Unlearning the Modern

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Instant Malaysia: Imagining a Nation at the Commonwealth Institute

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Unlearning the Modern

Interview interview between **David Elliott**Interview and **Hilary Floe**
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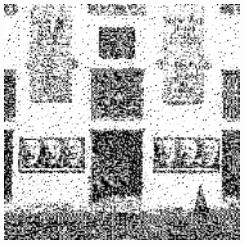

Abstract
British curator David Elliott led the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (MoMA) between 1976 and 1996. During this time, he developed a distinctively diverse and international programme in which twentieth-century art from Asia played a significant role, including landmark multi-exhibition projects devoted to India (1982), Japan (1985), and China (1993). Subsequently, he has been director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Mori Art Gallery in Tokyo, and the Istanbul Modern, in addition to directing biennial exhibitions in Moscow, Kiev, and Sydney. He is currently vice-director and senior curator at the Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art (RMCA) in Guangzhou. His book *Art and Trousers: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art includes an essay reflecting on exhibitions of Asian art staged at MoMA during his time as director, and will be published by ArtAsiaPacific in spring 2020. He discusses those projects, in particular his influential series of exhibitions clustered under the title India: Myth and Reality*, in this interview with curator and art historian Hilary Floe. Her doctoral dissertation considering the early history of MoMA (1965–1982) was completed at the University of Oxford in 2016.

Interview

Hilary: Over the course of your career, you spent twenty years as director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford curating—among many other things—both historical and contemporary Asian art exhibitions within a programme that was vastly more global than was considered the norm at this time. When we've talked in the past about your work in Oxford, you have mentioned that one of the things you were trying to do with your exhibitions was to intervene in British preconceptions about Asia, countering specific prejudices.

David: My own British and European prejudices as well. It wasn't intending to imply that "I'm enlightened and you're not." [But] I felt concerned and suspicious about how extremely prejudiced the contemporary art world and art market were about things beyond their expertise or interests.

Hilary: Your forthcoming book is a major publication, *Art and Trousers*, which addresses the context of contemporary art in Asia.[1] I was looking again at your list of past exhibitions, which is

so remarkably broad and deep. You could tell the story of your career as a curator by pulling any number of geographic threads—whether it be Eastern Europe or Germany or Latin America or other locales. Why have you chosen to adopt this Asian framework?

David: I lived in Tokyo for five years and Istanbul for two years and have been interested in Asian art since I was a teenager, but what you are referring to is more than the vagaries of my personal biography. Asia is a great landmass from which so much of Western culture comes, providing a kind of alternative to the Greco-Roman world. Professionally, I came to it through my work on Russia and the Soviet Union, and through interest in the major civilisations of India, China, and central Asia. All of the big world religions are derived from either the fertile triangle or the Himalayas—you could even say that a lot of the indigenous cultures of the Americas are related in some way to the shamanist nomadic cultures of Siberia and north-eastern Asia. European imperialism cut its teeth in Asia and, in the process, discovered America. Amazing art has always been made throughout this vast, perplexing continent that we are still learning to understand and appreciate.

Hilary: In your book, you describe very compellingly the way one project for you begot another project—a game of hopscotch or following a thread, where one show would lead to another show would lead to another show, not coming fully enlightened but following a pathway of research and discovery. After your time as director of MoMA in Oxford and of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, you shifted to working within Asia, staging (among other things) Asian art exhibitions there: for example, in Tokyo as founding director of the Mori Art Museum, and in your current role as vice-director and senior curator at the RMCA Guangzhou. For you, what kind of shift was it working on Asian art in Britain versus working in Asia itself? There's a lovely line where you talk about your relationship changing from that of a voyeur to a flaneur.

David: Well, there is an intimacy that arises when you're not just visiting a place. And for me, this was to do with everyday interactions and came from socialising with Japanese, or Turkish, or Chinese people, rather than being laagered in atomised expat communities.

Hilary: In terms of British audiences, did you make different kinds of assumptions about received knowledge? Is there something fundamentally different for you about curating "art from elsewhere"—also the title of the Hayward touring show of international contemporary art that you curated in 2014?

David: In Oxford, I knew that I was presenting exhibitions for British audiences. You can't assume that people have knowledge and, whether it is popular or not, the work has to be made intelligible (or "accessible" as we say in museums today). For example, in 1982, when I curated *India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art* with Ebrahim Alkazi and Victor Musgrave, a lot of people regarded India as a "Third World" country and not "modern" at all.[2] Many thought it was a "backward" ex-colony and, on top of this, there was significant racial prejudice against Asian immigrants. Even Howard Hodgkin, who was on my board, a collector and connoisseur of classical Indian art, was uninterested in contemporary Indian art, apart from that of [his friend] Bhupen Khakhar. So, I realised that we had to build bridges. For this I applied various rules of thumb. Most important was "do I think this work is any good? Do I find it interesting? And if I do, how can I articulate it? How may it be communicated with other people?" If I could be satisfied on these fronts, for me at least, the exhibition should be realized and 70 percent of the job was accomplished.

Hilary: Looking at the list of artists you included in *Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, the exhibition of modern and contemporary art, for example, many of those are names that have become much

more familiar to British audiences today (fig. 1). I would argue that your exhibition contributed significantly to that process of canon formation.

Figure 1

India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art, festival newsletter designed by Trilokesh Mukherjee, 1982. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

David: Absolutely. It reflected the remarkable strength of work made by Indian artists from the period of independence to the early 1980s—this has only relatively recently been widely acknowledged. I was then learning on the hoof in the run up to the exhibition and made two substantial visits to India to see artists' work. For *Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, both Victor Musgrave and I wanted to include the painter V.S. Gaitonde, but Ebrahim Alkazi, the third co-curator, wasn't keen on it and, as it was logistically complicated to get the right works, he was not included. But on balance, we made a really good, representative selection (fig. 2).

Figure 2

India Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, installation photograph with M.F. Husain. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: The Paul Mellon Centre's project *London, Asia* acknowledges the significance of London in the emergence of our historical narratives about Asia. But, of course, you were working not in London but in Oxford between 1976 and 1996. Your *India: Myth and Reality* programme seems to have been an unofficial riposte to the enormous official *Festival of India* that took place mainly in London in the same year. I wonder if your position as the head of a non-national museum outside the capital allowed you to make bolder gestures in terms of the art that you could represent? Or the ways you could show it?
David: Well, that's a big question! The equivalent organisations to MoMA in London at this time would have been the Whitechapel or the Serpentine, neither of which were national museums. The Serpentine was mainly showing then younger British artists, and by the early 1980s, the Whitechapel was starting to show international expressionist and "new spirit" painting. I liked the sense of freedom in Oxford because the city was small but world famous, not far from London or the main international airport (fig. 3). It was full of learned people and had a kind of cosmopolitan swing as well as a strong European character of its own. And, in this case, because we were working with a private foundation, I was able to keep well clear of political or diplomatic interests—or lassitude.

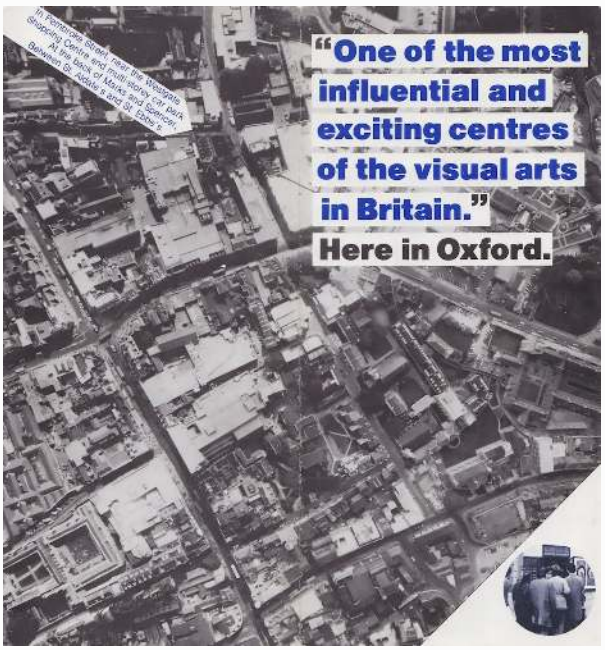

Figure 3

'One of the most influential and exciting centres of the visual arts in Britain', Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, promotional leaflet, 1985. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: How did exhibitions of modern and contemporary Asian art, such as your season devoted to India, fit within your wider vision for the institution? And how did they relate to the focus on art from the USSR, which was also a very strong current within the programme at this time? At this time, MoMA itself was still a relative newcomer to the British art world, having opened only in 1966.
David: In the early 1980s, as an indirect result of the increase in the money supply from the deregulation of financial markets by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, contemporary art

became more expensive and therefore more "important". Before I arrived at the museum, former directors Peter Ibsen and Nick Serota had shown a lot of work from an avant-garde pool of Western artists who were not publicly exhibited elsewhere in the UK. I continued in this spirit, but also wanted my exhibitions to challenge the accepted canon of the "avant-garde". This meant challenging the point of view that contemporary art of any quality was determined by the discourse in which it was embedded. While such discourses were not necessarily uninteresting, their dominance resulted from particular circumstances that were largely controlled by people who were Western, white, and male. This seemed to be rather myopic and at MoMA I set out to examine the idea of artistic quality within a broader framework that criticised the biases of both modernity and modernism, by factoring in the importance of viewpoint, gaze, and power.

Hilary: The freedom to programme was obviously very distinctive.

David: It was good for me. I also liked the roughness of the museum's industrial building. Twenty years is a very long time to stay in one place, but it enabled me to educate myself.

Hilary: It seems to me that the sorts of critical interventions you were trying to make in your exhibitions often didn't fully register with the mainstream art press. Is that fair to say? The 1982 Indian exhibitions were certainly a case in point: most critics seem to have been oblivious to the exhibitions' attempts to challenge shallow concepts of national identity. They repeatedly framed their assessments of modern Indian art as a struggle between supposedly native tradition and supposedly Western modernity. Those are exactly the sorts of misreadings you were seeking to contest.

David: Yes, the art press were more or less hopeless. There were some people who had an idea, but usually they weren't the regular reviewers. For the rest, one just had to try and avoid offending them. They were completely unpredictable.

Hilary: There is a difference, isn't there, between the art journals and the broadsheet type of review for which the lead times are so short—if they have to come out the day of the preview, it doesn't lend itself to a very sophisticated discourse.

David: It then tends to become naively political, and I don't think that's interesting either.

Hilary: Conversely, there were at the same time some really constructive critical debates taking place in Britain. Your *India: Myth and Reality* exhibitions in 1982 were explicitly post-colonial in structure, taking independence as the chronological starting point. These seem to have reflected some of the debates that were going on in art magazines, led by people like Rasheed Araeen and Victor Musgrave in *Art Monthly* and elsewhere, critiquing the plans for the Festival of India for adhering too closely to tropes of glorious unbroken tradition and not fully engaging with modernity or contemporary art.

David: I think that Rasheed at that time was locked in combat with Joanna Drew who was the deputy head of visual arts at the Arts Council and was responsible for *In the Image of Man*, a historical exhibition of classical Indian art at the Hayward Gallery. It was a very good show but Rasheed felt that the Art Council should be showing contemporary Asian art—a dialogue that they did not resolve until 1989 when he curated the exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward. *In the Image of Man* brought complaints from Philip Rawson because it contained no tantric art, although an exhibition, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy* had taken place in the same gallery in 1971. He disliked the Oxford show for the same reason but neither Alkazi, Musgrave nor I were convinced by the contemporary tantric artists and we were unanimous in not including their work. Jean-Hubert Martin included some examples of this work in his big show *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989.

Hilary: That year was also a formative time in the black British art movement with the first National Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton in 1982. How much were you aware of the crossover in thinking around art in Britain, with people like Araeen engaging with black British art as well as with post-colonial representations of Asia?

David: For a number of reasons, I wasn't so interested in this. I knew what was going on and who the people were, and also Rasheed at this time. But I decided to look at art from places where there were national or regional art histories, which, for various reasons, had not been acknowledged in Britain. Examining these within an international context seemed more complicated and rewarding because of the light it also threw on British knowledge and attitudes. The topic of black art is very important, but was not of such great interest to me then, because of the cultural situation in Oxford I have already described. Had I been working in Birmingham or Manchester, it may well have been very different.

Mainly, I was interested in bringing things from outside by people working today who were part of established cultures going back thousands of years, before the British were even running around in woad. And in really seeing what they were doing now, and why, and how. Obviously this wasn't just a matter of aesthetics, it also related to broader social, political, economic, aesthetic, and ideological development.

Hilary: On this question of politics, the London Festival of India was, as we know, the product of very official channels of cultural diplomacy. There were long negotiations between the governments of Thatcher and Gandhi. Whereas the *India: Myth and Reality* project you did in Oxford was largely, a kind of independent initiative between you, Victor Musgrave, and Ebrahim Alkazi, who also significantly funded the project through his family foundation. Private patronage is such a loaded concept, and often maligned, but in this case, it clearly served to facilitate an alternative to a limited official narrative.

David: It enabled us to be more flexible and get up to speed very quickly, which would not have been possible through the official channels. Also, all of our activities were concentrated in one place. The Festival of India was spread widely over London. There were very few books on the subject of modern Indian art, but Alkazi is a public figure in India and, having spent twenty years as director of the National Theatre in Delhi and having run a gallery, he knew all of the artists. His wife, Roshen, was also running the Art Heritage gallery in Delhi, which was a great help in local logistics and administration. We were in touch with Festival of India organisers, though—when I was in India, I had meetings with Pupul Jayakar, and Geeta Kapur whom I had already briefly met in London. She was the author of the one book then in English on modern Indian art and one of the curators of the Royal Academy show of contemporary Indian art. There was another exhibition curated by Rajeev Sethi at the Barbican called *Aditi: Craftsmen and Performers* (fig. 4). It was impressive in its way but criticised as a kind of "human zoo" because there were musicians and craftsmen who set up "huts and stalls"—a bit like a late nineteenth-century world fair. But there was some music, craft and folk art that was really good and had not been seen before in Britain.

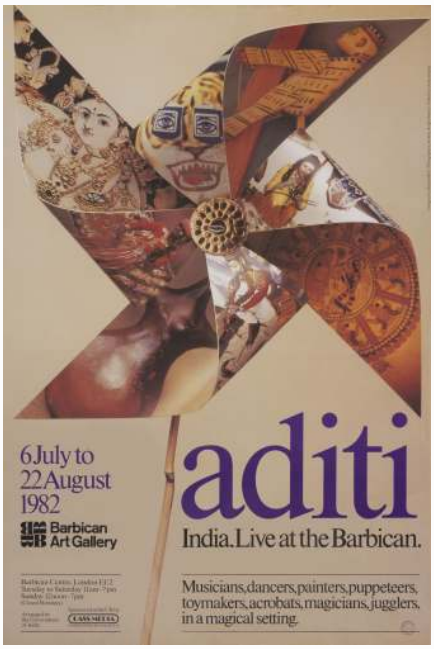

Figure 4

Aditi: Craftsmen and Performers, Barbican Art Gallery, 1982, poster design by Richard Bird, 1982, ink on paper, 76.3 × 50.9 cm. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (S.527–1995). Digital image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Hilary: You subverted the idea of the national survey show about India by having five different exhibitions over a three-part period, each examining different facets (fig. 5). This strikes me as a very strong statement to make about the plural nature of Indian culture.[3] Where did that idea come from?

David: I would have been uneasy just doing the one show because so little had been seen in the UK. And also the popular arts in India are amazing. As a kid in the 1960s, I used to buy Indian posters with Hindu goddesses and gods on them, which were part of the hippie culture, and Ravi Shankar was also very popular. I was very interested in the musical culture, as well as in the folk art and the modernist or modern art. From an initial position of almost total ignorance, one of the first big questions in my mind was, "why does Indian modernism make me feel a bit uneasy?" It was like seeing oneself reflected in a strange distorting mirror. Once I had travelled to India, immersed myself in its culture at different levels, met many artists, and seen some of the best examples of its modern art, I realised that the vestigial neo-colonial gaze had to be completely obliterated. Powerful and varied art works were being made with a numinous quality … any problems were my problems, not those of the work. This process of unlearning was a great lesson for me.

Figure 5

Gods of the Byways: Wayside Shrines of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1982, installation photograph. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: Clearly the market for Asian contemporary art in Britain, and everywhere, has dramatically changed over the last forty years. Some of the artists that you have been engaged with for a long time and that you write about in your book, such as Ai Weiwei or Yayoi Kusama, are now very much at the top tier of art world stardom. I wonder how much you think there has been a genuine shift in the way that British audiences look at Asian art and how much you think the art market has played a role in that?

David: Personally, I've never been interested in the art market. For people who don't know much about art, the fact that a work has sold for a lot of money may seem impressive but is no indication of its artistic quality. Now, with the extension of the contemporary art market in Asia, we have seen the rise of Asian collectors. And this has created a limited, but virtuous, economic circle in the matter of supply and demand.[4] But private collections are no substitute for strong, independent, publically minded museums which a few collectors and foundations are now trying to set up in Asia. At present, the lack of solid infrastructure there is serious and the matter of research is confined to a few universities and to those large museums that are able to publish catalogues.

Hilary: You've talked about how important it is to you as a curator to try and see as much as possible beyond the market, beyond whatever is commercially or critically fashionable at a given moment in a given place. In your book, you call it the "ethno-centric market-based myopia of the contemporary art world". This philosophy led you far beyond what other curators were exhibiting in Britain at that time. It was probably considered rather eccentric. Although we've supposedly had a global turn in the art world, and in many places programming is indeed more international, I'm sure the blinkers that we wear now remain very limiting in terms of what we're invited to value. From your perspective, what are we not seeing today? Where should we be looking harder?

David: I think there are still a lot of things to be seen. In this respect, there's a lot of research to be done in Southeast Asia, central Asia, the Pacific region, Africa, and Latin America. Also, in

looking seriously at indigenous cultures and their position in contemporaneity. Other eyes and other voices are needed to tell their stories. Today, what I see is a Western art world obsessed by AI and virtual reality—I'm interested in how people use technology, but this kind of technocratic "flavour-of-the-monthness" leaves me cold.

Hilary: You've also talked about how important you think it is for exhibitions to be able to be argumentative, to take a stance about something, or to make a proposition. In some ways, this feels like a rather rebellious position when the dominant tendencies in contemporary curating have tended towards the indeterminate, the minimal, a horror of didacticism. Sometimes paring away so much of the interpretation that exhibitions don't say very much at all. In contrast, your approach seems to embody a sort of ethics of curatorial generosity, whereby you feel comfortable giving more to the visitor, through the exhibitions, through the design, through the catalogues, than some others do because they're worried about coming across as too authoritative. Does the idea of generosity resonate for you at all?

David: Yes, having a position and being professionally generous are very important. For one thing, if you think something's good, you want to share it with other people. Otherwise, why bother? And you're already there—in a position of authority—because you've chosen the work to exhibit, whether you want to admit responsibility or not. This is really your power as a curator, so I'm not afraid of didacticism and like to provide people with a "toolbox". I would never dream of telling people what they should think or feel, but I can give interesting and relevant information about the work, the place, the person, the people. Then others can decide whether or not they would like to use it.

Hilary: Another change over the course of your career has to do with the term "curator" itself, which barely existed when you started working. Now it's overused, and rampantly commercialised as well, with everything from curated womenswear to a whole new line of beef jerky that I've seen in Sainsbury's called The Curators.

David: Really?

Hilary: Yes! And parallel to that emergence in popular culture, there has been the emergence of curatorial and exhibition histories as an academic discipline. But it's still unusual for curators to engage with those histories in the first person, as you do in a long essay in your new book. What made you decide to write about the history of your own work in this way?

David: I wanted to get the history of MoMA Oxford down before it disappears entirely. And I thought it may be useful for people to see a way of reasoning about exhibitions and the process of putting things together which isn't often discussed. I touch a little bit, also, on the political background to exhibitions I organised on art from southern Asia, Southeast Asia, central Asia, Japan, and China.

Hilary: The way you write about curating gives a sort of inside-out view that acknowledges the limitations of the critical response, the role that chance encounter plays in the development of particular projects, and how one project leads to another, budget problems, last-minute political dramas, all of the things that go into exhibition-making but are often excluded from its histories. You write about it in a very frank and unpretentious way—you're obviously engaged with the politics of your past projects but it's not a piece of curatorial theory.

David: Thank God. Yes, the period I've been working in has formulated the curator as the all-knowing, all-seeing figure, who ineffably decides what the most important art is, without knowing much about what's actually happening. And, as you say, there is the widespread growth of critical theory and curatorship as subjects at universities. I think it's important to know about

philosophy and critical theory, particularly as it influences artists, but I wouldn't use it as the sole prism with which to view the world.

Hilary: Tell me about your national shows. The India project was an expanded, festival-style, five-exhibition project, which approached the idea of national representation in a consciously fragmented and pluralistic way. This format of multiple national exhibitions comes back with regards to the post-war Japanese avant-garde in 1985, after which you do single shows on art from South Africa, Argentina, Australia, and so on (fig. 6). You also did a very important two-part show of Chinese contemporary art, *New Art from China*, in 1993 (fig. 7).[5] It's a model you have also continued to work with recently. You've mentioned not wanting to see those as national "survey" shows, although they could be mistaken for them. Do you ever feel awkward having a national framework around a show?

David: It's not necessarily awkward because there *are* national histories and they are always being revised and contested, which is often the territory where I work. Close to home, there are overlapping and sometimes competing British, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish art histories. I don't see this as being deeply problematic; one just has to be succinct. But there is a feeling in the art world that somehow it's improper to put a national "label" on anyone. In my view, it's not a label but a convenience, which may be adopted if helpful or dumped if it becomes any kind of impediment.

Figure 6

Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945–65, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1985. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Figure 7

New Art from China, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993, exterior view. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: You've worked extensively with public and diplomatic bodies as well as with privately led initiatives—for example, you've been involved with the British Council for a long time, and often needed to work with foreign governments to realize an exhibition. The RMCA where you work now is privately run. How important do you think it is to read the distinctions between

public and private when thinking about the final outcome of an exhibition? Have your choices often been constrained by a need for funding or loans?

David: Running any non-profit museum is a financial and aesthetic balancing act, but only very rarely have I not been able to raise funds for projects I have wanted to do. In the decision to make a particular exhibition, the argument of the director/curator should be decisive and the interests of either government or a private sponsor should not be primary. When I was in Oxford, I used to keep a lot of projects on the backburner as I looked for opportunities, collaborations, and public or private sponsorship----both of which we could receive as an independent non-profit. Part of our success was also in organising many exhibitions that travelled to other museums and galleries in the UK and overseas, which guaranteed an income from hire fees and catalogue sales. In terms of making contacts and securing loans, this also meant that we could operate outside official British government policy. An exception was the EU-wide embargo on cultural relations with China after 4 June 1989, which meant that our planned project had to be put on hold until 1993.

In the case of the exhibition *Art From South Africa* (1990), we had no links with the South African government or UK representation there and worked directly with the legal representation of the ANC inside the country (the United Democratic Front). By the time our exhibition took place, Nelson Mandela had been released. In relation to Indonesia, we received quite a shock when in 1994–1995 we organised a residency, exhibition, and performance with Heri Dono, from Yogyakarta, who received a very good review of his work in *The Times* that quoted the artist directly from the catalogue (fig. 8).[6] Just as this show ended, the museum received a furious letter from the Indonesian embassy stating that both the museum and artist had completely misrepresented many aspects of the country, particularly its policies and political history, and requested that the catalogue to be immediately withdrawn. Dono was very concerned but, as he and his family were still living in Indonesia and could suffer reprisals, I had to stifle my initial reaction of telling the embassy to get lost. A letter of polite concern sent by my assistant while I was away did the trick, and fortunately by then the exhibition was over, it was easy to remove the catalogue from sale for a time.

Figure 8

Heri Dono: Blooming in Arms, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1996, installation photograph. Collection of Modern Art Oxford. Digital image courtesy of Modern Art Oxford.

Hilary: It's one thing to insist on your curatorial independence until the life of the artist is at stake.

David: Exactly. The functionary at the embassy had a letter saying that the catalogue was withdrawn and was happy with this. After President Suharto resigned in 1998, the catalogue was openly put back on sale.

Hilary: One of the things I noticed going through the archives in Oxford is the extent to which some of these political fudges were possible because the parties involved were a long way away and information didn't travel as rapidly as it does now. You could get away with having multiple editions of exhibition catalogues or quietly exhibiting artworks that have been refused for export. Do you think it's a very different situation now, in a digital era?

David: I don't know. There are big problems with censorship in China at the moment, which is often decided by a minor official's individual interpretation and is never communicated in writing. I sincerely hope this won't continue and really struggle to see its political utility for the Chinese government. There's a grisly echo here of the Cultural Revolution as well as of Stalinism. So I'm still dealing with this kind of thing.

Hilary: What does your current position at the RMCA involve?

David: I'm its vice-director and senior curator, so I'm helping with the programming and curating a number of exhibitions. I work primarily long distance and go there four or five times a year. The programme is contemporary and it's both Chinese and international. They're particularly interested in video work, although not exclusively so. The museum is situated in a district, about 17 hectares, designed by Russian architects in the early 1950s as a gift for the new Chinese government. It was initially for food processing and food canning which was one of Guangzhou's big industries in those days but has now been converted for arts, culture, leisure, and educational use. It's wonderful to have this kind of relaxed space where people can get together. The museum has six buildings stretched across the site.

Hilary: It's a newly established museum, like the Mori Art Museum and Istanbul Modern, both of which you led over the last 20 years. Even the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford was only ten years old when you moved there in 1976. Is there something about a young institution that appeals to you

David: I hadn't really thought of it but, yes, I guess so. I haven't particularly been searching them out. Maybe older institutions are more stratified; they have a very large, often frustrated, not-so-well-paid staff and horrendously hierarchical pecking orders. Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where I worked from 1996 to 2001, is a national museum with well over a hundred staff and my time there was sometimes consumed by local politics. But wherever you are, if you do new things, people will always take notice, although not necessarily in a friendly way. This is all part of being a museum director—to be open, take responsibility for doing your job properly, and to refuse to be browbeaten; to expose the public to new art, new ideas; to give them something real to grasp their imaginations."

About the authors

David Elliott is a British art historian, curator, writer, and teacher, who has directed museums in Oxford (MoMA, 1976–1996), Stockholm (Moderna Museet, 1996–2001), Tokyo (Mori Art Museum, founding director 2001–2006), and Istanbul (Museum of Modern Art, 2007). He is currently Vice-Director and Senior Curator of the Redtory Museum of Contemporary Art (RMCA) in Guangzhou. He has been the artistic director of major biennales in Sydney (2010), Kyiv (2012), Moscow (2014), and Belgrade (2016), and has taught Art History/Museum Studies at the University of Oxford (1986–1996), National University of the Arts, Tokyo (2002–2006), Humboldt University, Berlin (Rudolf Arnheim Professor in the History of Art 2008), and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2008–2016).

Hilary Floe is Assistant Curator at the Barbican Art Gallery and previously held curatorial positions at The Hepworth Wakefield and Modern Art Oxford. Recent exhibition projects include *Into the Night: Cabarets and Clubs in Modern Art* (2019), *Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things* (2019), *Lee Miller and Surrealism in Britain* (2018), and *Alina Szapocznikow: Human Landscapes* (2017). Her doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford considered cultural politics and theories of spectatorship through the history of the former Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, 1965-82.

Footnotes

1. David Elliott, *Art & Trousers: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art* (Hong Kong: ArtAsiaPacific, 2020).
2. The exhibition Aspects of Modern Indian Art was one of a number of exhibitions and events devoted to contemporary Indian culture sharing the overall title India: Myth and Reality that ran at MoMA Oxford between May and October 1982.
3. Part one of *India: Myth and Reality* featured *Gods of the Byways: Wayside Shrines of Rajasthan, Madya Pradesh and Gujarat* and *Screen Idols: Indian Film Posters from the 1950s to the Present* (9 May–20 June 1982); part two was *Aspects of Modern Indian Art* and *The Indian Calendar* (27 June–8 August 1982); part three was *The Other India: Seven*

Contemporary Photographers (15 August–3 October 1982). Programmes of cinema and film were also organised.

4. In the early 1980s, Chester and Davida Herwitz, the biggest collectors of modern Indian art, were American. There was virtually no market for modern Chinese art.
5. Three contemporary exhibitions of modern and contemporary Japanese art ran at MoMA (8 December 1985–9 February 1986): *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945–65*; *Dada in Japan 1920–1970*; and *Black Sun: The Eyes of Four*. *Art from South Africa* ran from 17 June–23 September 1990. *New Art from China*, part one *Silent Energy and Posters and Ceramics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* ran from 27 June to 29 August 1993 and part two *China Avant-Garde* (co-organised with HKW, Berlin) with *Stuart Franklin Mexico and Beijing: a Tale of Two Cities* (5 September–24 October 1993). *Art from Argentina* ran from 2 October–31 December 1994. After Elliott had left MOMA *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia* (co-curated with Howard Morphy) ran 20 July–2 November 1997.
6. *Heri Dono: Blooming in Arms*, 1 October–20 December 1995.

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