

## Exercising Freedom: Encounters with Art, Artists and Communities

6 October 2020 – 21 March 2021

Archive Gallery 4, Free entry

#ExercisingFreedom

This autumn's new Archive exhibition delves into Whitechapel Gallery's rich history and the educational activities that influenced the diverse cultural landscape of East London.

Whitechapel Gallery was one of the first UK publicly funded art galleries to formally create an Education Department under the directorship of Nicholas Serota (1976-1988). The Gallery's position in Tower Hamlets is a crucial factor when charting this history. As the cultural makeup changed significantly in the mid-1970s - migration being one of the features that has shaped East London - artists living locally were able to work alongside diverse communities, forming an invigorating environment, rich in ideas, possibilities and resources.

*Exercising Freedom: Encounters with Art, Artists and Communities* looks at the relationships and strategies that forged the Education Programme at Whitechapel Gallery from 1979 to 1989. Featuring artworks, documents, pamphlets, posters, photography, children's artwork and films selected from key exhibitions and projects of the period, it highlights the role of artists in developing innovative approaches to collaborative learning. With an ambition to work closely with schools and artists living in the area, Martin Rewcastle was appointed as the Gallery's first Community and Education Officer in 1977; however, it was under the leadership of Jenni Lomax, Whitechapel's Community Education Organiser (1979 – 1989) that the programme developed and expanded into a pioneering artist-led initiative.

In a full-length interview, available upon request, Lomax recalls:

*"All the education activities - on and off-site - were devised together with artists. Artists invited to work on the programme brought elements of their own practice into the discussions. We always started from the exhibiting artists' conceptual premise and their working processes."*

### Press Release

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“The fact that the education and exhibition programmes became conceptually intertwined was distinctive (...). It was very unusual at this time for programmes to be integrated in this way. The community education programme included talks, lectures and public events around each exhibition, as well as audio visual material and written exhibition guides. The Whitechapel recognised the important local community of artists in East London and drew on this valuable resource to shape an innovative approach to looking at and engaging with contemporary art and artists.”

Whilst addressing a period of significant social and political change in the UK, *Exercising Freedom* explores a transformative moment in art education through three thematic segments: Encounters with Artists, Artists and Schools and Place-Making/Art, Policy and Education.

The first highlights three pivotal exhibitions that shaped the Gallery’s Education and Community activities: *Eva Hesse* (1979), *Arts of Bengal* (1979) and *Woven Air: The Muslim and Kantha Tradition of Bangladesh* (1988) – the latter featuring a rarely-seen tape slide conceived by **Janis Jefferies** and **Shireen Akbar**. It approaches each of these case studies through designated programmes, fieldwork and research. Presented alongside are the experimental workshops developed in response to the exhibitions of **Bruce Nauman**, **Cy Twombly** and **Mario Merz**, among others, with artists including **Sacha Craddock**, **Jefford Horrigan**, **Jo Stockham** and **Stephen Nelson**.

The second segment focuses on the collaborative learning models developed during the pioneering Artists in East London Schools Scheme in the 1980s. It addresses the role of artists in developing participatory and educational projects in cooperation with schools and local communities. Here many of the Gallery’s workshops and residencies are celebrated, including: **Maria Chevaska** at Hackney Downs Secondary School (1983-1984); **Rob Kessler** at Holy Trinity Dalston Primary School (1984), **Veronica Ryan** and **Jefford Horrigan** at Templars Secondary (1984), **Sonia Boyce** at Skinners Company School (1985), **Charlie Hooker** at Amherst Junior School (1985) and together with **Bruce McLean’s** in a collaborative performance titled *Deep in Fishy Waters* (1987); **Jo Stockham** at John Scurr Junior School, (1987), **Fran Cottell** at St. John the Baptist Primary School (1988-1989) and **Zarina Bhimji** at Culloden Primary (1989) among others.

Against the backdrop of Thatcher’s Britain, the third section chronicles the context of these activities in east London. It centres on the places, institutions and people who advocated for social justice and points to art’s role in community settings: from policy-making in art and education, to the activism of self-organised groups in the fight against racism and wider political struggles.

## Notes to Editors

- The exhibition is co-curated by Sofia Victorino (Daskalopoulos Director of Education and Public Programmes) and Nayia Yiakoumaki (Curator: Archive Gallery and Head of Curatorial Studies), together with former Director of Camden Arts Centre, Jenni Lomax, who shaped the Gallery’s education programme in the

period 1979-1989. Development of research by Rose Gibbs, independent curator. Organisation and exhibition production by Candy Stobbs, Assistant Curator, Whitechapel Gallery.

- The curators of the exhibition conducted research interviews with artists and curators whose involvement at the time helped cement the Gallery's ethos and vision in art and education. Key figures include **Zarina Bhimji, Vivien Blackett, Sonia Boyce, Maria Chevska, Jocelyn Clarke, Fran Cottell, Sacha Craddock, Jeffrey Dennis, Janis Jefferies, Rob Kessler, Deborah Law, Stephen Nelson, Veronica Ryan and Jo Stockham**. The interviews will be available throughout the exhibition and consequently will be deposited in the Gallery's historic Archive for researchers and the community to access.

### **About Whitechapel Gallery**

For over a century the Whitechapel Gallery has premiered world class artists from modern masters such as Hannah Höch, Mark Rothko and Frida Kahlo to contemporaries such as Sophie Calle, Lucian Freud, Gilbert & George, Sarah Lucas and William Kentridge. With beautiful galleries, exhibitions, artist commissions, collection displays, historic archives, education resources, inspiring art courses, dining room and bookshop, the Gallery is open all year round, so there is always something free to see. It is a touchstone for contemporary art internationally, plays a central role in London's cultural landscape and is pivotal to the continued growth of the world's most vibrant contemporary art quarter.

### **Visitor Information**

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm  
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### **Press Information**

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