Conversations and Actions
Whitechapel Gallery

An Education Resource
Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh
Until 11 April 2010

whitechapelgallery.org
How to use Conversations and Actions

This booklet has been written to help you explore the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition Where Three Dreams Cross.

It begins with a conversation between two artists, Rebecca Greathead and Daniel Wallis. Their conversation outlines key ideas and concepts from the exhibition. This will support your exploration of it, and give you information to pass onto others whether you are visiting with children, young adults or any other group. Their conversation continues throughout the booklet, introducing you to each of the five sections of the exhibition. There is a map of the exhibition at the back. The exhibition can be quite large to explore with your group, it may be a good idea to select a section that you feel is most relevant and start in that part of the gallery.

Throughout the booklet are actions that you can take in the gallery that will help you think about the artists’ ideas, working processes or more directly about the work and themes of the exhibition. These are in grey boxes and can often be carried out individually or in small groups. They are guidelines so the actions are easily adaptable to suit a wide-range of people.

Also within the booklet are actions that can be used beyond the gallery. They can be easily expanded upon to suit your own needs, or that of the group you may be working with. They are contained in boxes with a dotted line.

Spread throughout are images that you can display to act as prompts and help to remind you of the exhibition.

If you want to use these conversations and actions with a group it may help to talk your ideas through with a colleague first to help you tailor it to fit.

Have fun!

Prashant Panjar Scotland, United Kingdom from the photo series King, Commoner, Citizen
Daniel: There is a lot to look at here, how will I know what the photographs are about or which country they come from?

Rebecca: The work is divided into five sections: the two downstairs are entitled *The Portrait* and *The Performance*, in the first upstairs gallery is *The Family* and in the larger upstairs gallery are sections entitled *The Street* and *The Body Politic*.

Daniel: So the themes group the exhibition, rather than country or date?

Rebecca: That’s right, different genres of photography are also spread within these themes so that each may contain a mixture of fine art, documentary, studio, publicity and amateur photography.

Daniel: And why has the time period of 150 years been chosen?

Rebecca: 150 years ago the three countries were one; huge changes have taken place since then. The exhibition starts at a time when the people of India began to use a camera to record their own country.

Daniel: So all the work shown in this exhibition is made by people who were born and worked in one of the three countries?

Rebecca: Yes, a historic story has been constructed not of images made by colonial or European photographers but of those who were native born.

Daniel: How have these photographs been brought together?

Rebecca: Several curators from the different countries have worked together to research and compile the material. Many of the photographs are vintage prints from national collections or archives.

Daniel: So I presume the curators chose the vintage prints and traced their development?

Rebecca: No, in actual fact work by key contemporary artists was the starting point and the curators traced their influences and ideas backwards, in some cases through photographs made by other members of an artists’ family.

Daniel: So the stories within each theme are not taken from existing or imposed histories but are completely new?

Rebecca: Yes, photography is only recently being taken more seriously as an art form in India and Pakistan and photographs being valued enough to be collected, preserved in archives taught at degree levels and exhibited publicly. Bangladesh however has kept national archives for the last 20 years.

Daniel: Is this due to the influence of fine art photography? India has a thriving contemporary art market now and many artists are well known internationally.

Rebecca: It seems so. Contemporary art is often a trigger for re-investigating and re-evaluating the past.

Daniel: It’s a good place to start. Let’s go!
Pushpamala N.  *Bombay Photo Studio, Navarasa Suite (Bhayanaka)*

Iftikhar Dadi  *Urdu Film Series*
**Gallery 1: The Performance**

Daniel: How can you represent performance in a still photograph?

Rebecca: There are various ways. In this section you’ll find publicity shots of Bollywood actors, photographs documenting art performances, film-stills, photojournalistic images of events and artworks in which the artist is playing a character or storytelling.

Daniel: There’s a wide range of photographic styles. Is that how the photographers define themselves: as artists, photojournalists or photographers?

Rebecca: In this show sometimes it’s hard to tell where the line divides the different specialisms.

**Divide into groups of between 3–5.**

Look around the gallery for photographs with the **same number** of people in them as your group and **create the scene in a static pose** using your bodies. Think about your **relationship** with the **others** in the group, **how** you are physically positioned, your **facial expression** and **body language**, as well as what you are **holding**.

Did the photographer **pose** the people in the photograph?

**How might the meaning** of the final image change if **one** of you slightly **alters** their pose or position?

Find **Pushpamala N.**’s **nine** works from the series **Bombay Photo Studio Navarasa Suite** along the left side of this gallery.

All the photographs are of the artist. She appears to playing **different characters**. **What** is the **personality** of each of these? **What clues** reveal aspects of them?

Why do you think her work is sometimes described as **performance photography**?

Each photograph represents a different **Rasa**. **Rasa** is an Indian concept that roughly translates to the **aesthetics of emotion**. Here Pushpamala N. has represented love, laughter, fury, compassion, disgust, horror, wonder, tranquillity, and courage.

**How old** do these photographs appear? The artist has made them **look like** traditional **19th Century studio photographs** by using a particular **style** of **backdrop** and **props**, as well as the **quality** of the photograph itself. Throughout the exhibition you will find photographs from this period. The **sign** to the left creates a **made up** studio from this time. Why would the artist want to evoke this period?

Use **contemporary** props and clothes to **dress up** and represent different emotions. Think about characters from **films**, **sports personalities**, **pop stars** and **politicians**. Create a series of different **performative photographic portraits**. The **background** of your own photographic portraits is important too.

You could also relate this to your **own cultural heritage**.
Rajputana Photo Art Studio; unknown artist *Portrait of an Indian Prince*
Gallery 1: The Portrait

Daniel  This is a familiar theme.

Rebecca  Yes, the portrait does have an established history and value as a subject matter for art making in the West.

Look at the work by Guari Gill 2003 as you first enter the exhibition  
These children have chosen props to be photographed with in order to represent themselves in a particular way. Why do you think they chose the object they did?  
Gill made these works at a fair, trying to encourage women to vote in the forthcoming elections.

Get someone to photograph you with a prop that will influence how you are represented - it could be something to hold, wear stand on, in, behind or in front of.

Look at the work by Shumon Ahmed 2008 (grid of photographs with I and MINE written above and below)  
What is the figure embracing with his open arm gesture? And what is he shutting out with a closed body position?  
What would you embrace within your world and what would you shut out?  
Where would you define the limits of your world:  
By town, city or national border?  
By friends, family, school, religion or sport?  
By what you like, or don’t like or what you know or don’t know?

Find or photograph your own images to define your personal world. Think about how to lay out the images e.g a grid, a circle, a line, within the outline of a figure or other simple shape.

Find the portrait of Majaraja Jai Singh of Alwar 1910-20 (a small image from the Alkazi collection)  
How can you tell he is a Majaraja?  
The photograph has been hand tinted:  
Why do you think this might have been done?  
How does it change the image?

Look at the series of photographs nearby by Prashant Panjiar entitled King, Commoner Citizen, showing the descendants of the Majarajas. There is a tradition of western portraiture displaying the wealth, knowledge or beliefs of those portrayed. e.g Holbien’s Ambassadors, Gainsboroughs Mr and Mrs Andrews,  
If you paid someone to make an image of you, how would you like to be portrayed?  
Would you want to be shown:  
In your home, in the street, with others, somewhere beautiful, against a plain backdrop?  
Would you want to include your possessions, pets or family?  
Standing, sitting, working or playing a sport?  
Smiling or serious, looking out from the image or turning away?

Would you worry about appearing cool or dignified or care if you seemed ridiculous, vain or a show off?  
In pairs take it in turns to be the artist and the sitter  
As the sitter, try to explain how you want to appear in your portrait  
As the artist, try to think how you might create the image the sitter has described. Find subtle ways to tell them you think what they want might look silly, vain or conceited. But, remember – they’re paying you!
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Khubi Ram Gopital *Untitled*

Nony Singh *Nixi and Nikita in frill frocks, stitched by me...*
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**Gallery 9: The Family**

**Rebecca**
Family can mean different things as the work in this gallery shows. It’s not just blood-relatives, but groups of people brought together by similar social conditions, interests.

**Daniel**
It’s interesting that photography can still be so important, even when it has struggled to be recognised as an artform. There are some old archived family portraits here as well as contemporary ones.

**Rebecca**
The group of images by *Nony Singh* are a contemporary versions. As a mother she is documenting her children in a way that a traditional photograph from a studio can’t do. The titles she gives the images bring the subjects to life. One of her daughters is *Dayanita Singh*. She is a contemporary photographer who exhibits her work internationally, we’ll see some of her work in a later section.

**Daniel**
Family is important in the cultures across South Asia. I’ve noticed that some leading political figures from these countries often have relatives who become influential in politics too. The founding father and first president of Bangladesh was *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman* - his daughter, *Sheikh Hasina Wazed*, is currently the Prime Minister.

**Rebecca**
I like how *Vivan Sundaram*, whose photographs just to the left of the entrance to this room, uses images from his grand-uncle *Umrao Singh Sher-Gil’s* archive to reconstruct and create new work. You may recognise some elements in photographs from *The Performance* section downstairs where *Umrao Singh Sher-Gil’s* work is displayed.

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Find *Nony Singh’s* photographs of her family

**Before reading the titles** of the works try to **imagine** what the subjects of the photographs are doing, and what their personalities are like. 
Do the titles **change** your understanding of the people, or **reinforce** it?

Look at the other photographs in this gallery (or across the whole exhibition). 
Give the works **new titles** that **describe** the subjects within it, revealing their **personalities** or **how they are feeling** at the time. **Imagine** you **know them** and use the title to describe what you think of them.

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Find *Vivan Sundaram’s* work

**Is it easy to spot** the different elements that have been **collaged together** in his work? 
**Why** has he left it so obvious?

**Use an archive of images to create new works.**
Collect old **family photographs**, or images from the **internet** (Facebook may be a good way to collect photographs of friends and family).
**Collage together elements** of the photographs to create a **new narrative** or **alter** an existing one. 
Start by using one **image as the main work** and adding a **single** person from another to it.
**Think about identity and family. Bring together different generations** of the same family.
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Syed Mohammed Adil  Women Farmers Protesting Their Rights at the Karachi Press Club

Shahidul Alam  ‘Let Democracy Live’: mural of martyr Nur Hossain on a campus wall
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**Gallery 8: The Body Politic**

**Daniel** This first wall has three sets of images on it. Each photographer has their own style.

**Rebecca** Yes, but even though the photographs on the left are from India, the middles ones from Pakistan, and those on the right from Bangladesh, they all deal with the same theme -of exploited people.

**Daniel** They are struggling in harsh working conditions just to live. The politics that the rest of this section of the exhibition deals with may not be these peoples' foremost concern.

**Rebecca** A lot of the work here is from two periods: In 1947 India became independent from the British Crown and Pakistan became its own separate Islamic nation divided into two parts 1000 miles away from each other and divided by India. After years of unrest there was a violent war of independence. In 1971; India sided with East Pakistan, which subsequently became the independent state of Bangladesh.

The descriptions in the work may not be suitable for younger audiences.

Find Shahidul Alam’s photographs and text from the series *A Struggle for Democracy 1987 – 1990*.

Section 144 was set up to stop protesting, but people still found a way to do this legally. Stand in pairs or as individuals spaced evenly around the floor of this gallery, all facing the same way. How does this affect others? What visual impact does this make? How can this make a point?

The image labelled *February 1991* refers to the woman as “avenging Nur Hossain’s death”. How does a vote do this? What does Nur Hossain represent and why was he chosen?

Read the artists letter to the right of the work, it written after the events in the photographs. How does knowing his feelings change your interpretation of the photographs and their text?

Compare images from this work with others from *The Body Politic* section. How have different photographers represented the political causes in different ways? Do some photographers focus on the people and not the meaning behind the protest? Does the way the image has been taken change it into something other than historic documentation?

Find Syed Mohammed Adil’s photograph *Women Farmers Protesting Their Rights at the Karachi Press Club*. If you are with a group don’t tell them the title yet.

One hand looks as though it is holding a gun, others appear to be holding bladed weapons. What is happening? Is it violent? Knowing the title reveals the image portrays women and they are holding tools not weapons. How does this change the meaning? In what way is it still violent? How is it also non-violent?

What makes this image more than just a snap-shot of an event or a press-photograph? Does cropping the image in this way make, change or add to the meaning?

Just to the right is a photograph titled *Rangers Patrolling the Streets* by Fahim Siddiqi.

The meaning of these images is controlled or emphasized by the cropping of an image. Find images from newspapers or the internet and crop them to focus on a part of the human body. Think about what is still revealed from the background, and how you might emphasize or change the meaning of your work.

Create new images representing a headline from a newspaper that involves a gesture or part of the body.
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Lala Deen Dayal  Calcutta, Esplanade Row

Raghubir Singh  Boy at Bus Stop, New Delhi
Gallery 8: The Street

Daniel

*The Street* section looks at the theme in a very broad way covering architecture, street life, homes, public and private spaces.

Rebecca

I get the impression that the people in these images live out their lives much more in the street than we do in this country. Some people may be in the street because they have no private space to go to, but others are there for work or leisure, celebration or prayer.

Decoration on the **exterior** of buildings is there for those on the **outside** to see, as they pass by on the street or maybe approach the entrance.

Can you find the different ways that *decoration* has been **applied** to buildings in the photographs? (make a list...)

Some buildings have decoration which is an **integral** part of their form and some have decoration that may have been **added later**.

Discuss whether the person who **lives** (or lived) in these buildings might have been the one who **decorated** it.

Do you **care** what your house looks like on the **outside**? Why?

What about **other buildings**: shops, temples, leisure centres or museums?

*Dayanita Singh* is one of the most influential contemporary art photographers in India today.

Look at the different ways her work has been **presented**. You can see two of her **books** in one of the glass cases and a concertina like artist’s book displayed in another.

There is a **rhyme** written on the book box: *I wrote a letter to my friend and on the way I dropped it, someone must have picked it up and put it in their pocket.*

Do you know this rhyme?

Why do you think the artist has used it on the book box and in the title?

Many of the photographs in this section show images of people **glimpsed** through windows, doors, gaps in buildings, **reflected** in mirrors, glass or even water.

Look for these images (make a list of the photographer’s names)

Do you think the people in the photograph were **aware** of the photographer?

Do you think they were **happy** to be in the photograph or do you think they would have preferred to be left in **private**?

Take **secret** street photographs through gaps, windows or reflected in a mirror or glass (don’t upset anyone)

You could make a **picture letter** from these in **concertina** form like *Dayanita Singh*

Look at the work of *Arit Mahood*. Although a contemporary artist, he has **hand tinted** some of his photographs. There are other hand tinted works in the show some dating back over 100 years.

Try **tinting** some **black and white** photographs or copied images, either a thin paint wash or using coloured pencils.

Use the **same** image to make **different effects** either by the **colours** you choose or the **number** of areas you add colour to (it could be just one or two).

Tinting requires adding a **subtle** amount of colour. You could also use **thicker** paint to **cover** an image altogether, **add** something or **alter** the image in other ways.
Seeing this show has made me feel rather unaware of these countries’ histories.

Yes, me too. But it has made us want to research and find out more.

The photographs are all interesting to look at without any prior knowledge. Numerous meanings and narratives emerge simply from looking at the way they have been put together.

But through gathering information to enable us write to this pack so much more has emerged...

I like the way that that the exhibition does not only focus on political agendas but on the life of the individual, pleasure, recreation, environment and family.

And seems to contain such a wide range of photographic styles. To me the works in this exhibition are largely celebratory, they do not tend to frame people as victims.

Do you think it is a problem that the works are not clearly labeled as to which country they are from?

I guess this could cause people to perceive the three countries as one rather than helping them to recognise their individuality?

Or, it might highlight the commonalities they share?

The exhibition has made me want to know more about these countries.

So maybe it raises questions rather than just giving answers?
To book your group visit and use of our Education Space (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on

020 7522 7888

Or email education@whitechapelgallery.org