

Isobel Whitelegg

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Biographical note

Isobel Whitelegg

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Isobel is a curator and an art historian. She is the Director of the School of Museum Studies Postgraduate Research Programmes (PhD).

She joined the School in September 2015. She teaches and supervises research within the area of Art Museum & Gallery Studies, at both MA and PhD level.

She previously occupied two positions that operated between academic and arts-institutional contexts: as LJMU Research Curator within the Tate Research Centre: Curatorial Practice & Museology (2014-15) and as Head of Nottingham Contemporary's Public Programme (2011-14), a leading platform for the public debate of ideas and practices relevant to contemporary art and its institutions. Prior to this she was Course Director, MA Curating, Chelsea College of Art & Design (2009-11) and a Fellow of the TrAIN Research Centre, University of the Arts London (2008-11).

Ensaaios e Práticas em Museologia (E&PM) - To begin with, we would like to thank you for giving us this interview. As a curator and art historian, your interests are focused on South America. Why did your interest in this continent arise?

Isobel Whitelegg (IW) - One reason was personal, the other academic. When I was growing up, my father travelled a lot for his work; he visited Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. So, I had an awareness of that part of the world, a strong imaginary of it based on his anecdotes and photographs. He also told me to learn Spanish instead of French because it was going to be a more important international language. The irony is that I have ended up working the most with Brazil, a country that he did not visit, and one that does not speak Spanish! Later, when I studied BA History of Art, one of my tutors used some art historical texts and case studies relating to Latin America. I became interested in why the region was not widely acknowledged in Western Art History and did my BA dissertation on the US reception of the work of Torres-Garcia. The same tutor recommended me to choose the MA Latin American Art at the University of Essex, where he had completed his PhD.

E&PM - The Biennials of São Paulo and Havana have importance in the world of art. Brazil and Cuba are countries with troubled policies. How has it been to get in touch with these contexts? Which aspects most caught your attention?

IW - The Bienal de São Paulo was my first biennial. I visited it for the first time in 2002, before I had ever been to Venice, and when I was in São Paulo for my PhD research. The exhibition that year was not the best one I've seen, but the architecture and the role it plays for the city left a strong impression.

My PhD was on the work of artist Mira Schendel and her dialogues with philosophers and theorists. She was another seed for my interest, as she decided to participate in the edition of 1969, the one that was subject to wide international boycott. That first time, in 2002, I consulted the archives of the BSP to look at the files for the different editions she had participated in.

Later, around 2008, I started to look deeper into the complex question of the boycott, and at how the biennial had survived afterwards. I found that the BSP of the 1970s - even though it was almost ignored by the institutional narrative and by academic writing - was extremely experimental and important. It is a period marked by many collective participations of a critical

and sometimes political nature. It's a very important part of the history and I continue to research to this day, now in collaboration with a group of Brazilian researchers who are also looking at this passage of history, from post-boycott to post-democratisation and globalisation. We all do research in the archive, as well as by speaking to artists and others who were involved in the biennial at that time.

With Havana, I have not visited it, so my connection is less deep; but I am interested in Havana as one model of the biennial form within Latin America. It's also an example of how changing historical and political horizons will change the form and function of a biennial. When the world changed in 1989, that biennial also had to change; it has struggled to find its place in the world since.

E&PM - Has anything changed in your way of perceiving this part of the world? What?

IW - Ah. At this moment, this is a very poignant question. I am going to answer in relation to Brazil again, because this is the centre of my research. My involvement with Brazil specifically since 2002 encompasses its economic rise as a BRIC nation, the election of Lula, then Dilma, and then what came after...

To be honest, my biggest shock in visiting that country in 2002 had been the level of racial division, especially given the myth of racial democracy that is so successfully promoted internationally. In São Paulo, I witnessed people being patronising to Afro-descendant maids or waiters; and, it seemed evident that this was a structural phenomenon with deep roots, the darker your skin, the poorer you would be. It's difficult to say this, because I am English, and we have our own deeply structured social divisions, but there it is as I saw it. The period from Lula to Dilma was one during which this seemed to change. It changed at deeper levels but was also evident in the art world - before, it was unusual to encounter art gallery workers or artists who were Afro-Brazilian. The facts and statistics for the Afro-descendant population, however, will show that this issue is far from resolved.

2002 to 2014 or so was also time during which the study of art produced during the dictatorship became very mainstream - political art gained critical and financial value. Some of the non-Brazilian art historians who wrote these histories treated that period almost as if it was a genre,

a closed chapter of art history. Of course, we know all too well now that this is a history that still is not over, and even at the risk of being repeated.

After the most recent election, people who sympathise with the military are saying that the severity of the dictatorship has been exaggerated. People are re-writing history, and this makes me even more sure that history is important, even if it's only art history. And the most effective way to look at prior periods of political oppression is not to pick out individual artists, but to look at how artists survived collectively, and were supported by organisational structures, like museums, and including the BSP.

In the present day, and since the popularist right-wing campaign started to gain force, I have noticed that many artists have become less concerned with their individual practice. They are more committed politically and more inclined to work collectively. The coming change of government is likely to be a threat to culture and to public institutions. They are talking of cutting funding, which would be a folly and a tragedy as Brazil has a network of public cultural centres that are a model internationally.

E&PM - Do you consider that there are significant differences between the modern and contemporary artists of South America and those of Europe? If so, how do these differences manifest in the works of art?

IW - My approach to art history is a situated one. Where you live and where you produce art informs the nature of that art. This means there is a difference between, for example Danish and English art, and it also means there is a difference between art in Chile and in Costa Rica.

E&PM - Do your researches only go to the big exhibitions and Biennials or do you also get to the gallery exhibitions?

IW - I try to see and understand every context I can, because they are all connected somehow – the artists home or studio, the art school, independent spaces, commercial galleries, museums and biennial exhibitions.

E&PM - You have some papers about Brazil. Do you have a particular interest in this country? If yes, why?

IW - I have touched in this in some ways above, but the root of it was my MA study. The year I did my MA, 1999, one of my professors had visited Brazil recently so she focused on it a lot in teaching. It was also in this time that I became interested in Mira Schendel's work. Mira was a Brazilian artist, though she was born in Europe. She also had a connection to the UK, as she was one of those that had a large solo exhibition at the gallery Signals London in the 1960s and one who developed friendships with artists and critics based here.

When I went to Brazil the first time, I got very attached to it, because of research but also on a more personal level. I made lasting friendships. I still feel it's impossible to have a *committed* relationship to researching a lot of places at once, especially if they are thousands of miles away. So, Brazil is still at the centre for me, though I have been to other parts of that region for conferences or for pieces of research.

E&PM - Are there artists that are in your best interest?

IW - I prefer not to single out the individual, because it is context and collectivity that interests me more. But, historically Mira's work will always be of interest to me. In terms of artists working now, two who are important and interesting - in terms of their own work but also in their commitment to what lies outside of it - are Dora Longo Bahia and Cinthia Marcelle.

E&PM - What type of research sources have you covered?

IW - My research is often rooted in institutional archives, but also includes some interviews, because the structure of institutional archives will always mean that some voices are excluded. So, you must speak to people, and look at their own personal archives.

Methodologically, historiography is central to my approach, and particularly the question of how the history of organisations is written. In this, I am starting to use theories drawn from other fields, such as Management and Organisational Studies.

E&PM - We imagine that the differences in languages - Portuguese and Spanish - have been a challenge and perhaps a barrier. How are you getting around them?

IW - I began with some foundation in Spanish, because I chose (influenced by my father's advice) to learn this language in high school. From around 2001 onwards, I started to slowly teach myself Portuguese, because I really needed to read archival and published texts in that language. It took me longer to speak it, but now I am close to fluent ... I gave my first lecture in Portuguese in São Paulo a couple of years ago. I started to not worry about making mistakes, because I would never judge a non-English speaker for doing that!

E&PM - Do you easily find available information in England about the art world from the South American countries?

IW - Yes, but it always limited by the distance, and it tends to focus on the big names and the high-value artists. The best research on Brazilian art is that researched and written in Brazil and often published in Portuguese only. It is difficult to access funding for translation, but I am organising a collection of texts on the history of the BSP that will be translated for publication in English. I wish we could do this more.

E&PM - Do you see differences between the world of art and the art produced by the countries of Hispanic influence and these universes of Brazil? If yes, of what kind?

IW - Brazil's language, and the fact that it is connected to the patterns of colonisation by Portugal rather than Spain, puts it in a different universe in some ways. Brazil can converse, historically and linguistically, with other continents and countries, with Mozambique, with India... Spanish speaking Latin America, on the other hand, is more able to establish a conversation between its own nations.

E&PM - And Portugal, is it in your plans, considering the relationship between Brazil and Portugal?

IW - It is not in my own plans, but it's certainly an interesting relationship to consider. In recent history, there has been a lot of traffic between artists and curators in Brazil and in Portugal. And these days, the different political points of view of Brazilians living in Portugal has also been quite visible, in the wake of the election.

E&PM - Are you curating some exhibition now?

IW - I just finished this process. In June of this year, an exhibition I curated opened in London, and this was the result of a lengthy process of research. It took place at Thomas Dane Gallery and it focused on the history of the gallery Signals London.

Signals only lasted for two years, 1964-1966, and it was founded by three artists, David Medalla, Gustav Metzger, and Marcello Salvadori, together with the art critic Guy Brett and the gallery's director, Paul Keeler. It was the location for the first UK solo exhibitions by the Brazilian artists Lygia Clark, Sergio Camargo and Mira Schendel, and by the Venezuelan artists Jesus Rafael Soto, Carlos Cruz-Diez and Alejandro Otero.

The exhibition I curated did not focus only on the Latin American aspect, as this has become a somewhat repetitively celebrated aspect of its history. Instead, I began with the collective exhibitions, and was interested in how the gallery used these to bring different aesthetics together and to trace the pattern of important artistic networks across Europe, such as the Zero and nul groups. I also brought to light how the gallery also supported the work of less-known UK-based artists at the time, artists that were not only based in London but working in a range of cities, such as Cardiff, St Ives, Nottingham and Manchester.

E&PM - As Co-Director of the MA Art Museum & Gallery Studies Programme, how do you see the role of the museum professional nowadays and in the near future? How the educational and training programmes should evolve to cope with the new challenges?

IW - I now have a new role as Director of the School of Museum Studies PhD programme, but I still teach with the AMAGS MA programme. I think that it's important that future museum professionals have art historical knowledge, but that they also understand how art and art history relate to a changing institutional context and how this in turn relates to the specific social, political and economic conditions of various places. We want to encourage our students to understand the international context, and to feel like they can choose to work here, but also elsewhere in Europe - or in any other continent in fact. What helps to support this is having an international cohort and encouraging them to learn from each other as well as from us. We encourage them to work together and appreciate each other's particular knowledge and

expertise, and this is also part of learning how to work well as part of a collaborative team within an institutional context.

E&PM - Thank you!!

IW - De nada, o prazer é meu!