

Presenter Interview

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プレゼンターインタビュー

As the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) celebrates its 60th anniversary, what is the vision of its new artistic director?

インスティテュート・オブ・コンテンポラリー・アーツ (ICA) が60周年
新芸術監督のヴィジョンとは？

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the birth of the Institute of Contemporary Art, the London-based institution that has long been known internationally among contemporary art lovers as a presenter of progressive works in a wide range of fields, from the fine arts and film to club music. As evidenced by its prominent headquarters on The Mall near Buckingham Palace, it is an institution with a strong sense of mission as a long-time supporter of the avant-garde spirit. We spoke to the new ICA artistic director, Ekow Eshun, who assumed the position a year and a half ago and is also active as a journalist. Here are some of the things he had to say about the central policies of the multi-faceted ICA and its present directions.

(Interviewed by Mariko Inaba in January, 2007 at the Japan Foundation, Tokyo)

Could you tell us how the ICA was founded?

The ICA was founded in 1947 by a group of artists, writers and poets, specifically at a time when Europe and rest of the world had just come out of the Second World War, just a few years after the Holocaust and Hiroshima. This group of artists, such as Picasso and T.S Eliot, got together and decided to create an institution based on a belief that art can help create a better future. Also specifically it was at the time when the museums and galleries in Britain, places like the British Museum and the Tate, focused on collective works of the past. So ICA became the first modernist arts institution to embrace people like Picasso, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and the idea was to bring together different areas – visual arts paintings, sculpture, poetry, literature and music – quite revolutionary and something that had never been realised before in Britain. So early members of ICA were Picasso, Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas – it started like a club, really – and they believed the idea that the arts could show people a better way to think about who they are and how they live. That was the concept behind it, and 60 years later that's still what we do.

What kind of facilities do you have and what are your activities like?

The ICA moved to the Mall in 1968. It is in a strange location in a way, it's the same street as the Buckingham Palace, but it's a good contrast for us. We work against tradition, showing difficult, controversial works or the statements of the time in the heart of the most traditional

place in London. Before that, we had been based nearby in central London, but just had smaller or temporary spaces, because the idea was that these people could just come together. But when we came to the Mall we got proper government funding. Right now, about the third of our money comes from the Arts Council – meaning we are actually a charity, a public institution. The rest we raise ourselves anyway, as we want to do more, and to be ambitious as an organization.

Presently, the ICA has two cinemas, an art gallery, a theatre, and a room where we present talks, and we also have a bar, a club. Basically the building is an old, 19th century house, so it's like we do different things in different rooms. It's open until 2:00 a.m. In live music, we do gigs during the week and club nights on Thursdays and Fridays.

Since its inception, the ICA has always been interested in introducing new ideas, new cultures and arts not only from Britain. So over the years we have exhibited international artists like [action painter] Jackson Pollock, Keith Haring and [current video artist] Bill Viola, and many, many others. In the '60's we presented British pop artists, such as David Hockney and Peter Blake, who made their home at ICA. The important thing about the whole place is to bring together new ideas, arts and culture, so the artists who come out of there are interested in a popular, broader world. When we think about David Hockney or Peter Blake, their work is not just about fine art. They are interested in music, or politics even, and that is very much part of our character, because it always merged these different sets of thinking and radical ideas together.

In terms of personnel, we have about 80 people in total, including part-time staff. The ICA historically had always one director, but since I arrived we've split that role into two – the artistic manager, myself, and my colleague as the managing director to look after the finance – because it's a complex organization. And it has been successful. So we make key decisions, and beneath us we have creative departments for film, talks, exhibitions and performing arts. We also have marketing and sponsorship departments, and each has their own separate teams to look after technical functions of the place. Then we have our board of directors that meets every two months to oversee the organization.

What kinds of visitors or audience do you have? And, do you have a membership system?

We have about 250,000 visitors a year. Our membership system is quite complicated, consisting of different levels, so we are now working on it at the moment to make it simpler. Now we have about 10,000 members who pay an annual fee. It's a very strange historical setup. To get into the ICA you have to pay 2 pounds. We would like the ICA to be free, but because of our location, being on the Mall and near to the palace, and the fact that we are open until 2:00 in the morning and we serve drinks, the palace doesn't like people just to come and go and spend all the night drinking. So we have to charge people to come in. We are still a private members' club, really, meaning that the two pounds is just your membership for the day. But we have members who pay a single amount once for the whole year, and it gives them discounts on various things and free entry to the ICA. It means that

we have a good relationship with such regular visitors, because we can talk to them much more easily about what we do in the future and so on.

Regarding our audience, I think we are lucky, basically. I think the big feature of our audience is that they are very young. In comparison to other arts institutions where the age range is maybe people in their 40s and 50s, for us most of them are from 18 to people in their 30s. Lots of them are students, or well-educated people, who keep coming back. The numbers of audience of course vary according to the exhibition or different films we have on, but they remain very young and excited. And that age group is usually interested in discovering the newest and most exciting things, which is a key to the ICA. It also gives us a good opportunity, a licence to be experimental, challenging and innovative.

For example, in music, now famous groups like the Clash, the Smiths, Scissor Sisters and Franz Ferdinand all gave their early gigs at the ICA, because we would always look for new, exciting talents to showcase. You always want to put on a hot band, but you also need to sell tickets at the same time, but our audience know who our bands are. The gig we do next week, for example, is a band isn't that well-known yet, but by this time next year they will be really big. The three or four hundred people who are coming to hear them next week already know that they are hot and will be heard by a lot more people in years' time. Our whole thing is to make sure that we are always the first, so our audiences can say, 'oh, I saw it first, I knew them years ago.' And this applies to other art forms, too. It's all about 'now.' And, that's why we like working at ICA – you know, it's not so interesting to be in a place where everything is safe. It's good to be in a space that takes risks, so I try to encourage our staff that if you really believed in something, you should do it.

That's interesting, because your founders, thinking of them now, were all established, legendary figures, but they were interested in new ideas.

Yes, they were modernists. I think their whole belief was that you could create new culture – we think about a revolution in terms of the work they produced – and everything they did was about taking risks. So, although they were already known at that time, that's what they founded their careers on. I first came to the ICA when I was 10 years old, my parents took me there for something, and it started to feel like a home for me. As a teenager, as a student, I used to go there to watch Sartre movies, French and Russian avant-garde, discovered books on philosophy or things that inspired me, all these things I really didn't know about. It all happened without planning but turned out to be formative. The first thing you encounter when you walk into the ICA is the bookshop, and it's an amazing place, because you can discover all these different theoretical perspectives. And our audience are very open to uncovering new ideas, new ways of thinking. So it's almost like an education, and again we are not a place for everyone, that's the reality there. But people who do visit regularly, I think they are passionate and think the same way as Eliot or Auden that art and culture are a way to see the world.

So you already have young and passionate audience, who are enthusiastic about new ideas – but to attract an even larger audience, do you have any special, extra marketing strategy?

What I would like to find ways is to attract bigger international audience. On a personal level, I sit on a board for the University of Arts, London that represents arts and fashion colleges in London. And what that makes me aware of is how many students are coming from countries like Japan or Korea. So, one of my next tasks is to send them a clearer message, and connect more of these creatively-minded people with what we do, because that's what a city like London is about. It is an amazing place.

So many of your present or potential audience are young – what about seniors citizens?

We actually do get a more senior crowd for lots of the talks we do. We advertise them in different ways or newspapers. Actually, our talks programme is amazingly successful. The topics have to do with culture, politics, religion, identity – we talk about ideas of the day, and have an older audience age-wise.

The kind of speakers we have include the Nobel Prize winner economist Amartya Sen, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the prominent young British writer, Zadie Smith. We also recently had someone like the American feminist/writer/academic, Naomi Wolf, Tariq Ramadan, who is a very important Muslim scholar, Alain Badiou, a leading French philosopher at the moment and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, who is very fashionable. Basically, we are trying to find leading thinkers of the time. You don't find anywhere else in London where speakers of such calibre are coming week after week presenting a wide range of ideas and debate. We are very lucky that the ICA has a great reputation for 60 years. When we ask someone to talk, they at least take it seriously and consider it an honour. It means that they are historically in the same path as all the other important cultural figures. To come and talk at the ICA is a measure of where you are. And the level of debate between those speakers and the audience is very high. After the talk people always go into the bar and speak for many hours. Sometimes the speakers join them and talk more, because they are all passionate about what they think and believe. We are very proud of it.

What highlights did you have recently in other areas, such as cinema, exhibitions, or whatever?

We place great emphasis on film now. We have introduced lots of international pieces – for example from Japan, Akira, Seijun Suzuki's films and so on. The ICA does a couple of things – we not only show films, but buy films and the rights to distribute them for the UK. We are the only UK arts venue who does that. I was in Cannes last year to buy films, and every year we send people to major festivals or everywhere in the world. Last year we bought *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, for example. I think documentary is very big at the moment, culturally – since Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a lot of films have featured documentary. So, we are buying a lot of those. A film called *Iraq in Fragments* just opened last week, which is about the Iraq War and hotly tipped to be nominated for the Oscar's Best Documentary.

And we will show a couple of more films on Iraq, because we think it's important. In March, we are opening a film called *The Bridge*, which is a strange documentary about people committing suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The interesting thing in film is that the tastes change all the time. For a while we'd presented Japanese films, Wong Kar-Wai, early Iranian films – but we are always trying to find the 'next wave' in cinema.

In exhibitions, again our emphasis is about how we can introduce important new talents. The biggest event we do is the annual art prize called "Beck's Futures" for young artists, which has been going for the last seven years. In the UK we have the biggest prize called the Turner Prize, and this one is the second, featuring the artists under 35. Every year there is a huge amount of public profile and promotion about this. The prize is judged by a set of artists who are all high calibre, and we show the shortlist of 13 artists whom we saw as the most important in Britain. Throughout the rest of the year we do group and solo shows – again those exhibitions are about different ideas and talents, and we try to identify the most exciting artists working today. At the moment we are just finishing the exhibition called "Alien Nation," which was about race, identity and science fiction, and that was very good. In January, we are showing the last part of the three-year long project we have worked on with Tino Sehgal. He is a German artist who produces nothing. He doesn't paint, he doesn't make any kind of image at all but he works with people. He is an 'anti-materialist artist', very conceptual. So there's no piece of paper that can be sold afterwards.

In this exhibition, the idea is that when you walk into the gallery, there is a classroom of 30 children who just play amongst themselves all day. There's nothing, no one there apart from children. That's the piece of work, you can come into the gallery and interact with the children – so sometimes the children may play with you, or they ignore you, you don't know. The whole piece depends very much on your response and children's response, and the show runs for six weeks. When we worked with Tino before, sometimes with adults or old people, the piece was all about an unpredictable moment of your encounter and experience between you. It was to do with the fact that most of us spend our time not talking, not interacting with people. And when you do, it can be uncomfortable or exciting, you don't know. In this case – because in Britain there is a fear, or paranoia right now that the lifestyle of children is in danger, bad, and affects them – it can also show the fact that children are not that innocent and can be violent, too.

I've no idea how it will be received this time. In the past, some of the critics hated it, but sometimes they liked it. In a poll in *Art Review* magazine in Britain to decide most important artists in the world – there are two categories, one for arts critics and the other for curators including international people – they voted Tino second. So, in terms of the work he is really doing, it's interesting. But, this is a prime example of the fact that the ICA is not for everyone. Some people say it's ridiculous, and some people get really involved, and that's what we have to do.

Do you have any resident artists?

We have had different forms of artists at different times. For example, we had for a while writers in residence, and one of them was Zadie Smith. At the moment we don't have anyone, but what we rely on is to build up a long-term relationship with artists. We must understand that it takes years until our talking and ideas lead up to some form.

What about the performing arts?

It's still important, and again the chief thing is that we are trying to find the stuff that is genuinely innovative. Let me introduce you to a couple of events we are doing next year. One is the re-creation of what took place at ICA over 20 years ago. There is a German music group called Einstürzende Neubauten, which is an experimental rock group. They did a famous performance in which while they were playing they got a big drill and started to excavate the stage of ICA. It was controversial that they destroyed the stage, but we are re-creating it for next year as a performance piece. I am quite interested in how, over time, even the most radical acts could become big artistic events, historical moments.

There is a theatrical production we are hoping to have happen in the near future and are really excited about. It is a play about Iraq, which has a score by Nitin Sawhney and a set design by an artist, Lucy Orta. It is an experimental production. There is a big set, not on stage. The audience walk through the set and the actors are all around you. All the words of the play are taken from first-person accounts of events when the American army made a siege in Fallujah trying to get out all the insurgents. Jonathan Holmes, the playwright, has turned it to an amazing production based on the words and stories of the soldiers and innocent people he collected there. There were no journalists who were allowed in there at the time, so he was the first person who visited there just after the siege, which was still quite risky.

So, we always try to make sure that what we do can be a platform. I am optimistic, this play for instance, brings together theatre, music, performance and also politics. I think it's important that the works we are creating involve people looking at the world around them.

As the artistic director of ICA, how do you characterise and distinguish it from other arts organisations in Britain, where some of the arts venues are also dedicated to contemporary art?

I think the answer lies with 'urgency.' It's to do with the fact that there are many arts institutions, galleries and museums in London simply showing visual work, which are all fine. We offer a bigger room to discuss connections between arts, culture and ideas. Theoretically therefore, ICA can do almost anything. And for me the point is to work with things which I feel most urgent. That's why on a couple occasions I've done things about Iraq, because I think it's an important, imminent issue. I found it surprising actually that in artistic terms, there hasn't been much work about Iraq – film, now yes, but not so much in visual arts and theatre. But in fact, when you walk outside of the gallery the conversation we have is about policies, social issues of our time. So I thought it important that these are

explored creatively.

Equally, on an artistic front, again it's the matter of urgency. Theoretically, you can put on any number of artists and exhibitions, so the whole point is 'why this artist now?' The answer for me has to be always that they are doing the most innovative, exciting work in Britain or in the world. We have to remember that everything we do becomes a part of our history. The decision you've made is judged in the context of the last 60 years, and maybe nearly every institution thinks that way. But for me it's not just about where the artists sit artistically, but also culturally or politically, across the whole range of topics simultaneously. So, someone like Tino Sehgal, he is a difficult artist, but also very interesting. There is a notion that he is an artist who produces nothing, but the work he does at ICA is only a part of his activities. He represented Germany for the Venice Biennale last year and is considered a serious artist. He occupies an important position also in that he tries to think about or offend the nature of the whole art world, which at the moment is obsessed with money. So, he doesn't want to be traded as a commodity.

You are also a journalist and broadcaster. From this point of view, how do you think the arts influence the society, or people's way of thinking in Britain?

That's a good question – there was a piece in the *Japan Times* yesterday about how London is overtaking New York as the world's major city of international commerce and culture. It talked about economy, how the stock market is booming and trade industry is prospering, but also about how culture plays an important role in the rise of London. That's true. I think London is in the middle of the whole artistic boom at the moment, led really by the opening of the Tate Modern in 2000. Since then, every art institution is in competition to get the most people and to do the most exciting work. So, the game is bigger, the bar is higher now, and it is really exciting. There are all sorts of different activities taking place, which means that now the public is much more aware of what art means. Also, there is great hunger for culture in general. So, London is insane, all the cinemas, theatres and art galleries are doing different things and competing with each other to get attention. It's hard work if you work in the arts, but I think this is very healthy and it's the most exciting area to be in at the moment.

As a journalist I've spent all my life writing about all this. I write about arts, politics, culture, identity, fashion sometimes, but I don't think much about a distinction between them. For me they tend to roll into one. It's because they are all about how you live. I am always interested in what it is to motivate, or move people. I think culture is made up of all sorts of individual events and moments, and there is a collective voice that comes out of all these. I try to listen to and identify that, as it tells you a lot about what Britain is like as a country and how it sits in the wider international world at the moment.

So, it really interests me coming to Japan like this, as I am always trying to find where the next wave comes from and identify what that wave is. On a personal level, too, I started out my early career writing about trends and lifestyle. I was an editor for a fashion/style magazine called *Arena*, and even then, it felt to me that you could take them seriously.

Fashion is not just about clothes. Fashion is about the reasons why people do certain things.

It seems to me, though, that while arts can contribute to a city being an exciting place, people in the world are somehow feeling pessimistic about the future and the direction we are going. Do you think arts can help people to find a way?

Art doesn't have answers to things. What art can do is to question about things and allow people hopefully to see things in different ways.

The amount of time spent in the world talking about religion at the moment is huge. I would rather put my faith in art as an answer to the questions in the world, because I think artistic activity – whether it is in visual arts or film or whatever – can hold on to contradiction. Religion for instance is interested in a single answer to things. Art is about the complexity of the world. That's not so comfortable a lot of times for people. But for me it's crucial to accept the fact that the world is this complicated. And, while you can be pessimistic, actually the idea that we can explore the significance of the things around us and spend time thinking and talking about it, I think that can lead to new waves for making the world better.

The point of art is that when someone creates an amazing piece of art that people have never seen before, that can make people feel uncomfortable, but that's good, I guess, because it suggests that someone has found a different perspective. I am not always looking for the stuff that is going to please most people, but something that has depth and enough weight to it that we can come back to again and again.

Do you have any special events to celebrate your 60th anniversary?

We are in the process of planning now. Our 60th year won't start properly until late this year – and about our highlight, which we are excited about, I can't talk about it yet, because we still need to fully confirm it. But assuming it happens, that will be a major public event in our main space involving music and art. So we will not stop with our events about innovation and complexity, but over the next couple of years it will be important for us to bring in a large number of people who wouldn't have come to experimental forms of art until now. That is our challenge, but I think I have a strong idea about that.

Which areas would you like to emphasize from now on?

I think a lot about visual art, cinema, and music – trying to identify what the area means, to think not only about the audience but which is culturally ascendant now. I think visual art is enormously important in British culture at the moment. Performing arts also, especially live music, Britain is in the middle of a huge boom. So we should spend a lot of time on bringing in all these, what we think relevant. The feature about ICA is that it doesn't have a permanent collection - we are not a museum - we don't hold on to things. It means that the place has to be adaptable all the time. We are flexible, so we can say that now we should do more of this and less of that. ICA itself is alive, an organic institution. So I say to the staff that we should be led by our passions, and serve what we think is important, and that's how we

move our way forward.

As a writer you published the book *Black Gold of the Sun*. How is your personal experience reflected in this work?

I think my book is all about what it feels like 'not to belong' really, or to belong to more than one place at the same time, having home in either place, in this case Britain and Africa. And it's about how to approach life in childhood and as an adult – it was to do things as a stranger, like an outsider. It's difficult to do so as a child. But as an adult, I've always thought it important to take nothing for granted. In cultural terms, trying to look at things afresh and new. I was born in Britain but not English, in as much as I was not 'white' English. And I have been aware of the unfairness and discrimination that still exists in British society. But that made me more attuned to some of the nuances of the society or culture, to the fact that although people say one thing, they do another thing. But maybe artistically and culturally you can explore that territory. That's why I say that uncomfortable things are OK. The fact that the society is unfair and discriminatory and so on – that's what it is. After that it's down to you how you respond to that. The biggest thing that motivates me is trying to have a voice in the society, not to be discriminated against, to make sure that I am allowed to articulate what I think is important. So at various times in my life, in childhood, I wasn't very happy, but again you can use that experience. In the end it can be strength, because you accept nothing as a given, and always try to look at things in a new way.

*footnotes

Black Gold of the Sun – Searching for Home in England and Africa

Penguin Books, 2006

This semi-autobiographical book about cross-cultural issues is based on author Ekwon Eshun's experiences being born in London and spending part of his childhood in Ghana and then returning to Ghana as an adult. It deals with the eternal questions of belonging.

Do you think that contemporary art can give vision with regards to various problems of the society, and a means to express them? About young people in Britain specifically, what is their biggest issue and how would ICA respond to it?

Britain as a country is in an interesting phase at the moment that is uncomfortable. Socially, there is a lot of concern, people are talking about violence, worrying that young people are out of control, the fabric of the society is not so stable. Also, since the bombing in London in 2005, there has been a worry that different cultures in our society are fragmented. So, there is some strong sense of fear in a number of different ways. What we do at ICA is to give voice to that disquiet.

Two things have sprung to my mind. One is that at one of the night clubs that we have, we hold a night called 'Dirty Canvas', which is a 'grime' night. Grime is a form of urban music created by young black kids. And most venues in Britain, most clubs in London can't put on

grime nights because there is a reputation of violence. When you try to put on a grime night the police would call you up and say, "Should you really be doing this?" They don't think it's a good idea. So, since I arrived we've run grime nights. The police still called us, but we are doing it. And you know what? It has been very successful. It's sold out every time, and there is no violence. We have lots of black kids and white kids. It's a small event, but I think it runs counter to some of the fear that this has a reputation of danger. I think it is important to use the public space to say this is culture, too. This, too, is part of how British society is changing in new waves of music and attraction.

I guess the other example is some of the things to do with Iraq. Like everywhere else in the world we hear all this talk about 'Clash of Civilizations' and so on and so forth. But in fact, people are people. There have been all sorts of debates in Britain about the influence of Islam and Christianity. For me it is important to use ICA as a space to explore those issues. Some people get angry sometimes in such a debate, but that's OK. I think the virtue of being a public space is that you are neutral, and use that neutrality to explore difficult issues.

But what we focus on is creativity and showing what is historically important. It's not that there is a problem of young people so we have to do this. We take those criteria away. We have in fact for our audience a larger percentage of people than other art institutions who come from different minority cultures, but that's not because we deliberately target them. It is a result of being as open as possible in identifying potential sources of new work.