

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode Four

Exercising Freedom:
Encounters with
Art, Artists and
Communities

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the Gallery here in the heart of East London.

Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the art works. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes introducing you to today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery curators, Nayia Yaikoumaki and Sofia Victorino, and Jenni Lomax, former Director of Camden Art Centre and Whitechapel Gallery's Education Organiser from 1979 to 1989 who was responsible for a pioneering programme in the history of gallery education practices.

Here they speak about a new exhibition entitled Exercising Freedom: Encounters with Art, Artists and Communities which highlights the role of artists in developing innovative approaches that emphasise process and artwork in equal terms, drawing on collaborative learning with communities.

We also hear from artists featured in the exhibition about their experience of working as part of the Gallery's education programme in the 1980s. The exhibition is free to view in Gallery Four, and is on display from 7th of October 2020 to 21st March 2021.

NY: Hello, I'm Nayia. The exhibition Exercising Freedom: Encounters with Art, Artists and Communities is part of the Archive Gallery Programme which started in 2009 when we expanded the Gallery's building and we were able to introduce new curatorial strand. This programme is research led and explores archives as an

alternative curatorial resource and brings to light histories which have not yet registered in the formal art history.

SV: Hello, I'm Sofia. This exhibition, as Nayia mentioned presents rarely seen records from the Gallery's archives which have not been widely researched to date. The theme of education has really always been at the heart of what we do at Whitechapel Gallery and it has also been a key factor in its relation to arts centred in our local communities. This is what led us to investigate and bring together the history that has not yet been told in such depth.

We are very happy to have Jenni Lomax here with us today. Jenni Lomax, for over a decade, has invited young artists who often lived and worked in the area to act as the creative mediators between the exhibition, the Gallery space and East End communities.

Jenni, how did your collaboration with Whitechapel Gallery start? As the Community Education Organiser for ten years between 1979 and 1989 you were working with a lot of organisations across Tower Hamlets, with Tower Hamlets Council, the Arts Team, as well as with Toynbee Hall. Can you tell us a little bit about that period?

JL: I think it would be useful just to start off saying a little bit about the area at that time, because I think many people coming to the Whitechapel now perhaps don't realise what a very different place it is now to what it was in the '70s.

It was area of immense deprivation. People were very poor. I mean across the country there was a lot of unemployment, mass unemployment, but it had

particularly hit East London because of the demise of the docks which also meant that industries had moved away. And also severe bombing during the Second World War had started a housing programme that in fact never, because of the financial climate of the time and, you know, the economy was in a very poor state through the late '60s and the '70s that those ideas for rebuilding the East End never really materialised.

And because of all this change and also new immigrant communities moving in. People from Somalia and then more particularly Bangladeshi people who were moving here because of the wars and conflicts in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. And so those communities were setting up in what had been traditionally a Jewish area and with their industries and culture and so on that really... So it became to be a very layered cultural setting that also added to that because of all of the empty houses and warehouses.

Organisations like Acme and Space began to encourage artists to move to the area and there was at one point, I think, where a huge population of artists living in houses that were deemed for demolition in future years, but also taking over workshops, most of which are still here like Chisenhale.

And there was this wonderful, it created a very sort of, I don't know, exciting and rather potent mix of people. Those artists, people coming with rich new cultures to add to layer on what was already existing. And then the people who had been long established and living in East London and, you know, all their lives, and their families all their lives. So it was a very rich mix.

And I started to work in the area as someone who'd graduated from Art School and was interested, through

having worked with adventure playgrounds in Hackney Marshes and so on, became interested in the role of art in a place like Tower Hamlets. And started to work on a Gulbenkian initiated and funded project at Toynbee Hall which was an experimental after school workshop for local children. And because we're right next door, we were right next door to the Whitechapel, Deborah Gardner and I, we used to bring the children here to see... And on a Saturday we would come to something like a Robert Ryman exhibition. And work with the children with things to do with whiteness and shadows and Nick Serota, who had been at the Whitechapel then for a couple of years, part of his vision for the Whitechapel was to reunite it with its community really and the place that it was in.

And Nick used to let me use his office on a Saturday. So after we'd looked at the exhibition we would go up there and do, you know, things like rolling white paint and layering things. And the children... we just realised how much these children just really got from looking at contemporary art.

JS: Here, the painter Maria Chevska, who was involved with the Education Programme in the 1980s talks about the uniquely artist led approach which was distinctive to Whitechapel Gallery at the time.

MC: The great thing about this whole education programme run by Jenni at the Whitechapel was they decided that it would be artists who were doing it. So it would be artists talking about the exhibitions in the Gallery, doing workshops and doing the schools residencies, for example. So it was a very un-academic approach and I think the advantage was that artists would connect with the work itself, the art work. So anybody can relate to that. You know, they have a sort of implicit

understanding about, for example, how something is made, what it's made of and why it's made that way rather than any other way. And I think from their own experiences, they identified both as maker and viewer. So they could speak from those two viewpoints. So they could empathise with those viewpoints.

And I think it's that really, it was that absolute decision that it would be artists who were introducing and interpreting and talking about this work, and concentrating really on the artwork itself, rather than an academic approach or necessarily an art historical approach.

SV: Jenni, there are two exhibitions that we know have been incredibly important in shaping the development of the education programme and the way you have envisaged the collaboration and the work developed with schools and with communities. Can you talk about those two exhibitions which were Eva Hesse and Arts of Bengal in 1979?

JL: Yes, there was two very contrasting and very different exhibitions. So therefore they were really good opportunities to see what schools might respond to and react to, but Eva Hesse came first. And it was my association with Pat van Pelt who had been working with the Arts Council particularly at the Hayward Gallery because the Arts Council Art Department was kind of based at the Hayward Gallery then and ran the Hayward Gallery. We knew that from talking with Nick, that there was going to be an Eva Hesse Exhibition and she was something of a hero of mine, and Pat really loved the work as well.

And so we thought about perhaps trying to bring some of our thoughts about education and galleries to the

Whitechapel using the, our love of Eva Hesse's work to really think some of those through. So we made a proposal to Nick and Martin and I think Mark Francis. And at first they were a little bit thinking that the exhibition of Rudring Tompkins that was upstairs was more suitable for children because it was quite child-like, but we were really adamant that it was Eva Hesse's concepts and the work was much more meaningful to children and to schools and the fact of, you know, the relationship with the things to mathematics, to repetition, to an emotional relationship with imagery and pattern, but also the physical, physicality of Eva Hesse's work was something that, if one was taking an approach of not telling people about art, but engaging them in a dialogue with that work through their own experiences, through their own bodily movements and gestures and through their own emotional response to the work, that Eva Hesse was just the perfect exhibition to be working with to take that approach.

The Arts of Bengal followed more or less afterwards, I think. And it was such a contrasting show because it was a museum show. It came from the V&A, and those teachers who had been to Eva Hesse said, oh but this would be a wonderful exhibition, you know, for local children and really wanted to come to it. So we managed to find money from Tower Hamlets and I devised a programme around all the wonderful artefacts. And it was a fascinating experience and perhaps while it wasn't the most innovative education programme, it was done on a shoe string and it was really just me, I was able to bring in a textile artist, Cathy Merrow-Smith who to work with a local youth project led by an ILEA youth worker who had a background in textiles, Shireen Akbar, and also Henna Amid. And the project they did together as part of Arts

of Bengal which resulted in a huge wall hanging that is now at the V&A, I think, really forged a lasting relationship with the wider, you know, organisations in the wider Bengali community, East London Community School and so on.

JS: Artist Janis Jeffries recalls the legacies of the education programme connected to The Arts of Bengal exhibition, which through developing specific longer term engagements with the community led to the later exhibition Woven Air in 1988.

JJ: After The Arts of Bengal, the wonderful Shireen Akbar who had been involved in a number of different community arts exhibitions really responded to the fact of 'what was the legacy'. And I think this is a big question even now, is that you do something, it has an impact, it is significant in terms of locality and demographics and what it is for young people to see their experiences reflected in those activities, but what's the legacy? You see, what's the ongoing impact?

And Shireen Akbar introduced, initiated The Field of the Embroidered Quilt which was really a tape slide that we did, but the exhibition was called Woven Air: The Muslin and Kantha Tradition of Bangladesh. And that was from March to May 1988. And one of the criticisms really of The Arts of Bengal, it was all very celebratory and very nice and probably a little romantic, but as you know, the East End was the heart of a very particular set of textile practices and industries. Mostly going back to the Huguenots in the 17th century when the silk weavers in France were expelled for religious reasons, as many, as much as political agitation. The same was true of many Jewish communities who came from Eastern Europe with their different textile practices.

So the point was, can you address these histories of textile industries and practices from both within the locality as in the Bangladeshi community which was a lot of sweat shop labour at that point in terms of home working. Swasti Mittal's book on textiles and home working is very significant in that regard. And so Shireen had picked up on this saying, well what can we do about the work that is both from Bangladesh inside the community and show that there's a different way of thinking about these practices, within a contemporary art gallery?

SV: This artist led approach, Jenni, that you developed at Whitechapel, it included very clearly two strands. The work within the gallery and working with artists within the gallery space which you've talked about, but it included also the Artists in East London School's scheme which is a scheme of residencies and building ongoing collaborations with schools. Can you tell us a bit more? What was distinctive about this approach to working with art and artists?

JL: Perhaps start off a little bit about how the artists in schools scheme came about because that started to happen just while I was developing the programme for Eva Hesse and talking with the Gallery about the possibilities for the education programme and us trying to form a vision around how that might go forward. And the Arts Council of Great Britain as it was then, were also very interested in how, in the idea of artists in schools and together with Alister Warman at the Arts Council, he and Martin Rewcastle organised a conference about artists in schools that looked at examples from not just Britain but I think America and Canada.

And I was able to encourage some of the teachers that I'd been talking to about Eva Hesse come to that conference and that was really the start then of an interest, well, you know, there are all these artists in East London, all these artists in the area, you know. Maybe this is the ideal place to be developing an artists in schools programme in that the Gallery was very well placed to be the conduit that brought the two, the artists and the schools together.

It was very much running in tandem with the activities in the Gallery and the opportunity for teachers to meet local artists, not just by working with them in the Gallery around the exhibitions, but by us being able to take them to their studio. So, that were not far away from their schools very often or easy to contact. So the teachers and then eventually children, pupils were able to go to visit the artists. It wasn't just the artists being in the schools, but them being able to see the artists in a fuller picture, you know, of how they thought, how they worked, where art came from.

And then I suppose that, you know, we talked quite a bit about the distinctiveness of the programme that really, and the innovativeness, that approach that was really developed through the relationship with the artists and what they brought to the programme. And thinking about what was different about the way those artists were not only in the schools, but in the Gallery was that when we invited an artist to work with a particular exhibition, say it was Bruce Nauman, Cy Twombly, Richard Deacon, David Smith, they were artists whose own work had an affinity with that artist, and that they had a particular passion and knowledge.

And I think all the artists now still remember that for them, the fact that when we got together to plan the

activities in the galleries, we didn't start from the premise of 'what should we do with a group of seven year olds?' We started by really looking at the work, by trying to understand the artist. How did we feel about it? How did we look at it? How did... What were the artists' intentions? What were the underlying concepts? Not just about, you know, the history of that work or the broader context, but what were the intentions of the artist with this? And how do you, through questioning, through very targeted activities that guided looking and guided discussion that came from the children or student or adults own experience, that a kind of workshop could be developed, as it were, through those discussions.

And, you know, for a lot of the children that came, English wasn't their first language and we also worked a lot with children who had special educational needs. Some had no language. Some had no sight or hearing. And in a way this very physical and immediate approach and direct approach to looking at the thing that was there in front of you, and experiencing it in what way each individual person could, meant that there wasn't a distinction between those who had the intellectual knowledge of art, and those who didn't.

JS: Here, Jo Stockham describes the success of the artist led methodology introduced by Jenni Lomax and the supportive community that it fostered, as well as describing what was special about the approach to working with children.

JSt: The planning days we had, as far as I remember, were a real joy, we would be with other artists and we would, you know, walking through the show, talking about how we responded to the work, what were the things we all, and differently perhaps responded to. So you might,

for instance, each choose a piece of work that you particularly were interested in and that gave the workshop a structure that was based, not just on your own opinions, but on the, whoever you were working with.

Obviously we all had our own artistic practices, so we might bring suggestions of ways of making or materials to use that we were kind of comfortable with, or just wanted to test out. And we would spend the day doing the actual things we were going to get other people to do. So we would, you know, we would make a booklet or we would make sculptures out of wire and silver paper as we did for Martin Disler's work.

There was no preconceptions about what the end result had to be. It was very process based, I suppose, in the sense that it wasn't about making something for the children to take home, you know, the way... I was also working in a play centre, for instance, at the same time. I was doing kind of a photography workshop and then pottery sometimes and cooking and things like that. And there was always a pressure for the children to have something nice to take home to their parents. And this wasn't about that. It was about finding ways to get the students to think what it might be to make something, as an artist. And give them ways of asking questions through making, that might help to engage with an artist's work.

SV: Jenni, can you maybe describe some of the projects that you've just mentioned, but projects that have different features, because of the nature of the place where they happened? You referred to hospitals, to health centres. I recall Maria Chevaska's project an incredible Victorian building with a swimming pool. Or the Bruce McLean's performance with Charlie Hooker

in Hammerhurst. Could you describe some of those projects that really set in motion very particular kind of relationships and even trans disciplinary connections in terms of...

JL: Yes.

SV: ...the working process?

JL: I mean I think the two things that you mentioned, Maria Chevska working with Hackney Downs School where the teacher, Richard Crawford, who was an artist himself, an art teacher, it was a secondary school. And she really was able to work with Richard and the Gallery setting up a studio in the middle of the school which was this big old Victorian building. And there was the nearby Victorian swimming pool that the pupils, the children, young people at the school used. And it was a very important factor to their lives and Maria latched onto this, but also it fitted very much with her work, the light on the water and the ripples.

And so she was able to work with students and the teachers to think about ways of using their environment as a subject matter for work. And that also fed into her own work as a painter. And they, the school extended the project and found money to commission Maria to do a painting within the swimming pool. And she worked on that with the students as an extension of the project. And that was something that wasn't, necessarily happened with every artist in schools project, but it was something that arose from that particular situation and the students and the artists' relationship to that space and what effect it had on their work and on their learning.

JS: Photographer Zarina Bhimji speaks here about her experience as artist in residence at Culloden School in 1989 and what the approaches and politics of forging meaningful relationships with students there meant for her as an artist.

ZB: When I did my residency at Culloden School I tried to work in that way as well. So I worked with a group of mainly girls, I think. It was a long time ago, 1989. I asked them, I took some of my own objects and told them that these were my favourite objects and why I liked them a lot. And then could they go and think about what special objects they had. And then some of them invited me to their house to look at these objects and I photographed it and then we took them in a projector and we reeled them as a group and we talked about what it meant to them.

So I was, it was important to me that we, as a group, felt connected and that there was trust, so that we could talk about difficult things if we wanted to, and see how we could make that into a gesture. I needed them to understand that, what an artist does.

And so, and I wanted them to act that out, be an artist, you know. But they hadn't imagined that that could be their thing, you know. That they could be an artist. What creativity is. What was happening in Britain to Bengalis, where they were, what was it like in the Council Estate? Did they experience racism? Did they feel safe? What did they feel and what could they do?

So it was also making them feel confident about themselves and their place in the world. Because I think, being an artist is interconnected to properly feel that you can take that space, you know.

NY: We're approaching the end of our wonderful conversation. So Jenni, here is a final question. What impact did this programme have, both for arts organisations, but also for schools and their approach to art education?

JL: It was a year later when I was able to take on the whole of the education programme and I have, we were able to integrate more fully with the whole of the Gallery and the team. So we planned things really closely with Nick Serota, the director and the exhibition's organiser and the administrator. And were able to discuss things like the scheduling of exhibitions, which exhibition was good in times when children could come, or colleges could come. What was good in the summer?

And also Nick and the curators and also the artists, people like Bruce Nauman really engaged themselves in the programme. They talked to the teachers at the, we had a little teacher preview the day before the public preview. And often the artists were around. They were sometimes still installing the exhibitions. I remember Julian Schnabel involving teachers in the heights of where his paintings once, and, you know, these sort of experience that I think was very unusual in a gallery. You know, that education was on the margins and kept separately.

But by all working together, and I think for everyone really embracing this new community of local artists that had become part of gallery life, and listening to their conversations and their ideas, it really shaped, began to shape the programme and the rhythm of the programme and the things that we could put in between the exhibitions like performance, bring in the work from the schools and those artists.

Really, I began to work in the spaces between the exhibitions to bring those artists in, fully into the programme. And I think the Whitechapel programme showed the way that, if the organisation embraced what this could mean, and lost its preconceptions about gallery education, that all sorts of things could happen, you know, that could feed into the programme that made the life of the Gallery richer and the life of the community richer.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Exercising Freedom: Encounters with Art, Artists and Communities on display from 7th of October 2020 until 21st March 2021. Goodbye for now.

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