

**Conversations
and Actions
Education Resource
Whitechapel Gallery**

Wilhelm Sasnal
14 October 2011 – 1 January 2012

Introduction

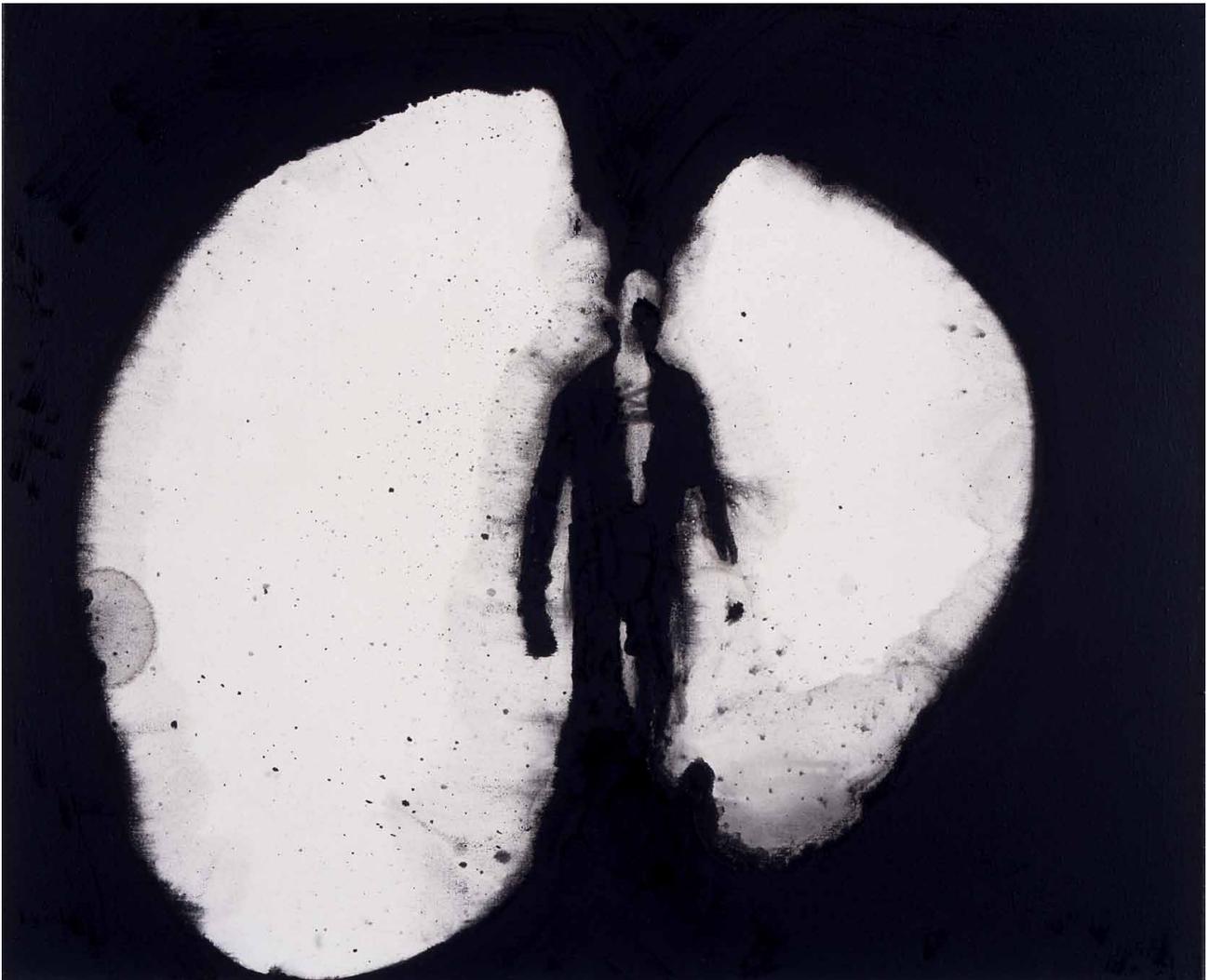
This booklet has been written help you to explore the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition *Wilhelm Sasnal*. It features three conversations initiated by artist **Viyki Turnbull** with **Emily Butler**, Assistant Curator at the Whitechapel Gallery, with **Charles Hustwick**, contemporary painter and with Fatima, Natasha, Novuyo and Tanha from the Whitechapel Gallery's young people's group, **Duchamp & Sons**.

These conversations outline key ideas and concepts in Wilhelm Sasnal's work and introduce you to different aspects of the show. It is designed to support your exploration of the exhibition and give you ideas to share with others in your group, be they children or adults.

Throughout the booklet are suggested actions for inside and outside of the Gallery. These practical and discursive activities are designed to help you consider the artist's ideas, working processes or themes of the exhibition.

Also spread throughout are images that you can use to act as prompts or reminders of the exhibition.

Have fun!



Wilhelm Sasnal *Untitled (Bowie)*, 2003

Looking

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Viyki How do you look at paintings?

Charles If it was just a matter of accessing the image, I could get that from the internet. I think one of the essential things about a painting is that it's a physical thing with a presence you see when you're looking at the real thing. So I do try to look and examine the structure of the brushstrokes to try to see exactly how an artist has applied the colours and textures in order to build up his image, as well as thinking about the sequence in which things have been added, removed, or changed - so I can follow the line of thought of the artist as well.

Viyki How do you look at an exhibition?

Emily In an exhibition, I like to know what I'm looking at, so I read the information panels, but then I look around the room and if there's something that draws me to it I go and focus in on it. But if there's something that doesn't interest me, I don't feel worried about walking past.

Novuyo You see so many images...but if you really stay there, and look at something for a long time, you start to discover more and more things in the image.

Viyki Could we do that as an activity?

Natasha Looking at an image.

Tanha It's hard.

Natasha I think it is because of other people around you as well, because when you're just standing there, someone behind you might want to look as well.

Novuyo But that's part of being in a gallery, isn't it?

Tanha I want to do that, just stand in front of something, block people's way.

Novuyo Stand in front of a painting and look for 10 seconds.

Gallery Action: Looking

Choose one of these ways to really 'look' at the paintings in Wilhelm Sasnal's exhibition, basing your discussions and thinking on the following questions:

- Where do you stand when you are looking at his work? Are you close or far away?
- How have the paintings been made? What tools has Sasnal used to make his paintings? Which part of the image do you think Sasnal painted first or last?
- How do the paintings relate to each other? What works draw your attention? Discuss why.

What do you notice by looking at paintings in this way?

What other ways could you 'look' at paintings in this exhibition?

My Favourite Painting

Gallery 9

Untitled (Bowie) 2003

Viyki Which is your favourite painting?

Emily This is my favourite image. I don't know what clip this image is drawn from, but there's something very Bowie-like about him, how he's dressed and the way he's standing, and something quite ambiguous about him. And what's really interesting about David Bowie is that he's got mis-matched eyes, a condition called anisocoria. And if you think about it and look at it, this painting looks like an eye from afar, or even a cat's eye. There's something very feline about David Bowie. Funnily enough my Granny's cat had one blue eye and one green eye so whenever I think about David Bowie, there is a sort of cat association for me.

Gallery 9

Untitled 2004

Viyki Which painting do you want to talk about?

Charles It's a universal image. We've probably all walked through a field or gone for a walk, maybe as a family but the immediate similarity ends there. These figures are walking away from us, we can't see who they are, they're walking in a landscape that looks quite windswept - there's something that's a little bit dramatic and mysterious about what's going on here and it does appeal to the imagination to wonder: What's happened? Why are they there? Where are they going? I'm sure this painting has personal resonance for Sasnal - maybe one of his own family photographs, but he doesn't tell us that, or maybe all families have memories like this...

Gallery Action: My Favourite Painting

Look at one of the paintings described above and then read Emily/ Charles' description.

Does it make you look at the painting in a different way?

What do you notice when you look at it?

Discuss how Emily and Charles have described their favourite paintings.

What have they looked at/considered?

Choose your own favourite painting.

How would you describe:

- The subject matter
- The way it is painted
- The mood of the painting
- What the painting reminds you of
- What is happening in the painting

Share your description with a friend.

Curation

Emily Wilhelm Sasnal's subject matter is very varied, as is his technique and this is something we wanted to put across very simply in the curation of the exhibition. Let the works speak for themselves, so we're not necessarily prescribing the works to fit into some thematic category or technical category.

Viyki How did you decide which works to show next to each other?

Emily We wanted to create some links for viewers to follow. In this case, it was very much our pairing, this spanner here on the right hand side, *Spanner X*, 2009 and *Kacper*, 2009 Wilhelm Sasnal's son on the left hand side.

Viyki On the ground floor in Gallery 1...

Emily At first glance the links are formal; there are two similar shapes and similar tones in both works. The one on the left is a larger format than the one on the right. When we presented this idea to Wilhelm, he quite liked it because other than having this formal association, it reminded him of a cross on the right hand side and on the left hand side his son looks a bit like a Christ-like figure.

In other cases, we tried to break down formal links, so if you look at the paintings in the exhibition (in Gallery 9 for example) there's nothing too formally prescribed. The sizes of the works vary, from large to small, which gives a natural and varied rhythm to the show.

The idea is also that the viewer makes out their own thematic links between the works, and gradually as you make your way around the space you will come to pick up on certain subjects and themes.

Gallery Action: Dot-to-Dot

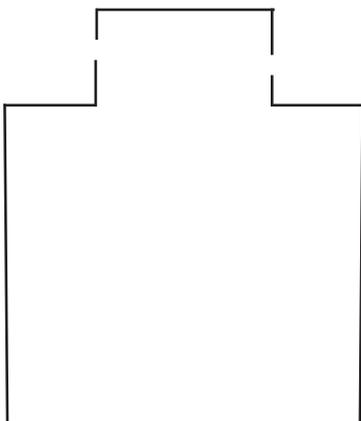
Look at the paintings in Gallery 1. Make a connection between three paintings e.g. through colour, size, shape, subject matter etc.

Use this floor plan of Gallery 1 to mark where these paintings are.

How do the paintings relate to each other e.g. are they next to each other, opposite, around a corner?

Join the dots. How do the locations of these paintings make you move around the Gallery?

Share with a friend. What other connections between the works did you find?



If you were arranging (curating) this exhibition, how would you group the paintings?

What do you think the Curators are trying to show about Wilhelm Sasnal's work by displaying them in this way?

In Galleries 8 and 9, look at the connections again that you can find between paintings.

Are they similar or different?



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Power Plant in Iran*, 2010

Beautiful Accidents

Gallery 1

Power Plant in Iran, 2010

Viyki What do you like about this painting?

Novuyo It's really captivating, the graduated colour in the sky, and the structure at the bottom. It looks unfinished as well, as if an error has occurred or something has happened to it. It looks like a beautiful accident in a way.

Fatima What is it of?

Novuyo It's called *Power Plant in Iran*.

Natasha I think it has a Middle Eastern feel to it ... the colour.

Tanha It makes me think that that thing at the back is a bomb.

Novuyo I think he thought 'I'm deliberately going to make it messy' because you can still see the brushstrokes, the lines aren't finished, they're not really perfect and there's a big splatter in the middle.

Natasha I think the imperfection makes it what it is.

Novuyo At the bottom there is something unfinished, like a sketch underneath.

Viyki In the photograph that he worked from, he said that there were buses in the foreground.

Novuyo You can see the pencil marks where he didn't cover them properly.

Natasha I'm always interested when artists don't choose to cover stuff up, when they leave a little bit of their preparatory work showing...

Novuyo What's the reason behind that? Is it to show the process of how he got to the finished image?

Gallery Action: Process

Can you find other paintings where you can see Sasnal's pencil marks or where you think the artist has changed his mind and not covered it up?

What do you find out by discovering how he made his paintings?

Gallery Action: Drawing by chance

What does a 'beautiful accident' mean to you? Can you find any examples in Sasnal's work?

Standing in the Gallery, create a picture by chance e.g. scribble lightly across the page, draw something without looking, make a rubbing of a texture in the room etc...

Mark Making

Gallery 1

Masi (2006)

Viyki How would you describe this painting?

Charles The ground, the background space is composed of marks that look like they've been made with a cloth using lots of turps so he's got a very liquid-soaked, wet rag and then he's like cleaning a window. You can see the physical traces of the movement of the hand. You could also see that as a kind of obliteration—there was something there but it's been wiped out.

Viyki There's something interesting about which marks he chooses to make, and then how they relate to the image.

Charles Yes absolutely. Sometimes he's very definite and precise and at times, he's removing stuff and taking things away. There's a painting right at the beginning where he spent seven days making and erasing the one image, and there's another one upstairs that was based on a photograph by Metinides. It's got these kind of swirling patterns removing so much of the image, so that only a little bit of the image is left intact in the middle. So he uses these abstractions, obliterations, decisions, in various mixtures with great intention.

Gallery Action: Drawing

Can you find the following styles of paintings in Sasnal's paintings? What others can you find?

- Impasto (thickly applied paint)
- Translucent
- Rough
- Smooth
- Fluid
- Transparent

How do you think the artist made these marks e.g. did he use a brush, his hand, something else?

Make a drawing of your fantasy mark making tool. What marks would you like to make in your painting?

Home Action: Painting

At home, experiment with whatever paints you have.

Can you create the different marks that you found in Sasnal's paintings? What would you use?

Create your own picture using these marks and techniques.

What is your picture about? How does the way you made your painting relate to what you painted?

Portraits

- Novuyo One thing I noticed is that there is a presence of people, but that they lack features or they have distorted features like the Arab guy.
- Fatima Is he an Arab?
- Novuyo It's called *An Arab 2*, 2006.
- Natasha Most of the people in the paintings aren't represented how we expect them to be.
- Tanha Maybe Sasnal finds it hard to draw faces?
- Natasha Or perhaps he wants you to be that face and be what you see; you take the persona of the body or character in the painting so it involves the viewer as well?
- Viyki Sometimes when I see someone from behind, it makes me think of someone I might know or have seen, but if you see the face, then you know that it can't be them, you can't know them. Maybe if you see an image without a face...
- Novuyo It can be whatever you want it to be, maybe it's about making it universal, it can be your world.

Gallery 1

Hardship 1 – 4 (Anka and Kacper), 2009

- Emily It's basically about Wilhelm's struggle with representing his family; sometimes the closer he is to the subject matter, the more difficult it is to represent them. So he often blurs faces or you hardly ever see his wife's face, she's turning away and it's the same with his son where you just see the silhouette. So in this case he's describing the struggle - how do you represent someone who is so close to you? How can you be objective about it when it's a very subjective emotion that you have in relation to them?

Gallery Action: Compare

Look at two paintings by Sasnal where you can't see the face of the person in the painting.

Discuss:

- How has Sasnal changed or obscured the face of the person?
- Who do you think the figure in the painting is?
- What are they doing?
- What can you see that tells you this?

Compare these to a painting where you can see the person's face. How is it different or similar?

What do you discover about the people in these portraits?

Home activity: Making

Make a portrait of someone close to you, but do not include their face.

Think about what you want to describe or represent about this person instead.

Use any medium of your choice e.g. painting, collage, sculpture, drawing etc.

Show this to the sitter. Do they recognise themselves?



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Kacper*, 2009



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Kacper and Anka*, 2009



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Bathers at Asnières*, 2010

Photo Stories

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- Viyki So where do you start when you're making a painting?
- Charles Well, we all start with Google, don't we?
- Viyki Big question, but what's the difference between painting and photography?
- Charles A painting is always a physical object and in that physicality of the act of painting, you can get the actual response to the photograph, not just what the photograph looks like.
- Viyki We were talking about how he uses photographs but he changes the photographs. In all these paintings, he starts with photographs that he prints out, but he obviously looks at them differently and changes them in different ways.
- Novuyo This is probably what we all do, when you hear a story and you tell someone else you pick out what you want, you exaggerate what you're going to exaggerate, and you downplay what you are going to downplay, you never tell the story exactly.

Gallery action: Drawing

In Gallery 9, look at the four paintings called *Untitled (After Metinides)* 2003 and read the caption in the gallery.

What do you think Sasnal has taken away from the image? What do you think he has added?

Choose one painting in the exhibition to draw from.

- Choose one part of the image that you wish to keep
- Choose one part of the image that you wish to change
- Think about how you are going to draw it e.g. using straight lines, abstract shapes, realistic images

Share your interpretation of Wilhelm Sasnal's painting with a friend.

Home Action: Making

At home, create an artwork inspired by any image that you want e.g. a book jacket, comic book, photograph from the news, a family photograph or an image you have taken yourself.

Think about:

- Why you chose the photograph
- The size
- The colour
- The medium e.g. paint, crayons, paper, plasticine
- The style of painting that you want to use

Compare your artwork to the original image. How is it similar or different?

Reflection

Gallery 1

Emily In *Photophobia*, 2007, Sasnal is trying to represent that feeling, that first feeling when you wake up in the morning and you have a fear of light, maybe because you have a headache or you don't like waking up.

Viyki It reminds me of what it looks like when you half close your eyes against the light

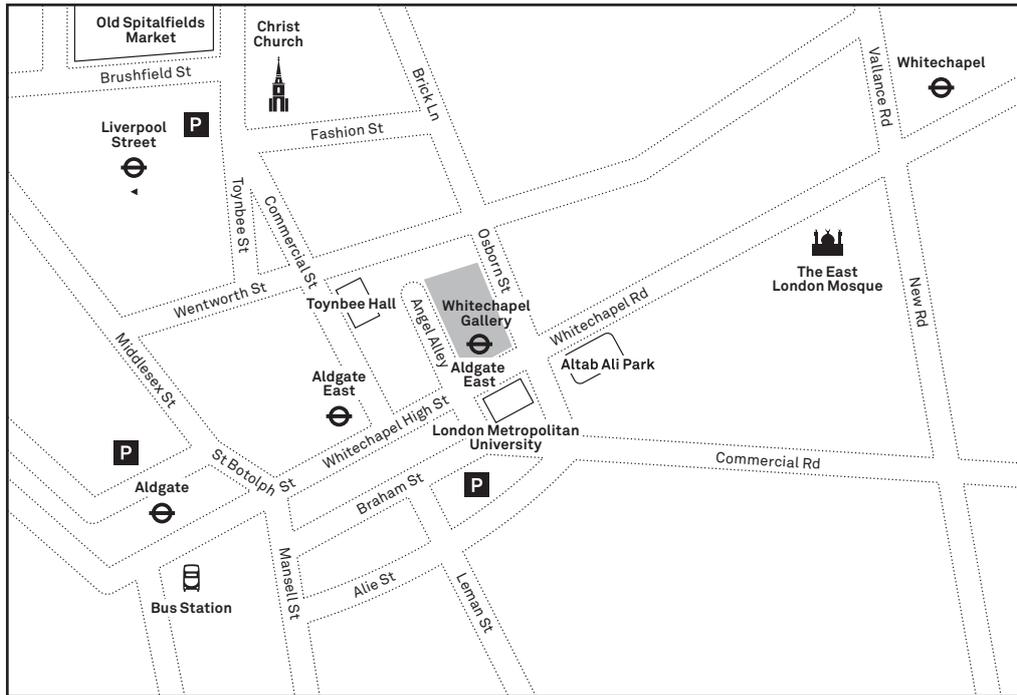
Emily And here you have this painting of *Roy Orbison*, 2007, which is also painted from a found image and I think that this theme of allowing and disallowing vision crops up again and again in Wilhelm's work.

Viyki Did you say allowing and disallowing the vision?

Emily Yes, not only in terms of the characters in Wilhelm's images (in this case the blind singer Roy Orbison), but also what you as a viewer can perceive in the image - perceive of the people's features, or simply what you can see. So obviously Roy Orbison was blind, which kind of links back to *Photophobia* over there, but as we noted earlier Wilhelm sometimes removes the character's vision, the eyes or face of his wife and his son for example. Upstairs, if you remember there is also the image of the *Shoah (Translator)* 2003 and she also doesn't have eyes either.

Viyki Yes, I see.

Emily So the idea is that you set the scene downstairs and then gradually you will see those themes crop up again and again as you move around the exhibition.



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