

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 5

Lisa Tickner and Mark Hallett: Exploring London's Art Scene in the 1960s

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Anna Reid: *British Art Talks* from the Paul Mellon Centre, championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

I'm Anna Reid, head of research at the Paul Mellon Centre. Welcome to episode five of *British Art Talks*.

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Anna Reid: In 1967, the art historian Alan Solomon queried what makes a scene? A certain state of mind, a certain kind of collective awareness, a sense of spirit, a sense of mutual reassurance, all of which seem to operate apart from the quality or extent of individual effort. *London's New Scene: Art and Culture in The 1960s* is a new book by Lisa Tickner, honorary professor at the Courtauld Institute of Art, professor emeritus in Art History at Middlesex University, and a fellow of the British Academy. It is a book full of unfamiliar, unseen material drawing on oral history and fine-grained archival research.

It reads an art world in the capital animated by new dynamics, transatlantic air travel, arrivals of artists from across the Commonwealth, tobacco sponsorship deals, new commercial galleries, a scintillating new culture of film and photography. In this episode of *British Art Talks*, Mark Hallett, director of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art talks to Lisa about her account of this transformational period and the project of her book. Which the author closes by quoting critic Frederic Jameson. "What you finally decide to think the '60s was is one of the forms in which you affirm or repudiate a whole part of your own life."

Welcome, Lisa Tickner and Mark Hallett.

Mark Hallett: Thanks very much, Anna. It's a pleasure to talk to you, Lisa, about this wonderful book. I thought I'd begin by actually focusing on the book's cover and some wonderful photographs that adorn both its front and back. On the front, there's this very distinctive image that I'd never seen before of a model, a fashionably dressed model, being lifted into the air in front of Rauschenberg's pilgrim at the Whitechapel Gallery of Rauschenberg's exhibition of 1964. What made you think about using this as your front cover image?

Lisa Tickner: This photograph is Elsbeth Juda, and it came originally from a feature called *Fab Pop Fash* in *Ambassador* magazine in April 1964. She chose the Rauschenberg show because she said its awareness and exhilaration of modern city life made it the most relevant setting for fashion on the same wavelength. So I like the fact that already there is the sense that there is a creativity here between the arts, fashion, the emergence of the Beatles, all of those things that fed into a belief that London was a newly effervescence city on the world stage.

We don't know who the two guys are. They're dressed as students, and maybe they were or maybe they weren't. The model is Queenie Whiteley, who was the wife of the young Australian painter Brett Whiteley. But what was important to me was not to have the usual clichés on the cover. I didn't want hearts or targets or fairground lettering or union jacks because this isn't yet another rehearsal of pop. I like the fact that it's a slightly mysterious cover but I also like the fact that it's by Elsbeth, whom I came to know at the end of her life and who I liked and respected very much. She was about 95 or 96 when I met her, and she died at 103.

Lastly, I like the fact that it points to the internationalism of an art world in which London was playing an increasingly expansive part.

Mark Hallett: On the back cover, you've got this photograph of Kasmin the gallerist together with Antonioni, the film director, and his film producer, then the background Clement Greenberg all gathered together at an opening at Kasmin's Gallery. Why did you decide to put this on your back cover?

Lisa Tickner: I very much enjoy this photograph because you don't always have the luck to find an image that condenses a moment in which several of your key players were present at the same time in the same room. It was taken on the 28th of October 1965, in the stockroom at the Kasmin Gallery on the occasion of Antonioni Caro opening. It's just a pity that it doesn't have Caro himself, that would really be a full deck of cards.

Clement Greenberg is behind because he was in London to chair the jury for the John Moore's prize in the autumn of 1965. Kasmin had started his business in 1961, and had opened his gallery in 1963 but by this moment in October 1965, Antonioni

was already in London to research *Blow-Up*, which began shooting in the spring of 1966. So this is just one instance of many links and overlaps between different people who were key players in the London scene and who tend to recur in different chapters of the book.

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Voice over from archival clip: Good evening. Our programme tonight consists of one single film that we've made about four young artists. They're four painters who turn for their subject matter to the world of pop art, the world of the popular imagination, the world of film stars, the twist, science fiction, pop singers. A world which you would dismiss if you would feel so inclined.

Mark Hallett: It'd be great if you could now tell us a bit about your book's contents and about your decision to organise it by year.

Lisa Tickner: The first of the year chapter is 1962 is devoted to *Pop Goes the Easel*, which is Ken Russell's film for *Monitor* with the painters Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, and Peter Phillips. It was about popular culture, pop art and as Ken Russell himself put it, all the things we love and relish. Then in 1963, I talk about the Kasmin Gallery. I'd wanted to know more about the role that dealers and private galleries played in the London art world in the 1960s. This was really an exemplary example partly because of its extraordinary space, but partly because there was a lot of detail in Kasmin's business archives, which have gone to the Getty Research Institute about the gallery as a business enterprise.

1964 is called, 'Borrowing a phrase from one of the art yearbooks, a big year in modern art'. This chapter is about two particular and in different ways very significant exhibitions. The first one is 'New Generation' 1964 at the Whitechapel Gallery, and the second is 'Painting and Sculpture of a Decade'; '54-'64 at the Tate Gallery. These overlapped in the spring of 1964. This chapter is interested particularly in new forms of sponsorship. It was new forms of commercial and charitable sponsorship that were largely responsible for a microclimate of relative prosperity in the art world in the 1960s when the economic picture in the rest of Britain could be grim.

1965 is devoted to *Private View*, as its subtitle called it a book about the lively world of British art. This is a visual ethnography of the British, actually the chiefly London art world compiled by John Russell, Brian Robertson, and Lord Snowdon. It grew out of Snowdon's work for *The Sunday Times Magazine*. I would like to say that the importance of the colour supplements in the British cultural scene, along with that of jet air travel, can scarcely be overestimated.

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Lisa Tickner: 1966 is devoted to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, which was described in a famous article in *Time Magazine* in 1966 as his swinging London project. Antonioni carried out very extensive research among artists as well as photographers from the autumn of 1965. He recruited Francis Wyndham and Anthony Hayden-Guest to help him. Together, they did an enormous amount of research which feeds into the final film.

1967 looks at export. At export Britain, art, mass culture, and the export trade. This is really about soft power in the promotion of British art abroad, for example, by the British Council and the Board of Trade. As one official put it, the cultural events represent the jam on the trade earning bread. The question that I was wanting to pursue here was when art is sent abroad on government business or alternatively in the interests of trade, what kind of company did it keep, and whose agendas did it serve?

Voice over from archival clip: Nearer home, the sit-in at Hornsey College of Art had lasted for a week when some of the students threatened to end the rebellion by handing the college back to the authorities. Many of the staff had already decided to support the rebels.

Lisa Tickner: The last of the year chapters, 1968, looks at art school revolution, the Hornsey sit-in.

Voice over from archival clip: The day to day organisation has been looked after by the students themselves and seems a pretty orderly affair. The issues of this Hornsey row of the administration on general conditions in the college.

Lisa Tickner: It might seem like a bit of a gear shift to move to art education. Particularly in the wake of the Coldstream reforms in the 1960s, art education was a hot topic. There were endless debates and seminars, and a large number of documents were produced out of these. Was the point of design to contribute to product turnover, or was it to find design solutions to social problems? The political unrest of 1968, which we saw in its local version at Hornsey, of course, swept across Europe and America in 1968 and erupted in the international art world as well.

At the same time, counter-cultural, interdisciplinary, and anti-form activities on the fringe of the art world throughout the 60s, some of which were politicised and some not, were emerging as the new international avant-garde in Harold Zimmer's exhibition. This is where I took my title from, *When Attitudes Become Form*. This opened in Bern in March 1969 and in a version curated by Charles Harrison at the ICA in London in August. It was intriguingly another instance of sponsorship for a cash strapped institution coming from a tobacco company, in this case, not Philip Stuyvesant but Philip Morris.

Mark Hallett: One of the clearly distinctive things about this book is that it's a succession of standalone case studies. I wonder how far you think it works and is coherent as a book as an entirety as something more than the sum of its parts?

Lisa Tickner: Well, obviously, I hope it is more than the sum of its parts. No doubt if and when it gets reviewed, there'll be somebody who will take issue with that particular question. Certainly, we all, and particularly those of us who are academics, are often short of time and have investments in particular topics. If you had an interest in one particular topic, you might zoom in and read a single chapter and of course, I would hope that it will make sense. If you're an Antonioni specialist, for example, you might think, "Oh, there's a chapter on *Blow-Up*, I'll just read that and then I'll go about my business." That's not actually the aim of the book. The aim of the book, the point of the book is to be cumulative, to show how an art scene emerges from shifting networks of individuals and institutions, money and other resources, and much less tangible interests and ambitions and beliefs.

Is not quite to say it's not an artist that makes the work, it's the art world that makes the work. That would be going too far in the other direction. It is the art world that enables the possibility of the works and sometimes closes down on other possibilities, which are going to have to wait their moment to emerge.

Mark Hallett: As well as a great deal of wonderful historical detail, the book is packed with scores of fantastic photographs from the period. That's one of the things that I felt was most striking about it. It's wonderful having read it or looked at it in manuscript and then to see it in book form with all of these photographs in play made it even more exciting to read. I was struck by how many of these photographs focused on the conversations taking place in parties, studios, galleries, and on the particular groupings of individuals seen talking in these venues.

There is a lovely photograph, for instance, on page 98 of the book, which shows the party for the new generation exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1964, in which you carefully identify many of the people who are shown. How important is this notion of conversation and of distinctive clustering of individuals gathered, at particular moments, to your story?

Lisa Tickner: Well, along with some of the other parties in *Private View*, one of which was specially arranged to be photographed, by the way, which is the photograph that Snowdon's stay books record as 'the book party' in the penthouse belonging to Hans and Elsbeth Juda. That's a double-page spread which shows Elsbeth jumping down from the shelf onto the floor with her camera in her hand. That was specially arranged so that it could appear in *Private View*. But along with images like that, there is a photograph of the staff gathered around the pub table near an art school.

I think it's probably Camberwell and various artists are sitting there. I can't now remember offhand who they all are but I think Kitaj is there.

It brought home to me the memory when I was an art student, of staff going to the pub about half past 12 and probably not coming back until well after three at best. Art school was, yes, a place where knowledge was transmitted and skills were transferred and so on, but it was also a place where professional artists got together for quite long lunchtimes in order to talk about what they were doing, what their ambitions were, the shows that they'd just seen, the openings they were going to, if they were going to Venice, if the gallerist had shown anything, if they'd sold anything, all of these kinds of things.

Art schools were actually central to the art world in a way that people who are outside the art world don't necessarily understand.

[music]

Mark Hallett: I've got to turn now to your extensive endnotes, which I have to say you've become quite celebrated. Now there are 100 pages, almost exactly, I think exactly 100 pages of endnotes in *London's New Scene*. It's a very substantial section of the book, so I wondered what your attitude to such endnotes is?

Lisa Tickner: Well, I was hoping to stay below the radar on this actually. You've made this a front-page issue, Mark. It's nice of you to say celebrated. I think my footnotes are notorious actually, the opinion is divided on them. There's a spectrum of views on footnotes, and at the two poles of that spectrum, there is one that says that notes should be citations only. I remember the art historian John Whitehorse used to say this rather sternly, "If anything is of any significance, it should be in the main text. If the reader needs to know, it should be in the main text. Otherwise, you're just saying where the quote comes from."

The other extreme is that the main text needs to be uncluttered. It should flow. There isn't room for lots of interjections and byways and parenthetical dashes and all the rest of it. The idea then is to put supporting or explanatory material in the notes, and it's clear that that's the end of the spectrum where I belong. I do do a lot of research, for better or worse, I want it to be useful to other people's projects. I actually love other people's footnotes myself. It's often where I start looking at a book. I go to the back and I start thumbing through. Of course, technically, they're endnotes, not footnotes.

I often go to the back and start getting engrossed in the endnotes and so do some of the friends with whom I share this particular, you might say, perversion. These footnotes have been pruned, believe it or not, but yes, there's quite a lot of them. But I can't see that somebody else is necessarily going to go through the local

authority records and discover what Alderman Kettle said after he'd been to a meeting with the steering group of the Hornsey sit-in July 1968. I put it there in case anybody else wants it, really. [laughs] It's a resource.

Mark Hallett: It is. It reminds me of your comment that you love spending time rummaging through the archives, of being an archive rat, I think was your phrase. You can become an endnote rat where you just end up spending hours rummaging through the Tickner endnotes. I think that's something that we'd all enjoy. Or I can imagine lots of students wanting to do.

Lisa Tickner: Well the point is that if you don't enjoy it, you don't have to do it because the rest of the text is there, just read the text.

[music]

Mark Hallett: Now one thing I really wanted to ask you about was the fact that of course, you were an art student in the 1960s yourself. Indeed, you studied at Hornsey College of Art, which saw the famous students' sit-in that you write about so brilliantly in the final chapter of the book. I'd love it if you could reflect a little on how the account you've written in this book relates to your own personal memories of the art scene in the 1960s.

Lisa Tickner: I went to art school when I was 16, and I was there for six years. This world was, in general, not my world, because I was only a young teenage art student. So, I wasn't part of any of these groups of professional artists or filmmakers or whatever. Of course, I wouldn't have been but there are some things that I remember. There were exhibitions that I went to. I remember very clearly going to the Kasmin Gallery, which was a much admired place which showed wonderful artists. Kasmin, at one point in an interview, complained that 'oh, the students would come and eat their sandwiches on the Barcelona stools'.

Well, I don't think I ever had the nerve to take the sandwiches, but I did often sit in the Kasmin Gallery on the Barcelona stools and look around at the paintings, or the Indian miniatures, or whatever he was showing. The closest I'd come to the topics in the book is the chapter on Hornsey in 1968. I left Hornsey in 1967. So, I was not there officially, except that in fact, I still had friends there. I still visited there and for complicated reasons, I was with somebody who had access to a 16-millimeter film camera. We went back several times in the hope that were the sit-in to be raided, this event will be caught on film.

As it happened, when the dogs were sent in, we weren't there and we didn't catch it on film, but it does mean that I do have some connection to the Hornsey sit-in. Of course, I was very familiar with Hornsey as an institution in the lead up to the sit-in. I

knew very well some of the objections and frustrations which led to the decision to have a sit-in in the first place, but that was before I went on to university.

Mark Hallett: I just wonder if your writing of this history was in any way haunted by or shadowed by your own memory of at least having, even if a very peripheral perspective, on that same world or getting a sense of a deeper exploration of a world that you remember only having seen from the outside beforehand.

Lisa Tickner: Perhaps that last point is the very good one, Mark. That it was familiar and not familiar, that some of the spaces were familiar, the galleries, some of the people. There are particular moments in one's past that one goes back to, and I think, "Did that really happen? Did I go up to Marcel Duchamp at the Duchamp exhibition organised by Richard Hamilton when he was going around with Hamilton at the opening in 1966 and ask him to sign my catalog?" Well, actually, yes, I did. It seems like a dream, but I have the catalog and it has Marcel Duchamp's signature. So I'm obviously not mistaken.

Now I think, "Well, what was I doing?" I did go to a few openings, but I wouldn't have even been invited to a Tate opening as a teenage art student in June 1966. How did that happen? I don't know. I think you're right. There is a sense maybe of having been on the outside looking in, which is partly to do with real moments when I was and partly to do with fantasised moments that I imagine. I mean yes, some people do say that historians of the recent past, there's a psychoanalytic component. They're always wanting to rediscover their own life as it were, but I wouldn't want to analyse myself to that extent.

Anyway, it's taken me some time to get to the 1960s. I started off writing about the arts and crafts movement for my thesis, which I finished in the 1970s. I've been working my way forward at a very snail's pace. Really.

[music]

Mark Hallett: Can I ask about one other aspect of your own history, Lisa? Is that as you say, through the '60s and in many ways, subsequently, you've known art schools very well and known the world of the art school, but at the same time, or subsequently rather, you've gone on to pursue a very distinguished career in academia. I do wonder whether part of the richness and the granularity of the book does derive from this dual experience and history that you've had, that you've been someone who's really been part--

Worked in a studio and spent time with artists and students but at the same time, you've also developed all the academic and scholarly skills that are also self-evident. I just wonder whether it's that combination that helps generate this particular kind of perspective.

Lisa Tickner: It may be for others to say. I've always been resistant to the idea that if you have once worked with artistic materials of any kind, then you have some magically distinct relation to them and it's a relation that mere historians can never acquire. I actually think that's wrong and when people have suggested that to me, I've resisted it. I think for example, that there are many dealers and particularly museum curators and people in auction houses who have an extraordinarily intimate knowledge of works of art.

When I've been on committees with people like that, particularly if we've been discussing something which is outside my own period as a modernist, I've been extraordinarily impressed by the way that they've thought about, I don't know, medieval icons or ivory carvings or whatever. So, I don't buy the idea that art school is a passport to a magically special relationship to the work of art.

On the other hand, I was sometimes surprised teaching art history students that they didn't really know the difference between an etching and an engraving and a lithograph. Then it will be my art school experience that I would draw on to say, well, this involves a burin and this involves acid, and that involves a transfer process on a stone. This is what happens with this and that and so on. If it has made any difference at all, I think that it has born in upon me the moral which other people can acquire by other means, which is that it's very important to be attentive. You have really to look. I think some of the finest art historians are the ones who look closest and longest.

I think we can also look at some of the things that I've looked at, which are films and television programs and galleries and exhibitions. It doesn't just have to be the work that we look at.

Mark Hallett: Well, I think we should leave it there. This has been a really wonderful conversation and it's been great that you've been able to give us such an insight into this book, which I urge everyone listening to find and to read and to delve into, and to enjoy. Thanks so much for giving us this tour of your book and the London art world in the 1960s.

Lisa Tickner: Well, thank you Mark for provoking me.

[music]

Anna Reid: Thank you to Lisa Tickner and to Mark Hallett. *London's New Scene: Art and Culture in The 1960s* is published by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and distributed by Yale University Press. Images of the works described in this episode can be found online at the Paul Mellon Centre website. That's also where you can find previous episodes of the PMC podcast and a program of virtual events.

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Archive clips are from Huw Wheldon's introduction to Ken Russell's *Pop Goes the Easel* produced for the BBC. Newsreel of the Hornsey sit-in is courtesy of British Movietone.

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