

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.

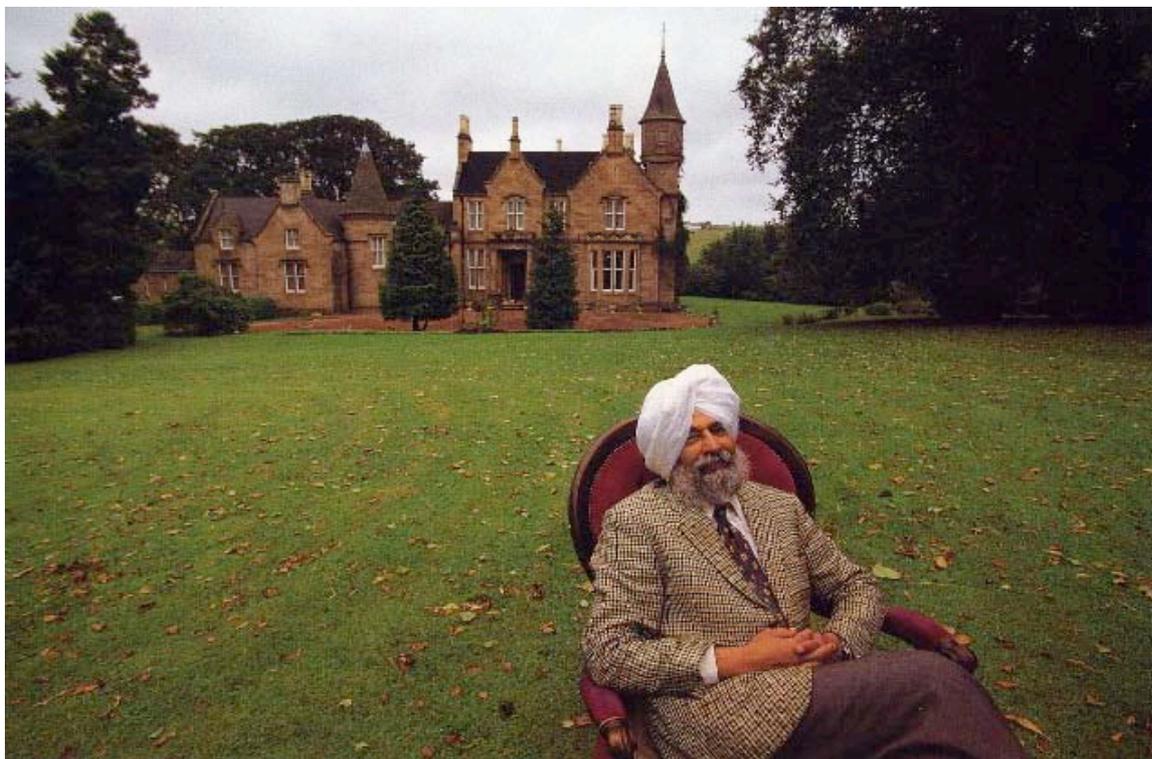
Throughout the booklet are *actions* that you can take in the gallery that will help you think about the artists' ideas, working processes or more directly about the work and themes of the exhibition. These are in grey boxes and can often be carried out individually or in small groups. They are guidelines 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 Panjjar 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!
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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 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, Gainboroughs 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!



Khubi Ram Gopital *Untitled*



Nony Singh Nixi and Nikita *in frill frocks, stitched by me...*

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 .

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.

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.



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*

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 middle 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**.



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.

Rebecca Seeing this show has made me feel rather unaware of these countries' histories.

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

Rebecca 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.

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

Rebecca 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.

Daniel 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.

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

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

Rebecca Or, it might highlight the commonalities they share?

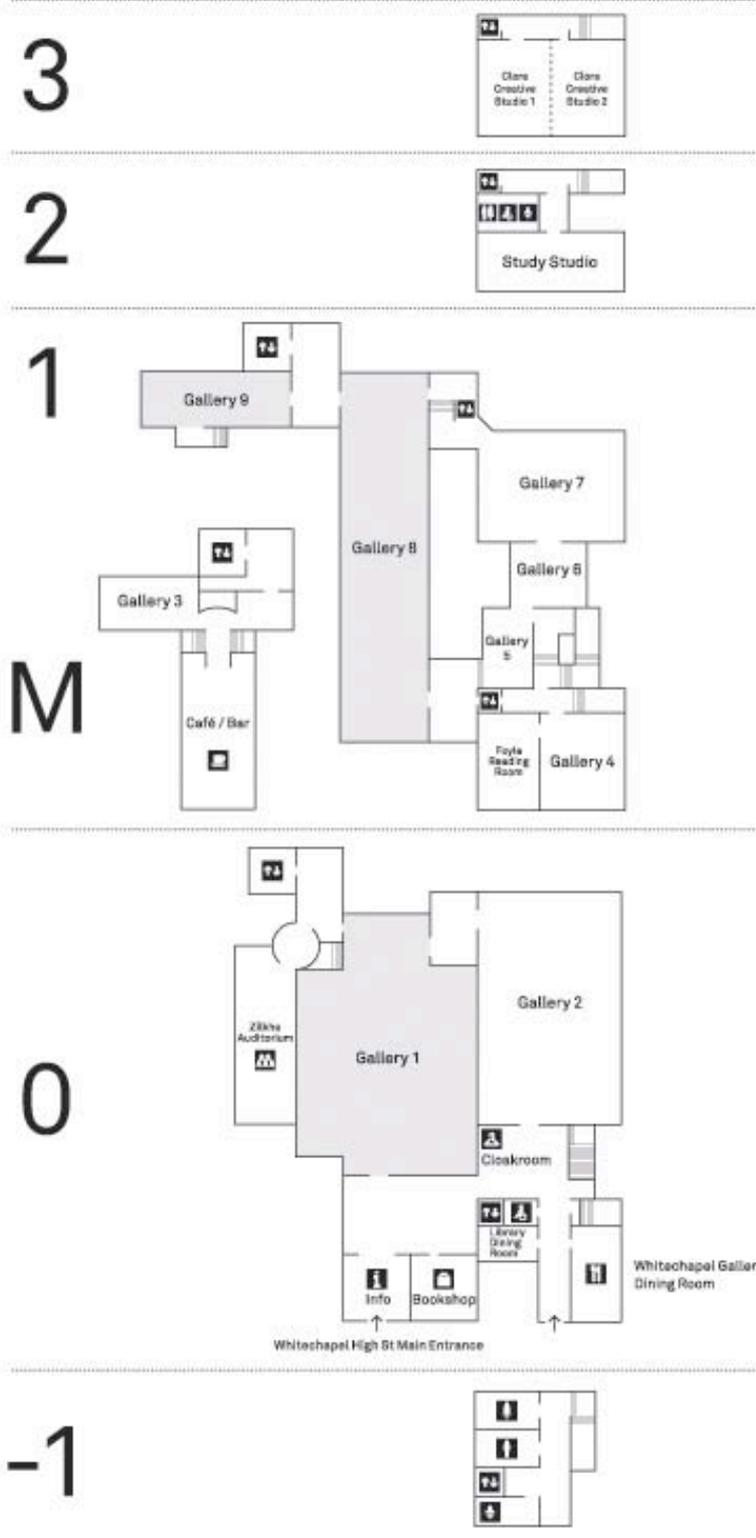
Daniel The exhibition has made me want to know more about these countries.

Rebecca So maybe it raises questions rather than just giving answers?



Farida Batool *Nai Reesan Shehr Lahore Diyan*

Whitechapel Gallery Floorplan



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