

London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories

Introduction by **Hammad Nasar** Introduction and **Sarah Victoria Turner**

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London Comma Asia

This *London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories* special issue of *British Art Studies* is the first publication to emerge from the *London, Asia* research project. The project, which is funded and hosted by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (PMC), is co-lead by Hammad Nasar, Senior Research Fellow and Sarah Victoria Turner, Deputy Director for Research at the Centre. Established in collaboration with Hong Kong's Asia Art Archive (AAA), it explores the ways in which modern and contemporary art history in Asia intersects with, and challenges, existing histories of British art. This introduction explores the main themes of this special issue, and reflects on the premise and themes of the broader *London, Asia* project as it has developed thus far through an ongoing series of collaborations and provocations staged primarily through events and exhibitions.

The project was prompted by a session titled “British Art Through its Exhibition Histories”, which Sarah Victoria Turner convened with Martina Droth (Yale Center for British Art) and Mark Hallett (PMC) at the Association for Art History Conference held at the University of East Anglia in 2015. In that session, Nasar presented a paper that argued that Rasheed Araeen's exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (1989) (figs. 1 and 2) was haunting British art history, and examined the exhibition *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* (Tate Britain, 2012) (figs. 3 and 4), as one such case.¹ The paper contended that while many of the works in *The Other Story* moved from the Hayward Gallery in the Southbank Centre to be absorbed into the national collection at Tate Britain in Milbank, the 23 years it took for the works to make this passage had made little discernible difference to the narratives of British art history. It posited that for diasporic artists like Li Yuan-chia and Araeen, new exhibitions in Taipei, Sharjah, and Karachi were overtaking the histories of art in Britain that are yet to be written (figs. 5 and 6).²



Figure 1
The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Hayward Gallery, 1989–1990, gallery exterior. Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen and Asia Art Archive.



Figure 2
The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Hayward Gallery, 1989–1990, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen and Asia Art Archive.

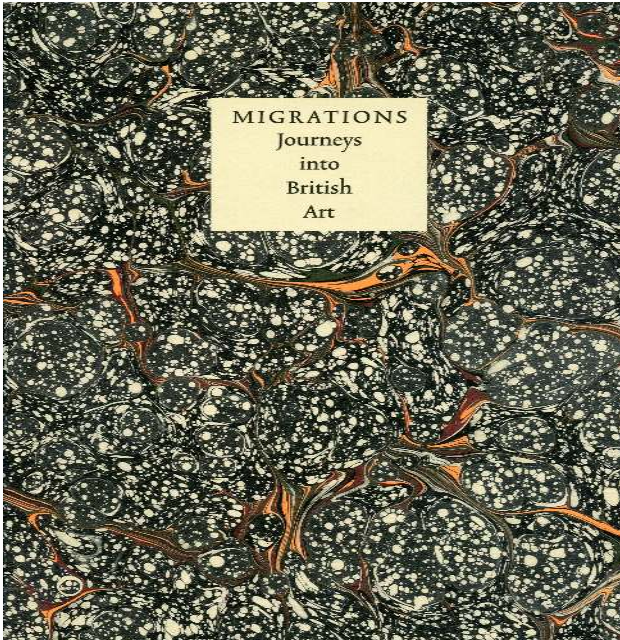


Figure 3
Migrations: Journeys into British Art, Tate Britain, 2012, exhibition catalogue cover (London: Tate Publishing, 2012). Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 4
Migrations: Journeys into British Art, Tate Britain, 2012, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Tate.



Figure 5

View-Point: A Retrospective Exhibition of Li Yuan-chia, 2014, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



Figure 6

Rasheed Araeen: Before and After Minimalism, 2014, SAF Art Spaces, Sharjah, UAE, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Universes in Universe and Haupt & Binder.

In a more recent paper, Nasar extended this argument of “art-historical haunting” to consider two subsequent exhibitions at the national repository of British art, Tate Britain.³ *Artist & Empire* (2015) relegated a collection of modern and contemporary work by artists from former colonies to two end rooms. *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979* (2016) repeated a formulation of conceptual art advanced in another Hayward exhibition—*The New Art* (1972)—and ignored artists like Araeen (who had arrived in London from Pakistan in 1964), David Medalla (who was born in the Philippines and co-founded London’s influential Signals Gallery in 1964), and Li Yuan-chia (who moved from Taiwan, via Italy, to London in 1965 before settling in Cumbria from 1968 until his death in 1994). All three expanded the very notion of what conceptual art in Britain could be—in very visible ways within the art world—and yet they remain outside art-historical narratives in Britain.

Exhibitions make art and artists visible, but they can also omit and ignore. Exhibitions have the power to challenge or rewrite history, but often repeat and reinforce existing accounts.

Exhibitions always produce meaning through: the art works displayed on the floors and walls of the gallery; the texts that accompany them; and, the larger infrastructures of exhibition making. These include the networks of the curators, the institutional priorities that determine which exhibitions happen and where, the impact of budgetary constraints, the logistics of transport and installation, the issues of authorship and ownership, the question of audiences (both imagined, before an exhibition has opened, and real, once it has), and the criticism and responses that circulate in response. The crucial details of organisation and infrastructure are often, and purposefully, rendered invisible to the exhibition visitor, considered extraneous and unnecessary by comparison to the aesthetic *raison d’être* of the exhibition. However, for art and cultural historians, exhibitions leak well beyond the walls of the galleries that host them. They tell us much about the politics and manoeuvrings of the art world, and *how* artists, and indeed their work, are made public at a particular moment. Of course, not all exhibitions are equal. Some are organised with the weight of internationally recognised institutions backing them, whilst others are more provisional—hastily assembled on a shoestring budget. We take “exhibition” to signal a range of possibilities for displaying art to the public and the contributions to this issue take us on

a journey across a multitude of exhibition spaces, from the permanent to the more provisional, some familiar and others much more surprising.

“Exhibitions” are the focus of the first research strand of the *London, Asia* project. Through the site of the exhibition, we have established some guiding principles which shape this special issue, but also the project as a whole. These are:

To experiment with approaches and methodologies for researching and writing about connections, encounters, and differences across and within nations, regions, and cultures;

To “socialise” a field of enquiry, by which we mean convene events and gatherings (physical and virtual) to discuss and debate the new research possibilities of *London, Asia*;

To create art histories which are not siloed into neat categories, but that can exceed boundaries; and

To build a project that is not self-contained, but can “infect” other projects and researchers working across art produced by artists from Britain, Asia, and their diaspora.

Other research strands of the project will further shape and develop these principles. They will encompass institutions and art schools, again allowing us to exceed the borders of the nation state and the monographic focus which still grips much art-historical study.⁴ These three research strands—exhibitions, institutions, and art schools—are also necessarily porous, with what we envision as many productive overlaps and interchanges between them. Together, they form the meeting points of *London, Asia*, the nodes around which a more expanded and diverse narrative of British art can be mapped. This expansion and entanglement of narratives is also an area where this project can intercept the ongoing construction of art histories in Asia and in the diaspora. Our intent is not to map the world—but to privilege testing approaches that engage with this terrain in a systematic but open-ended way that socialises and convenes a field of new research possibilities.

Our title—*London, Asia*—is purposefully provocative. The juxtaposition suggests displacement and invites a kind of dissonance, for example, by bringing a city into proximity with a continent. It is also a claim on London, a city that exceeds and complicates easy nationalist framings, and Asia, a region so vast and diverse that it resists any homogenising categorisation. We embrace this ambiguity, uneasiness of scale, and resistance to sharp definition. The project does not propose a comparative framework; instead, it encourages new perspectives on the entanglements, historic and contemporary, between London (and more broadly Britain) and Asia.⁵ These entanglements are, of course, historic and there has been much recent work on imperial artistic and cultural networks, especially those facilitated through trade and cultural exchange.⁶ Our focus, whilst being informed by the critically energising and interrogative work of historians of empire and imperial aesthetic cultures, takes a more expanded framing that is not restricted by the geographies of the British Empire. Our focus is also very much on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, examining how these shared terrains have been negotiated by modern and contemporary artists. Modernism, particularly as it has emerged, been shaped, and defined in newly independent, post-colonial countries, has often been a nationalist project, or at the very least, inflected by the impulses of nation-building.⁷ We have histories of Indian modernism, for example, and those of modern art in Britain, but very few (if any?) that track the emergence of modernism and modern art in these countries and regions as connected, embroiled, and interconnected—as necessarily shaped by what Edward Said described in *Culture and Imperialism* as “overlapping territories, intertwined histories”.⁸ Newly independent nations were eager to emphasise separation from former imperial powers in the West, but these histories, in their desire to emphasise equally new and independent aesthetic languages, often ignored a

messier reality. There was no *tabula rasa*, no fresh start, but only lives and careers that were lived across geographies and which were very much shaped by past events, as well as a desire to create new futures. It is hardly controversial to state that national and regional boundaries are porous, criss-crossed by people and ideas, and yet we are still working out how to research and write in ways that can accommodate these complexities. In rejecting imperial binarism (a kind of “them” and “us” structure, to put it more crudely), we have taken our cue from thinkers such as Leela Gandhi, who writes of “affective communities” as a model to think across and through national and imperial structures.⁹ *London, Asia* asks broader methodological questions about the ways in which the art histories of Britain and Asia have been written, circulated, and negotiated. It also asks questions of the PMC as an institution that serves the field of “British art”, and through that platform seeks to infect the wider field of study that the Centre serves. This challenge to units of geography (nation, region, continent) circumscribing historical research is an approach we share with AAA, our partner in the *London, Asia* project, and in sympathy with other recent efforts such as the multi-disciplinary journal *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, and its attempt to “cross-pollinate the categories of analysis” that constitute both “Asia” and “the world”.¹⁰

Exhibitions Comma Histories

All of the contributions to this special issue embody a collective attempt to interrogate the exhibition as a site for researching the entanglements between London and Asia, and deploy the digital publication *British Art Studies* as a platform for collaboration that will catalyse further research.

The Conversation Piece in this issue, led by Saloni Mathur, positions “exhibition histories as a practice of knowledge” and invites eleven respondents to consider “what is the nature of this knowledge pursuit” from distinct positions. Caroline A. Jones argues, in her response to Mathur’s provocation, that the “Western procedure of exhibition was always about capital, whether cultural, political, or fiduciary”.¹¹ Kenji Praepipatmongkol points out that, as we move away from strictly Eurocentric models, “nothing about exhibitionary form is self-evident” and scholars increasingly recognise the parallels between exhibitions and other modes of collective gathering and performance that “trouble the propriety of museum and gallery spaces.” What all respondents do is take the exhibition as a site to destabilise the relationship between art and its many histories.

The Cover Collaboration is occupied by the artistic–curatorial–research collective Asia Art Activism, and emerges out of a series of performance art works (“Being Present”) that responded to the exhibition, *Speech Acts: Reflection–Imagination–Repetition*, (Manchester Art Gallery, 2018–2019).¹² Their interventions treated the site of the exhibition not simply as a subject of historical enquiry, but as a productive space for conducting and staging research, as well as for fuelling artistic practice. Artists Bettina Fung, Ada Xiaoyu Hao, and Nicholas Tee, working with curator Annie Jael Kwan, have taken their performances as points of departure to create new works for this special issue that extend their exploration of voice, visibility, and trace to the digital realm.

The articles and contributions included in *London, Asia, Exhibition, Histories* do not simply provide the endpoint or outcome of a research journey, but also make available raw material, such as digitised archival materials or previously unavailable data, which might underpin further or different research projects. In publishing the material in this way, our goal is to test how the digital format of *British Art Studies* can encourage or provoke new methodologies for

researching or publishing the histories of exhibitions, and more broadly for the model of entanglement that we propose.

Visibility is one of the main themes that runs throughout this special issue. Many of the exhibitions discussed by our authors have slipped out of the art-historical record. This often has to do with issues of scale and institutional support. Often held in smaller and less financially stable venues, the archival traces of the exhibitions discussed here can be difficult to find, or where available, are dispersed across different publications and archives, or live on only through personal memories of the event, as Alice Correia discusses in her article on “Researching Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain in the 1980s”. The question of how historians revisit, reconstruct, or even just describe a historic exhibition recurs throughout the articles, and the authors propose a range of possible solutions. Brinda Kumar’s article “Exciting a Wider Interest in the Art of India: The 1931 Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition” uses the published, but unillustrated, catalogue of the 1931 exhibition to reimagine the narrative journey through India’s art history constructed by curators and the 333 works they selected. A trio of articles by Sarena Abdullah, Kelvin Chuah, and Claire Wintle explore an exhibition space that no longer exists: the art galleries of the Commonwealth Institute. Through their distinct but overlapping contributions, Abdullah, Chuah, and Wintle demonstrate the possibilities and limits of the archive; a theme that several authors return to again and again. Exhibitions can also take place outside of the gallery and institutional walls, as Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason remind us as they follow the exhibition histories of two artists from East Pakistan (Bangladesh after 1971) as they made their way through London in the 1950s, displaying their works at the Sunday open-air exhibitions that took place on the railings of the city’s parks and in restaurants owned by acquaintances. A series of interviews with contemporary curators, Iwona Blazwick, David Elliot, and Sharmini Pereira, who have all steered influential curatorial projects between London and Asia, reminds us that these exhibition histories and their regional and institutional framings extend into the present and shape our future.

The open-access platform of *British Art Studies* is a springboard. Our hope is that readers use the ideas, research, and resources presented here to make conceptual and historical leaps of their own, which will contribute to more expanded notions of British art and its historical and contemporary entanglements with artistic production from Asia.

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About the authors

Hammad Nasar is a curator, writer, and researcher based in London. He is co-curator (with Irene Aristizábal) of British Art Show 9 (2020–2022), and a Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, where he co-leads (with Sarah Turner) the *London, Asia* project. Earlier, he was the inaugural Executive Director of the Stuart Hall Foundation (2018–19); Head of Research & Programmes at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2012–2016); and, co-founded (with Anita Dawood) Green Cardamom, London (2004–2012).

Sarah Victoria Turner is director of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art in London, which is part of Yale University. She is editor-in-chief of the award-winning, open-access journal *British Art Studies* (since its founding in 2015). She has taught at both the University of York and the Courtauld Institute of Art. Much of her academic work has focused on the entangled relationships between Britain, the British Empire, and South Asia; she has published widely and co-curated several major exhibitions, most recently *Making New Worlds: Li Yuan-chia & Friends* at Kettle's Yard.

Footnotes

1. Hammad Nasar's paper on *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, titled "Notes from the Field: Navigating the Afterlife of The Other Story", Art Asia Archive, is available at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/notes-from-the-field-navigating-the-afterlife-of-the-other-story>.
2. These exhibitions were: *View-Point: A Retrospective Exhibition of Li Yuan-chia* (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2014); *Rasheed Araeen: Before and After Minimalism* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2014); and *Rasheed Araeen: Homecoming* (Karachi: VM Art Gallery, 2014).
3. Hammad Nasar's paper, "Expanding Britishness: Curatorial Interventions in Re-Entangling Histories" was presented in the session "Diaspora Artists and British Art History: Intervention–Integration–Expansion" convened by Alice Correia, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, and Elizabeth Robles at the Association for Art History conference held at the University of Brighton in 2019.
4. Some of these ideas are more fully explored in "Art Histories of Excess: Hammad Nasar in Conversation with Karin Zitzewitz", *Art Journal* (Winter 2018): 106–112.
5. The concepts of "entanglement" and "entangled histories" has gained currency in recent years. We want to acknowledge the work of Nicholas Thomas, who was one of the first researchers to promote this widely through his publications, stressing in his work on the Pacific the shared history of colonial entanglement. See, in particular, Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
6. See, in particular: Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley, and Douglas Fordham, *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Antoinette Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis Across Empire: Artworks and Networks in India 1765–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
7. For productive discussion of modernism and the nation, see the work of Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina, 2010); Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Delhi: Tulika, 2007); and Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
8. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 1.
9. Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

10. One of AAA's content priorities that guides their research and archival collections is the idea of "complex geographies" that acknowledges the shortcomings of simple geographic delineations; see <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/building-asia-art-archive/type/conversations>. See Tina Chan and Eric Hayot, "Introducing *Verge*: What Does It Mean to Study Global Asias?", *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): vi–xv.
11. See this issue and also see Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
12. "Being Present" was staged as part of the symposium, "The LYC Museum & Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice" (Manchester Art Gallery, 6–7 March 2019), organised by the Paul Mellon Centre and University of the Arts London, in collaboration with Manchester Art Gallery and the University of Manchester; it was convened by Hammad Nasar, Lucy Steeds, and Sarah Victoria Turner. For more on the symposium, see <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/forthcoming/the-lyc-museum-art-gallery-and-the-museum-as-practice>. It accompanied the exhibition *Speech Acts: Reflection–Imagination–Repetition* (2018–2019), curated by Hammad Nasar with Kate Jesson, and presented by Manchester Art Gallery in partnership with The Black Artists and Modernism (BAM) research project—funded by the AHRC and led by University of the Arts London in collaboration with Middlesex University. For more on BAM, see <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/about/>.

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