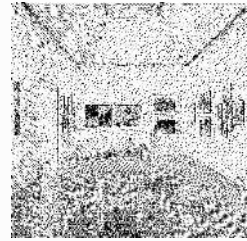




## Curating the Cosmopolis

Interview interview between **Iwona Blazwick** Interview and **Rattanamol Singh Johal**

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### 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.

### 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?



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.

**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.

**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 Alegre 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.

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## **About the authors**

Iwona Blazwick is Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, London since 2001 and is a curator, critic and lecturer. She was formerly at Tate Modern and London's Institute of Contemporary Arts as well as working as an independent curator in Europe and Japan. Blazwick is series editor of *Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Documents of Contemporary Art*. She has written monographs and articles on many contemporary artists and published extensively on themes and movements in modern and contemporary art, exhibition histories and art institutions.

Rattanamol Singh Johal is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University and a 2019-20 Mellon-Marron Research Consortium Fellow at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. He has previously held fellowships at the Tate Research Centre: Asia, MoMA, and the Whitney Independent Study Program. His research charts transformations in contemporary art, its institutional contexts and international networks at the turn of the twenty-first century, with a specific focus on the development of installation-based practices in metropolitan India during the nineties.

## Imprint

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