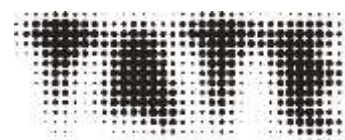


Panchayat: The Context

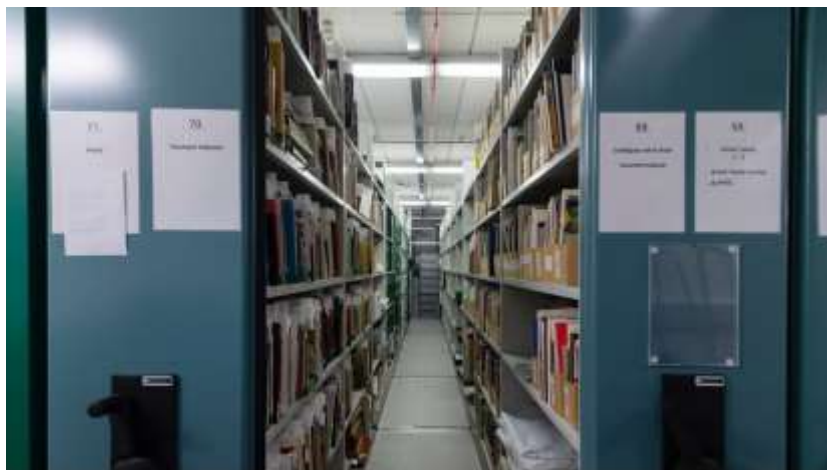
A conversation between Shaheen Merali,
Narendra Pachkhédé and Rita Keegan

19 August 2021



Shaheen

Let me start by introducing myself, welcoming you and expressing my thanks for joining us. This is the first of three dialogues on the Panchayat Collection. The accompanying slides provide a view of the current location of the Panchayat Collection, between Martin Parr and artists' books in the Tate Britain library (figs.1a–b).



Figs.1a–b
Holdings of the Panchayat Collection in the Tate Library
Photo: Matt Greenwood
© Tate

I have had the great privilege of working as an artist and working with artists and students over several years, on exhibition making, curating and writing. All these activities were bound to a central core, which was collecting, filing and safely placing material aside. The material was to be shared and made available for use by others in search of examples and comparisons; people who want to recognise the work and legacy of those who came before them and those around them. What I collected was brought together with another collection owned by artist Al-An deSouza,¹ providing the core of what became Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit, based in East London in 1988.

We met as a small group of artists of Asian descent to work on the strategic importance of an organisation, with a collection of ephemera,

fiction and non-fiction publications, poetry that straddles fiction and non-fiction, and artists using technologies that provided valuable documentations, including slides, videos, colour xerox copies and zines. Panchayat soon became a hub, a depository, a sorting office and a place for research. It contained rows of books like a small library; there were filing cabinets full of hanging files with materials organised into artist files; there were files on galleries and organisations, and, increasingly, files based on issues and countries as we travelled and returned with materials or from donations from our international network. **The following conversation will reflect on Panchayat's journey,** learnings at different stages of its development, projects, ambitious goals, and the tiresome nature of working from the periphery.

Panchayat functioned independently from 1988 until 2015, when its contents were donated to the Tate Library, where it is held as part of their Special Collections. It has remained in the Tate Special Collections, lacking the urgent and necessary resources for cataloguing and **digitisation. In fact, it remains to this day relatively unknown to Tate's** own curatorial body. In 2020, Tate, alongside two other museums, were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to select a case study which might be of value for the nation, a form of heritage that could be national, yet had remained in a silo. The Panchayat Collection was selected for this case study, titled Provisional Semantics, and I was asked to contribute as a curatorial consultant.

My contribution to the study is titled Panchayat-Horizon. In this year, 2021, I have researched, curated and recorded three conversations using the Zoom webinar platform. Each conversation is organised with two key artists or commentators, whose understanding, experiences, and recollections are missing from the discourse on British art. What remains missing is a place and value to influence and discuss different interpretations of British art and culture. For this purpose, Provisional Semantics offers a valuable redress to broaden the interpretative materials and histories of evolving and digitised national history. Furthermore, it re-addresses dominant approaches and legacies through the Panchayat Collection. In this conversation, I am looking forward to **sharing Panchayat's substantive history with the fabulous Rita Keegan,** who will be introduced by our brilliant moderator, Narendra Pachkhédé.

Narendra Pachkhédé is a multi-disciplinary artist, curator, programmer, critic and writer based in Toronto, London, Paris and Geneva. Narendra pursued his doctoral studies in anthropology, and works at a cross-section of philosophical enquiry, social theory and systems of knowledge production. He is a founder of the Geneva-based Society for Inquiry into the Social and provides art advisory services to major private art collections. His latest essay is for the catalogue of *Cloak and Dagger: India's Fictional Times*, an exhibition I curated at the Zuzeum Art Centre, Riga, Latvia.

Narendra

Thank you, Shaheen, for your kind words and for inviting me to be part of this important conversation. In 2019, I spent quite a few hours at the Tate Library visiting the holdings of Panchayat. This conversation gives me a wonderful opportunity to reflect. It takes us back to the tumultuous decades between the 1970s and 1990s. These decades were ones of contestation, staking a claim, ensuring that people of colour do not get erased out of history. Since I am joining from Canada, I thought of indexing that moment with this image (fig.2).

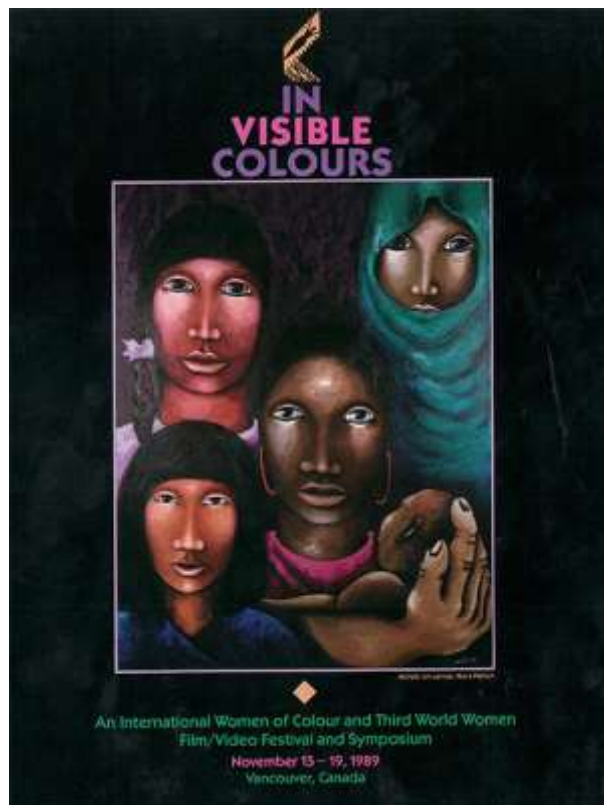


Fig.2
Poster for *In Visible Colours – An International Women of Colour and Third World Women Film/Video Festival and Symposium*, Vancouver, 15–19 November 1989, featuring artwork by Nora Patrich
© Zainub Verjee Archive

This image is from *In Visible Colours – An International Women of Colour and Third World Women Film/Video Festival and Symposium*, a foundational film event in Canada and one of the critical events in the history of Third World cinema, and Third cinema. Many artists were building and bridging two or more art movements across the Atlantic. Zainub Verjee was one of the co-founders of *In Visible Colours* in Vancouver. This history is very under-researched, left out in the colonial pursuit of the London, New York, Paris axis of modernity. In the UK, a coterminous event to *In Visible Colours*, an equally significant marker, took place: *The Other Story*. In her paper titled 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', based on a talk given at the symposium *Exhibitions and the World at Large*, held at Tate Britain on 3 April 2009, Jean Fisher observed:

In the absence of institutional support, it is common to find experimental artists acting as their own exhibition curators, writers, historians, or archivists. And this was true for the generation of Black and Asian artists that emerged in the eighties to construct a cultural and archival counter-memory. The construction of archives as a means of establishing an historical footprint informed the construction of the African and Asian visual arts archive (AAVAA), Panchayat South Asian Archive, Third Text, Autograph, and Organisation for Visual Arts (OVA), which was later incorporated into the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA).²

Here we see in 2009, she qualified Panchayat as a South Asian archive [rather than an archive of Black and Asian or politically Black artists]. It is interesting to note this. This is a perfect example that defines the imperative of this conversation that offers an opportunity to correct that **narrative. Here nomenclatures [such as 'South Asian'] are important.** They provide us an opportunity for a critical enquiry into the **institutionalisation of archives, their cataloguing as 'special collections'**, how they are accessed and perceived by the public. Our conversation today probes the relationship between the archives and history by examining the Panchayat Collection. It hopes to offer both a curriculum and a pedagogy towards the decolonisation of post-war history from the sixties to the nineties. Let me welcome and introduce Rita Keegan. Lovely to see you, Rita. Wonderful that you are with us.

Artist, lecturer and archivist, Rita's practice reflects the intersection of new media experimentation, feminist practice and the Black Arts Movement of the 1980s. In 1985, she established the Women Artists of Colour Index (WOCI), a unique collection of slides and papers that provides a vital historical context and resource for contemporary discussion of race and gender. A recent publication, *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive*, is part autobiography and part critical history.³ It reproduces a **cross-section of Keegan's archive, mapping an artistic practice that ranges from her exhibitions at major museums and galleries, including the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and Tate, to her curatorship of the Women of Colour Index, a ground-breaking initiative that documented Black and Asian women artists.** In addition, let me mention that she has a deep Canadian connection, and I am sure, Rita, you can hear a big hello from Collingwood, Ontario.

Rita

Well, thank you for bringing me back to my roots, which is so important. I will not break into song, you are safe! I think the act of collecting and archiving comes naturally to me, because my grandmother had that piano bench full of family photographs. There were family photographs everywhere. There is an archiving that goes on within our families and within our homes. We have a need to collect those little pieces of paper. Those little pieces act as proof that we were here. I guess you are either a magpie or you are not. I can see by the books behind us in each of our rooms that we are magpies.

Collecting information is quite important, but when I was involved with the Brixton Art Gallery and through the feminist movement, it also became important to document yourself. As an artist of colour, you realise that if you do not document yourself, nobody else will. And along with that documentation comes the holding of the documents. And there is this serendipity of things holding on to you as well as you hold onto them.

Narendra Wonderful. Artists during those decades between the 1970s and 1990s invariably were also archivists. Shaheen, how would you describe the Panchayat Archive Collection as a lived experience? What does it entail to collect ephemera or make an archive in a community?

Shaheen I love what Rita said about how it starts at home. Black and white are really interesting colours for a magpie and for ourselves. In many ways there is a political agenda we must address: Who is the political Black artist, per se, who emerged in the late seventies and eighties? Was there a particular obsession? Is archiving an obsession as Rita has suggested, possibly one that comes from being at home? Is the salvaged family album also an album of the diaspora? We hold onto those images. They become very precious. They also replace our self-interrogation. How does archiving become a political and useful tool in structuring our type of cultural metamorphosis? Is that true?

Rita Our family archives end up being an antidote to what you see in the history books, because the history books are just one form of showing who we are. Not every person worked in the fields, you know, we were doctors, we were lawyers, we were hairdressers, we were other things **besides sharecroppers or workers in paddy fields, or 'the exotic'.** We had a broader field of practice. So, when I started at the Women Artists Slide Library, I was invited to collect information mainly because the director as a white woman felt that she could not, which was incredibly politically aware. Collecting information is always complicated as a person of colour, because we are aware that we are always watched. All we need to do is go into a department store and we are watched, not even talking about government surveillance. So, to collect information on my people I had to find a way to make sure that there was clarity in what I was collecting and make sure that other people knew that I was not just squirreling away stuff that they had no contact with. So, we are always trying to find a place in between Big Brother and friendly sister.

Narendra Is there any specific moment that has stayed with you, whether it helped you in your practice or gave you an insight?

Rita Well there were two different levels. There was the idea of keeping records as an artist, so keeping records of your practice. Those little, wonderful plastic folders could have an invite to participate in an exhibition, or a breakdown of what you were going to do. They could

have the private view card, leaflet or other publications. They could also contain the letter you wrote to the gallery to say, 'you haven't paid me'. So, this little plastic folder could hold a lot of the information that you needed.

But also, in that same plastic folder I could photocopy a catalogue page of an artist and start a collection. I don't want to say dossier because that goes back to the CIA, but to start collecting things like two paragraphs from a catalogue, or an article where the artist's name is included, possibly pictures they had provided. Eddie Chambers was also going around the country as director of African and Asian Visual Artists Archive (AAVAA) at the time. AAVAA got its initial funding from the Arts Council, who sat around a group of artists of colour and asked us what we felt could benefit us most. I mean, there was not much money, so the idea of documentation came up and we all agreed that documentation was crucial.⁴



Fig.3 Folder advancing the aims of Panchayat, in English and Bengali, featuring artwork by Amal Ghosh (front cover and inside cover rotated) Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926 © Amal Ghosh

Narendra Shaheen, was there a particular moment that was significant in your decision to start a collection or was the political act of collecting a moment of departure for you?

Shaheen At one point in our careers, we started producing leaflets, postcards and slides. They helped identify opportunities to be selected and to promote the selection of artworks for public exhibition or private commission. Circulating images, especially as slides, could illustrate an important piece of writing. We all believed in the intentions of future research and towards the historical or contemporary presence of African and Asian **artists in Britain. If we examine this image (fig.3), which is of Panchayat's folder**, it had similar aims with an additional emphasis of text in two languages in East London, Bengali and English. The importance of leaflets was also to do with other people who were around us who had managed the publicity of their events by distributing leaflets. The publisher and activist John La Rose was very much present in our lives throughout the late 1970s up until the late 1990s. The John La Rose ephemeral archive is held at the George Padmore Institute, London and is a prime example of these practices now visible through their collection of ephemera.

The practice of circulating information as leaflets and other ephemeral material such as postcards, posters, private view invites and calling cards **was very common before the flyer and social media. It's how generations** prior to us to managed their network in Britain. Often travellers who would return to the Caribbean (as John La Rose often did), India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka would bring back material and donate it to existing archives. This material was available for journalists and researchers. Sometimes the ephemeral material was collected to produce small pamphlets and self-publications, which were also available at the New Beacon Bookshop. There was a serious relationship with the ephemera. The notion of the ephemera challenges the notion of the archive, as the archive was almost exclusively conceived as part of the mainstream cataloguing library system. The ephemera that we collected, both Rita and I, as well as Eddie Chambers, David A. Bailey, Sonia Boyce and, of course, Sunil Gupta, was about valuing these artefacts which could have been thrown away, although they were produced for a very specific moment. The attempt remained to organise with what we had, to build a critical platform.

Rita But we still had to find a way to organise. When I started, Liz Ward was the amazing librarian at Chelsea College. She was one of the first people who started collecting exhibition information on artists of colour. I said to her, **'I am dyslexic, how do I do this?'** I told her that I had been using the alphabet. And she said that the simplest way, and the clearest way, is the best way to do it. **And I thought thank God, I don't need Dewey Decimal!** So, collecting archival material is one thing; people having access, and people being able to break it down and understand it, is another thing. For me it was important that anyone could look at it and find their way through it. I did not want it to have my stamp on it. It was

not about me, it was about them, it was about the information. And I tried to make it as clear as possible.

Narendra This opens up the questions: What am I trying to understand? What could be the geography of this collection? Of this mode of collection? It opens the notion of the relationship between London as the metropole, and the other centres around Britain. The image of the Brixton Art Gallery (fig.4) makes me think, what were these tensions between different sides in defining one whole community, and a community of artists? Rita, you were busy with the Brixton Art Gallery.



Fig.4
Flyer for *Personal Stories* exhibition held at Brixton Art Gallery,
London, April–May 1992
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133887

Rita I think it was important that we were actually an international community. There were people from all over the place, so the Brixton Art Gallery was basically an umbrella place. We did, ridiculously, twelve shows a year, which killed us. And so, people came – because there were so few venues in London, especially of that sort. People came and could show there, but also it was not prescriptive in the type of work it showed. It showed painting, film, performance, and you know, twenty, thirty years ago, there were not a lot of places that showed that. And they would show it in conjunction with other works on the walls. So, people would come and be shocked that you had sculpture next to painting and next to photography, that it could be that so diverse a place, breaking those

unspoken rules of exhibition practice. And so, it illustrated (by default) the international quality of the space.

Shaheen It is better to underline what Rita has just said, that collecting for us was not a race to create value out of something. It created and maintained connections. Internationalism was based on an active relationship to maintaining those connections. To collect a leaflet or private view card, or a poster, was also an act of memorialisation. It retained and addressed the importance of events in the present, whilst anticipating a future. A poster represented an ambition. It was a way of allowing others to know what you felt.

I would just like to add that the idea of ephemera is like the digital era in the way individuals collect digital ephemera including tweets, emails, jpegs, memes. In this manner the Panchayat Collection becomes a pedagogic gathering that furthers emotive positions. The ephemera was part of an emerging consciousness, of thoughts and different patterns that provided the evidence of the progression of ideas not from the mainstream. At that time many ideas or concerns about, let's say, labour rights in Trinidad or caste issues in India remained invisible and unimportant for the mainstream agenda. In retaining these ephemera in the Panchayat Collection, we explored ways of gathering, but also attempted to represent diasporic and international thinking and emerging positionalities within Britain.

Rita We saw people who were creating an art practice out of those very interventions. The art practice did not exist outside of politics and race and culture and time. I think that is what made a lot of our practice very different and made it important to collect.

Narendra So, how did lived experience manifest for you as embodied history? You mentioned collections and connections, that it is a very important dialectic that you establish. But then there is this whole other element, that you have lived, but it manifests later as an embodied history. It is not just something other, it is very much part of your own self. So how did this kind of history shape you? The publication *Mirror Reflecting Darkly* (fig.5) documents as well as accompanies your exhibition at the South London Gallery in 2021. Does this become embodied history? An example of an embodied history as process?



Fig.5
 Cover and two pages from Rita Keegan, Matthew Harle and Ego Ahaiwe
 Sowinski (eds.), *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive*, London 2021
 © Rita Keegan

Rita

When you walk through life, sometimes you have ephemera of things that remind you, or that are proof of place, and proof of experience, such as having a leaflet from the **Women’s Art Library** [now at **Goldsmiths, University of London**], from when it was called **The Slide Library**. People under forty do not know what slides are. And that was the best, you walked around with a little package of slides, so you could show your work. You did not have a phone to show these things. There is a whole issue about ephemera. What will be the ephemera of the future? Will there be ephemera in the future? Because if everything is digital, and everything is online, what happens when there is no more TikTok?

As you know, there was MySpace. Somebody recently told me that all their stuff was on MySpace, and it just does not exist anymore. With digital media you are at the mercy of the server, whereas a piece of paper – I guess we are a paper culture. I do not know about the next generation, if they care that much about paper. We do because we know it. Maybe someone in their twenties or thirties, it does not matter to them. But they will not always be able to count on YouTube or Facebook for their memories. I think for me that is really telling. Someone asked me about Sun Ra Arkestra, who I saw perform at an event in San Francisco, but I was not sure, because it was an event in San Francisco in the late sixties, early seventies. So, I contacted my brother and he agreed, ‘Yes, we were there’. And this somebody said, ‘Do you have a photograph?’, and I was thinking, ‘I was too busy having a good time’. Being able to record that moment would have been almost impossible, I would have needed so much kit. I would have to just watch it from my camera. I would not have been able to experience it. But talking to a younger person, they almost did not understand why I did not record that moment.

Narendra

Shaheen, how did it manifest for you as an embodied history?

Shaheen It remains virtually impossible to think about embodiment without thinking about when I arrived in Britain in 1970. What unfolded around me daily, on the way to school, or on a journey back home was incredibly violent. This was embodiment when democracy was on trial, we became completely positioned as the victim. The resurgence of right-wing fascism was in the school playground. Most of the artwork that I made in the mid- to late 1980s was about racial violence. As young students in art colleges in the late 1970s, early 1980s, one ended up regurgitating this paused democracy. In that which had been paused, we learned to communicate from one to the other.

I believe, in this way, several artists who embodied this experience started to convey their experiences and thereon alter the mental image of Britain, reflecting on this violence. The place of violence has been depicted in several ways, more recently in the film and television series by Steve McQueen's 2020 BBC series *Small Axe*. Embodiment remains in the address of lived violence. It was painful, and however violent it was, however repressive it was, however confusing it was, it provided many with points of clarity. The work that needed to be done in British society was to make it clear – that although we were not welcomed here, here we are to stay. Focusing on our creativity was not welcomed in Britain, and this included our experiences in art college. Anything I undertook that smacked of Indian-ness was shunned upon, with estranging remarks including 'it is too bright', 'it is too orange', 'it is too red'. For my undergraduate studies I focused on sculpture, to simply settle in the unsettled half of the existing binary. It was easier to mediate ideas about migration or exile or longing in 3D rather than 2D. Maybe in Britain 3D culture was unsettled by the likes of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

Rita Which is slightly different from my generation, which was all about civil rights in America. And everybody was foreign, even if they did not necessarily acknowledge it, except for the Indigenous people. There were riots in Harlem and throughout America. After the assassination of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X everyone knew it was easy to be assassinated. **When I came to Britain, I found people's living experience was not that** different to mine. It might have been a little delayed, but it was very similar, the visceral racism and the National Front. For my generation in New York it was a bit more polite, not that it is now. The north thought of itself very differently from the south. My Canadian family was underground railroad, so they had left before the civil war. To come to England and see the civil war playing itself out was anything but civil and then there were the fires, such as the New Cross house fire in 1981. It was quite horrific living in Brixton.

Shaheen If we look at the work by the Blk Art Group, in the 1980s and from 1984 onwards, it was very much about the relationship to the police as a state apparatus. It was about the Sus law (which authorised the arrest and punishment of persons suspected of frequenting or loitering in public

places with criminal intent), speaking on a culture that remained suspicious. I came out of art college embodying that.

- Rita Yeah.
- Shaheen We understood white academia, which to a certain extent repressed us making images about laws that made us suspects. We lived in trigger chambers, not only in the sense of looking out for our families and our mothers and fathers, coping with prejudice, but through the experiences of our elder brothers and sisters whose ambitions had been thwarted because they could not get jobs even after graduating here. So of course, we turned to the notion of equal opportunities. The notion of equal opportunities became very big in our lives and in this way, we sensed our lives, developing within a hybrid culture that was disrupting racism that interrupted our lives.
- Rita But that goes back to Black. We were Black in a political sense, we were **Black in a...**
- Shaheen Cultural sense.
- Rita Let's not forget that one of the little check boxes was 'Non-white'. In terms of race, they didn't break it down any further. You were either white or non-white. The ownership of the term 'Black' was one of solidarity, and one of political awareness. I mean, there has always been discussion about it, but it was done in the sense of unity.
- Narendra Yes, that was the intent.
- Shaheen One of the best descriptions of the term 'Black', political Black, was as 'those deemed outside of "whiteness"'.⁵
- Rita Definitely. Everywhere.
- Shaheen In the early 1980s in Britain we did not have the reach that we have now. We had to pave that reach, we had to internationalise our diasporic identity.
- Rita Because you were already internationalised, but you did not know that you could own that.
- Shaheen Part of the problem was maintaining those relationships, which were already formulated in our diasporic identities, now known as south-south alliances.
- Rita If it was not for your work in presenting five Black artists at the Third Havana Biennale (1989) we would not be here now.
- Shaheen Thank you.

Rita So it was crucial that we maintained our international presence.

Narendra But there were other kinds of discourses also happening, right, including the book *Radical Postures* (fig.6) and the Postcolonial Twilight Talks in London (fig.7). How do you place them?



Fig.6
Pages from Shaheen Merali and Jeremy Mulvey (eds.), *Radical Postures: Art, New Media and Race*, published by Panchayat at the University of Westminster, London 1997
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926



Fig.7
Left: Press release for Postcolonial Twilight Talks, London, May–October 1995
Centre: Poster for the Ex-Centric conference, London, 10 September 1999
Right: Exhibition poster for *Unbound Geographies, Fused Histories*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, September–October 1998
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926 and 08133775

Shaheen Some of what we tried to present, alongside maintaining a collection and archive, were conferences and talks, especially at universities which had spare capacity. Often their lecture theatres and conference halls were less programmed. We exercised our visibility and maintained that visibility in organising conferences and book launches, including *Radical Postures* (which was launched at the University of Westminster) as well as **Postcolonial Twilight Talks (at Central Saint Martin's School of Art and Design)**. We had wonderful academics including Jean Fisher, Sarat Maharaj, John Seth, and of course artist-curators like Gavin Jantjes and Eddie Chambers, bringing to the students and artists their diverse sense of references. Gavin and Pitika Ntuli had a relationship to apartheid and the struggles against apartheid in South Africa, whilst their involvement was part of the seventies and eighties culture in London. The protests outside the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square became part of **many artists' lives**.

Rita Some of the alternative galleries had exhibitions that brought so many people together. One had a political understanding from these exhibitions, for instance an exhibition by artists from Chile, which even the mainstream press was not aware of, or did not acknowledge. The practitioners were making those contacts, those international contacts. And we were making exhibitions, and aware that we were global.

Shaheen The exhibition *Unbound Geographies, Fused Histories* (fig.7) was held in two parts. The first iteration was at the Lethaby Gallery, London, and the second was at A-Space Gallery, Toronto in 1999. Working from an intuitive understanding that we needed to organise these types of seminars, conferences, talks, small publications, we brought those who had the power to influence and critique, let us say the role of photography in the western world, within its modernist tropes, or write about race and its relationship to technology; subjects that needed to be further mediated with a nuanced understanding and both a personal and theoretical position.

It was important for those of us who were teaching or curating, like myself and Rita, to be involved in longer-term projects. These included developing collections, archives, where there was the possibility to merge emerging consciousness in the meeting of minds and resources; what we **ubiquitously call 'discourse'**. **The necessity for discourse-orientated events** was to a large extent dependent still on those from the political Black art sector to organise in art colleges, to develop a more inclusive curriculum, and facilitate events back in community settings, which were fast disappearing. It is important to reconsider what happened there, as in the long run it assisted in formalising not only discourse, but strengthened a fantastic network, which we had been part of, and are still part of today.

Narendra Yes, and it has produced a language, as there was a need to create a vocabulary to talk about that reality. Invariably that language got fused

in interesting ways. Even across the pond in Canada, we witness similar histories. Apart from the *In Visible Colours* film and video festival that I mentioned earlier, there were key conferences and art events that were held in parallel. In 1993 there was a coalition of artists of colour and Indigenous artists called Minguon Panchayat, a very interesting mix. Minguon being an Indigenous word, Panchayat a South Asian [Sanskrit] word, an interesting mix of these two linguistic terms – who brought into their critique the collapse of what was called the Association of National Not-for-Profit Arts Centres, ANNPAC, which was basically a white-dominated Canadian organisation.

In these frictions and sites, I see resonances, and interestingly as you say, there was the idea of fused geographies in a way that comes into play. I remember the other instance, the Local Colour Coalition in Vancouver which was where they challenged the Vancouver Art Gallery for importing exhibitions of artists of colour from the UK. I am referring to *Fabled Territories: New Asian Photography in Britain* [1989], curated by Sunil Gupta. I think even your work was there and Al-An deSouza participated as well as Sutapa Biswas who ran workshops. The challenge was not against the artists, it was against the institutions, suggesting and implying very clearly this idea of replacing race by importing from outside, some resonance of which we are seeing now, with the Black discourse. Like how an American Black discourse has replaced a particular political Black discourse in the UK.

Shaheen, how do you see the Panchayat archives or collections manifest as a live document?

Shaheen

The idea of a live document is quite liberating. It has curious resonances, not only about the role of events changing our lives, but the relevance of the past for the future. Of course, this is a red line in the series of conversations – these three conversations. Possibly, the live document speaks to one of the goals for the Provisional Semantics case study, which is: How do we provide from such a strong past a future connotation for consideration?

To a certain extent we are here not only to make sense of timelines, but perhaps to also reorder ourselves in terms of those historic narratives, to understand what happened, what remains of interest now, [and maybe even find ways to share these re-orientations] as Rita is doing by producing a book and exhibition from her archive. To think about the terms of engagement from that time for the understanding of a composite time, these are not concerns out of obsession, or some sort of obsession with nostalgia. Speaking for myself and Rita here, we are completing our objective truths with a flow of information. By re-instating between the two of us, this is what we were dealing with, this is how we dealt with it at that time, and this is what remains of it in the current fiction (including the change of community in the recent shift in the term Black).

The current realm of change is part of the pandemic, which challenged the certainties of many behaviours and narratives, from what we eat and how we travel to how we remember aggregate aspects of our recent past. We are in the midst of communicating, having entered a world with different ambitions in which we are very concerned with past as interrupted and compromised. We have remained compromised after 2021 by meeting neither our personal nor collective goals, including justice, racial, climate and cultural justice. The blueprints are present, in the special collections, such as Panchayat or the Rita Keegan Archive project. These blueprints, these ideas remain pertinent to clear a path for future identity-disciplines. Especially now when both Rita and I are willing to make further attempts to help evaluate and consolidate future forms of address.

Rita If you put it out there, then it is for someone else to interpret or reinterpret. All you can do is hope that people are conscious of how they use the materials. If you are afraid, you never let anything go. It is also important that people truly have access to the material, and that they know it is there, and that it is in a form that you can look at, as opposed to calling and saying, 'Oh, I want to see this' and getting, 'I am sorry, we haven't archived it yet'. I think we must be truly diligent.

Narendra In your case Rita, this also takes the form of an exhibition. Would you like to speak to that? How this archive emerges as a live document which takes the form of an exhibition?

Rita Initially, two years ago, the archive was supposed to be sorted, archived, and given to Goldsmiths, and at the same time we were going to produce a book. The exhibition would follow. Everything got placed into disarray because of Covid. Instead, we worked on the book so that it would come out at the same time as the exhibition. The archive is going to Goldsmiths but the colleges have been closed, so instead the exhibition will have archival material. I am also producing a new piece that is revisiting *Trophies of Empire* [August 1992 – January 1993], an exhibition that both Shaheen and I participated in. I showed the work in Liverpool, as well as in Mexico, and now I am showing it in London. Using similar elements, I have revisited the whole process and invited people to produce a square called a social fabric that goes along with the garment that I am making.

The archive also includes three of my uncle Keith Simon's pieces, who lived in Britain between the 1950s and mid-1970s. He was an art practitioner who exhibited at the ICA, and the Commonwealth Institute. He had a viable practice, and I did not realise until my cousin was talking about this that I met people that he knew, that we walked the same footsteps, which is kind of bizarre and wonderful. I am bringing his very modernist work to be seen as people assumed his work was Picasso-esque when he was dealing with African and South American imagery. I am interested in how a cultural product is reinterpreted. As Shaheen

mentioned earlier, when your work is too orange, has too much red, in the same way, why are you painting these Black people? Why are you doing this? That work with your own culture becomes a pastiche that some European artist was ripping you off to begin with. It is about re-evaluating a practice, and putting him back within the canon of Britain, of European and of world art practice.

Narendra That is fascinating. There is an element of correction there and correcting political narrative and correcting history, and the background-foreground dynamics that keep happening. Maybe on that note, I was just wondering Shaheen, how does the Panchayat Collection offer agency? Rita just mentioned this sense of agency through the form of exhibition – she can foreground some of these histories.

Shaheen The **title of Rita's exhibition speaks volumes**. *Somewhere Between There and Here*. We have been debating how institutional frames have constrained agency. We have been debating the influences that still exist and operate as structural bias. How does Panchayat influence agency? Panchayat as a special collection has a capacity to allow further comprehension. For researchers, searching within its collection, a process of contrasting information to other collections might allow one to understand how structures, factors and histories are represented and misrepresented.

We are speaking of material that relates to past tenses and past presences. It is important and valuable to allow the researcher to independently verify the place of agency by what they might find. Issues embedded in Panchayat are part of the history of the visual arts as a whole. In Panchayat, the visual arts talk to social class, caste, religion, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, customs and coloniality. A number of these **'issues' or ideas remain part of British artists' lives yet they are not often** part of the current discourse on art or culture in Britain. The fact remains that they are part of the communities that make up Britain, so why are they absent in the material history of the nation, the state, its intrinsic collection, and the history of arts? Panchayat allows such debates, a deeper site of enquiry and one which is now rooted in one of its central institutions, the library at Tate Britain. Otherwise, Tate would remain and represent debates, research and exhibitions around Henry Moore and Turner for years to come. Somewhere between there and here, is that it, Rita?

Rita Yes. It is like my uncle [Keith Simon]. He was born in Belize, lived in New York.⁶ He travelled, he lived our lives, and lived in England, and he was an artist, as a practitioner you are *Somewhere Between...*

Shaheen ...*There and Here*.

- Rita Collections and archives tend, in most instances, to be given posthumously. The fact that we not only created our collections but are also dictating how they should be shown and put together, is crucial.
- Shaheen Giving your archive to Goldsmiths at this particular time, in your living reality, is allowing access through traction. This allows the possibility of emerging relationships to come forth. We return to your idea of the live document, of the lived reality. It is an attempt to show the possibilities of collecting, curating and education as living conversations.
- Rita And you can do it too!
- Narendra True, that is a good point for me to draw this conversation to a close. Thanks, Shaheen and Rita. In this short span of time, we were barely able to scratch the surface. Given the time constraints, it was wonderful, and we could touch upon some key themes in exploring the prospects and the promise of the Panchayat Collection. To recap, we spoke about the archives as a lived experience, and both of you offered how it became part of embodied history for each of you. We went on to look at the Panchayat Collection as a live document, and its prospects. Finally, we foregrounded the idea of agency that the Panchayat Collection embodies. It calls upon the younger generation of art historians to dig into this rich material. Thank you for sharing your thoughts.
- Shaheen Thank you for summarising that and moderating this conversation so elegantly. I speak here for the both of us. I hope that the online publication devoted to Panchayat will allow a sense of an essence, an ontology of this kind of bibliographic as well as curatorial premise to emerge. And I would like to thank Rita Keegan, fabulous as ever, Narendra, intelligent as ever, as well as the invisible hands and minds of Katie Blackford, Jane Bramwell, Anjalie Clayton, Christopher Griffin, Maxine Miller, Emily Pringle and Ananda Rutherford. I would also like to extend our thanks to the staff of the Tate Library, Tate Research, as well as Tate Digital. Most importantly, I would like to thank the artists and activists who have participated in the Panchayat-Horizon conversations for their spirited participation. I welcome you as our audience to listen to these profound histories, as it is truly a gift for us to be heard after thirty years of service to the arts. Thank you.

NOTES

¹ Al-An deSouza was formerly known as Allan deSouza.

² Jean Fisher, 'The Other Story and the Past Imperfect', *Tate Papers*, no.12, Autumn 2009, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect>, accessed 23 February 2022.

³ Rita Keegan, Matthew Harle and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski (eds.), *Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive*, London 2021.

⁴ AAVAA was one of the first research and reference facilities in the country for documenting British-based political Black visual artists. Eddie Chambers was the first director and drew on material in his own collection relating to the practices of artists particularly from South Asian, African and other diasporas. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Chambers_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Chambers_(artist)), accessed 20 January 2023.

⁵ Virou Srilangarajah, 'We Are Here Because You Were With Us: Remembering A. Sivanandan (1923–2018)', *Ceasefire Magazine*, 4 February 2018, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/us-remembering-a-sivanandan-1923-2018/>, accessed 2 December 2022.

⁶ The text written to accompany Keegan's exhibition *Somewhere Between There and Here* at South London Gallery in 2021 describes Simon as 'a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance who lived in London from 1952–1972 and exhibited widely, including the Lawrence Alloway curated *Collages and Objects*, Institute of Contemporary Arts (1954) and *Caribbean Artists in England*, Commonwealth Art Gallery (1971), with artists Aubrey Williams, Ronald Moody, Althea McNish and Errol Lloyd. Simon's estate is managed and cared for by his niece, artist Lorraine Brooks, described by Keegan as "the family historian", and partner Jana Michele King.' See 'Rita Keegan: Somewhere Between There and Here', exhibition text, South London Gallery, London 2021, <https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/rita-keegan-somewhere-between-there-and-here/>, accessed 25 November 2022.

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This text is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place on Zoom on 19 August 2021. It has been reviewed and approved by all the contributors.

A full screen-recording of the conversation is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfqeujlXEMk

This conversation forms part of the [Panchayat Research Resource](#), an online publication devoted to the Panchayat Collection at Tate.

Acknowledgements

Tate Research would like to thank Shaheen Merali for conceiving and orchestrating this conversation as part of Panchayat-Horizon, which constituted Merali's contribution to the research project [Provisional Semantics](#) (2019–2022). We are indebted to him for his perspicacity, generosity and patience. We would also like to thank the moderator, Narendra Pachkhédé, and Rita Keegan for their invaluable rich and insightful contributions to this conversation. Ananda Rutherford and Anjalie Dalal-Clayton commissioned and steered the development of all five conversations that make up this research resource on the Panchayat Collection, and we are immeasurably grateful to them for their care, commitment and sensitivity. Thanks must also go to our colleagues in the Tate Library – especially Katie Blackford, Gustavo Grandal Montero and Jane Bramwell – whose assistance and support is hugely appreciated.

Editorial note

This transcript was edited by Shaheen Merali, Narendra Pachkhédé, Rita Keegan, Vasundhara Mathur and Arthur Goodwin, proofread by Celia Delahunt, Christopher Griffin and Pamela Merali, and produced by Susannah Worth.

