

Land, Sea and Air

27 May — 4 September 2016



Frank Bowling (UK/Guyana), **Tiffany Chung** (Vietnam/USA),
Agnes Denes (USA/Hungary), **Shilpa Gupta** (India),
Amar Kanwar (India), **Tania Kovats** (UK), **Cornelia Parker** (UK)

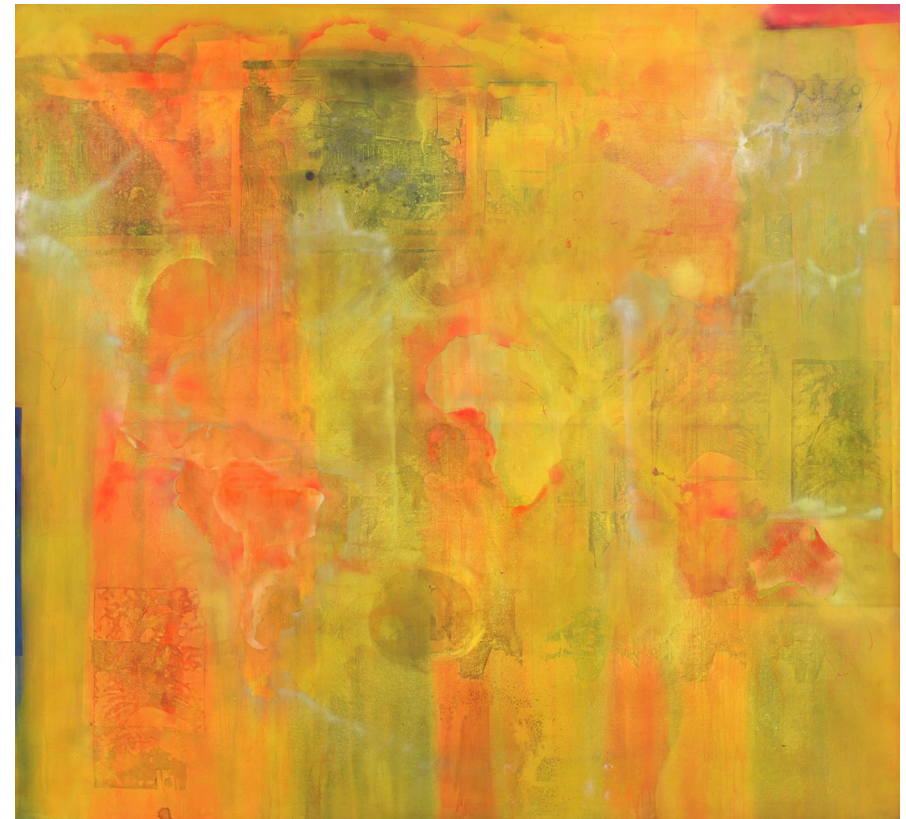
Exhibition guide

Maps have continued to provide a potent source material for artists for many years. They provide attempts to create order from a world that is ever in transformation; whether in terms of physical manifestations such as the erosion of land masses or the rapid expansion of cities; or through shifting or contested borders, betraying evidence of conflict, resistance, negotiation and power. Maps also serve to support a sense of identity or an engagement with a specific time and place.

This exhibition brings together a diverse selection of international artists, engaging in different ways with maps, and by extension, borders and territory. Paintings, drawings, prints, video, sculpture and installation combine to create a visually powerful and thought provoking exhibition. The selected artists vary in approach and their works span a period of over forty years. Consistent within all of these works is a combination of the personal, the poetic and the political.

Frank Bowling (b Guyana, 1936) painted his now celebrated series of epic *Map Paintings* between 1967 and 71 whilst living and working in New York. They were to be a significant transitional body of work, forming the link between the more Pop-influenced work created in the UK and his abandonment of figurative elements in favour of complete abstraction. With a large Soho studio where he could experiment with pouring and

staining colour onto large canvases and with the encouragement and support of highly influential critic Clement Greenberg and fellow artists Jasper Johns and Larry Rivers, Bowling created a stunning series of large paintings which combine his interest in colour with stencils of maps and autobiographical references. Templates used to suggest the outlines of continents or his mother's house connect with



Frank Bowling, *Where is Lucienne?*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 308 x 337 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery, London, New York



Tiffany Chung, *remapping history: an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man's past*, 2015, vinyl decal, photographs, videos, archival photographs, found images and audio recording, texts, drawings. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

his personal life and cultural origins but also serve to engage with the surface of the painting. Bowling was born in Guyana in 1936 and moved to London in 1953. In the late 1960s onwards, he was active in the fight against racial discrimination, particularly with regard to promoting the greater visibility of black artists. In such a highly politicised climate, the transition to complete abstraction was particularly complex. These incredibly rich paintings convey Bowling's interest in pure abstraction, yet they also reveal references to his family and wider cultural origins. Ideals of modernist painting collide with rich cultural histories to create these truly spectacular, powerful and poignant works of art.

Tiffany Chung (b Vietnam, 1969) works in a wide range of media including painting, drawing, photography, film and installation. She explores the transformation of the urban landscape and the enduring psychological effects of trauma on personal and collective memory, particularly in the aftermath of war or natural disasters. Her work is frequently developed through considerable research. *The Syria Project*, for example, presented as part of *All the World's Futures* for the Venice Biennale in 2015, comprised of beautiful and intricate cartographic paintings which attempted to map the movement of refugees out of Syria. In the context of an ongoing crisis, attempts at



Tiffany Chung, *national route 13 and abandoned airfields from my father's youth*, 2015, oil and ink on vellum and paper, 27 x 27 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

accuracy are doomed to fail as information becomes outdated with immediate effect. The work eloquently reveals the complexity of constructing histories.

For this exhibition, Chung presents a complex installation, *remapping history: an autopsy of a battle, an excavation of a man's past*, v.3, (2015-2016). Exquisite drawings in oil and ink on vellum and paper, photographs, video, audio and text are presented within a carefully constructed timeline, focused around the Vietnam War. The overall aesthetic has the appearance of an elaborate route map or an incident room, where fragments of evidence and information are assembled for contemplation and careful

scrutiny. Central to the installation is a photograph of Chung's father taken in 1970. He was a helicopter pilot and a member of the Kingbee 219th Squadron, an elite group of pilots within the Southern Republic of Vietnam Air Force that flew the US MACV-SOG recon teams in cross-border missions. The photograph was taken a year before his helicopter was shot down in Laos during Operation Lam Son 719. He was captured and imprisoned and was therefore absent from the artist's entire childhood. His photograph appears alongside those of other young pilots, both at work and while waiting for the ground alerts that would send them to the gravest extraction missions at the possible cost of their lives. These



Cornelia Parker, *Meteorite Lands On Buckingham Palace*, 1998, Maple boxed frame, map of London revealing burn marks left by the meteorite, 54 x 69 cm, British Council Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

young men were fathers, brothers, husbands and lovers. Chung enables us to reflect on the experiences of her family as well as other elusive stories of love, loss, absence and separation. The other side of the diagram shows found photographs of the landscape and everyday life in An Loc, both before and after the pivotal battle that marked a significant victory for South Vietnam. These images indicate both the destruction of warfare as well as the resilience of those who survive through these traumatic events. These are shown alongside meticulously rendered cartographic drawings of military strategies and

road systems as well as film footage taken in disused airfields. Here, the viewer takes the position of the pilot as the aeroplane appears to taxi down the now neglected runways. Chung continues to explore the complex and enduring effects of warfare and trauma on families and wider communities, piecing together fragments of a history to create a multi-layered and compelling, narrative.

Cornelia Parker (b England, 1956) is renowned for her transformation of familiar, everyday objects, often employing destructive techniques such as burning, crushing or

exploding, to create something poetic, extraordinary and unsettling. In this exhibition, she is represented by a series of five works *Meteorite lands on...* (1998). The works take as their starting point the once familiar A-Z street maps which are gradually being eclipsed by mobile phones and satellite navigation systems. Parker has used a Gibson meteorite found in Namibia in 1836. This has been heated and then allowed to burn over key locations in the map of the City of London; namely the Millennium Dome, Wormwood Scrubs, St Paul's Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace. The charred holes erase and obliterate the evidence of these landmarks, echoing the holes left on the earth's surface by giant meteors that have fallen from space.

"An alien object from space, the meteorite, embodies the fear of the unknown, fear of the future. In this sense, this is an apocalyptic work for the end of the millennium."

These works were made in 1998 and Parker was clearly engaging with the widespread anxiety that computer technology would fail to cope with the onset of a new century and that our data and systems could be plunged into chaos. However, the work continues to be powerful and resonant. Whilst reflecting on the often

overwhelming power of nature and both the pervasiveness and vulnerability of technology, Parker also connects with our current fears around international terrorism.

Agnes Denes (b Hungary, 1938) is an artist whose practice is wide-ranging, encompassing science, psychology, poetry and geography. She is best known as a pioneer of environmental art with one of her most striking and influential works being *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* which was created in New York in 1982. With support from the Public Art Fund, Denes planted two acres of wheat fields on a former landfill site in Manhattan, overlooking the Statue of Liberty and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. The site was farmed and subsequently harvested over a period of months; the wheat was then distributed as part of a campaign against hunger.

Denes' *Map Projections* depict maps of the world, projected onto a variety of forms, using complex mathematical calculations to create distortions of the globe into shapes such as the cube, the pyramid, the dodecahedron and even the doughnut and the hot dog. Though modest in scale, these ingenious creations combine mathematical and technical dexterity with playfulness and wit. A two dimensional representation of a three dimensional entity

is always bound to lead to distortion but Denes pushes this notion to the extreme. Her re-imagination of the planet alters the dynamics and relationships of the continents, the seas and the borders between territories;

...longitude and latitude lines were unravelled, points of intersection cut, continents allowed to drift, gravity tampered with (and) earth mass altered.

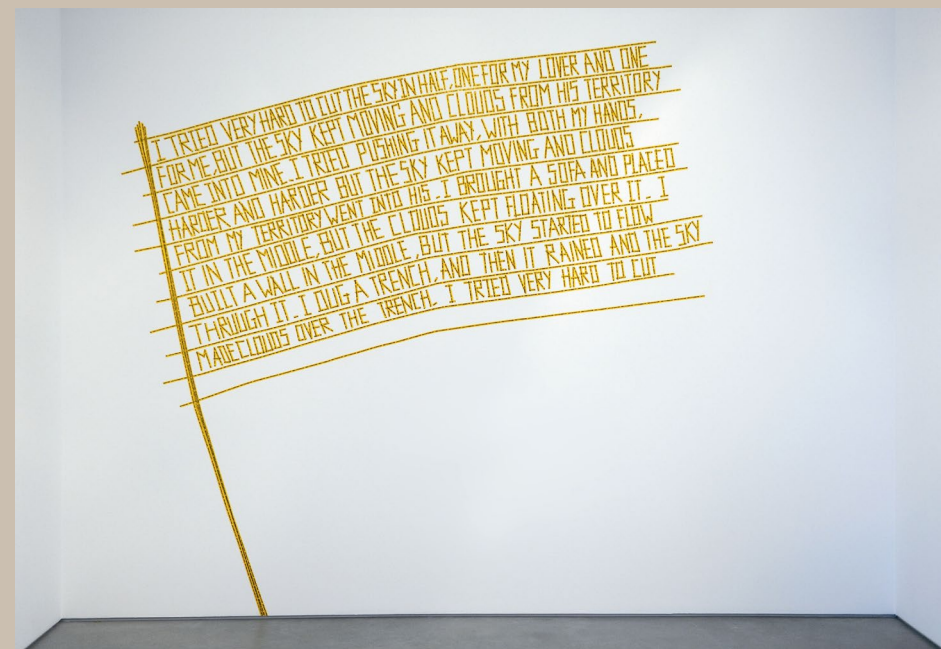
Denes challenges the association of maps with fact and impartiality, exposing them as sites for subjectivity and for the projection of specific interests.

Tania Kovats (b England, 1966) is a British artist currently based in Devon. The natural world is both the subject and often the medium for her work. Most recently, she has conducted an exploration into our relationship with the world's seas and oceans, taking inspiration from James Lovelock's Gaia theory where the earth is regarded as an interconnected super organism. Water provides the connective element on our planet and covers over 70% of the earth's surface. The force of the sea shapes and gradually transforms the land; the tides are driven by the moon and water evaporates into the clouds and returns as rain. Kovats' epic installation *All the Sea* (2012 – cont) is a stunningly beautiful

and poetic work where over 300 glass bottles are assembled onto shelving, bringing together as many of the world's seas as possible into a single place. Participants responded to the artist's invitation to submit sea water from throughout the world and every contribution has been included. As such, the work remains resonant of all the stories and journeys that have collided to create it. Though magnificent and celebratory in one sense, Kovats also reveals the absurdity of territorialising the sea and imposing borders.

Kovats was also commissioned by the Gallery to create a new series of drawings mapping *All the Islands of All the Seas* (2016). In this instance, using a single source, *The Times Atlas*, the artist has made meticulous studies of all of the earth's islands which are then layered, sometimes 5 or 6 at a time, according to alphabetical order. Kovats employs a strict methodology for indexing the islands to create an alternative map of the world where the specific location of each island within its sea is no longer a factor.

Shilpa Gupta (b India, 1976) works across a wide range of media and is represented here by a wall drawing, *There is no border here*, (2005-6) created from self-adhesive tape. We are reminded of the kind of tape used to hastily



Shilpa Gupta, *There is no border here*, 2006, installation drawn in tape, Bristol Museums & Art Gallery. Presented by the Art Fund under Art Fund International, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris

create barriers to prevent access to scenes of crime or potential danger. Ironically the tape reads THERE IS NO BORDER HERE, a phrase that is repeated constantly throughout the work. The drawing reveals itself as a pattern poem in the shape of a free-floating flag. The poem reads as follows;

'I tried very hard to cut the sky in half. One for my lover and one for me. But the sky kept moving and clouds from his territory came into mine. I tried pushing it away with both my hands. Harder and harder. But the sky kept moving and the clouds from my territory went into his. I brought a sofa and

placed it in the middle. But the clouds kept floating over it. I built a wall in the middle. But the sky started to flow through it. I dug a trench. And then it rained and the sky made clouds over the trench. I tried very hard to cut the sky in half'

The text is at once both lyrical and tender yet also employs the language of battle and conflict. Significantly it closes abruptly and refers back to the first sentence, implying a cycle of repetition and continuity. The flag itself is a rallying symbol used to define nationhood and identity but by extension, also implies segregation and difference. In her work, Gupta



Amar Kanwar, *A Season Outside*, 1997, still from colour video with sound, 30 minutes, Bristol Museums & Art Gallery. Presented by the Art Fund under Art Fund International, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

has consistently reflected on the physical, social and psychological borders that define public life and the forces that serve to divide us. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 represents the largest mass migration in human history. Against a backdrop of unspeakable violence and tension between different groups, over a million civilians died and over 15 million were uprooted. The border itself was hastily drawn up by British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe,

using out of date maps and census materials, and as a result, the western region of the Punjab was literally cut in two, effectively ripping apart communities and dispersing them throughout Asia. The exact position of the border was announced two to three days after India and Pakistan celebrated their independence.

The painted white line that defines the border between India and Pakistan appears in the opening

footage of Indian artist **Amar Kanwar's** film, *A Season Outside* (1997). (b India, 1964). We witness the bizarre daily ritual performed at the border gates by the ever-present military, the reaction of the tourists who travel to witness this elaborate and emphatic celebration of segregation and the absurdity of the transferral of goods across the border. Kanwar also reflects upon the impact of Partition on his family and community. As narrator, the artist considers the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and his commitment to non-violent resistance and seeks wisdom and advice as to the alleviation of conflict and violence. His intensely personal, philosophical and ethical reflections are set against a striking and powerful visual essay in which the beauty and the richness of the South Asian landscape coexists with the violence and brutality that pervade everyday life across the world.

A Season Outside is the first in an early trilogy of films exploring the relationship between India and Pakistan. It is indicative of Kanwar's socially engaged practice and his enduring interest in borders, nationhood and violence.

In the UK, the news is currently dominated by debates about Britain's relationship to Europe, the threat of international terrorism

and the plight of refugees fleeing from war and persecution and risking their lives to secure a better life elsewhere. The world is forever in transformation. These artists offer visually powerful works with multi-layered narratives which allow us to contemplate and reflect on a variety of themes and ideas regarding the human condition and the ways in which we seek to order and understand the world around us.

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