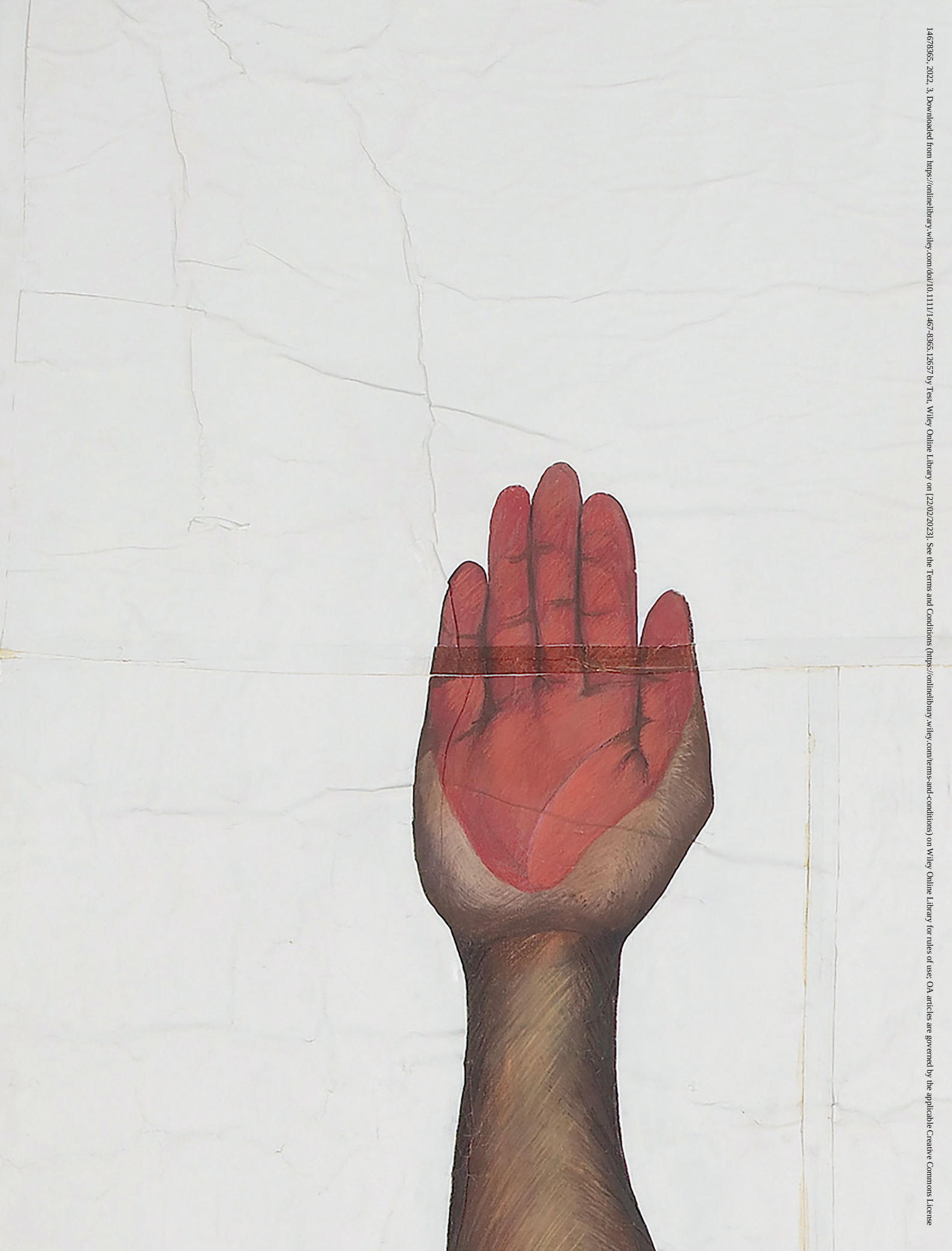

Synaptic Visualizations: Reading 'the Global' in and through the Work of Sutapa Biswas

Gill Park

Introduction

In his text 'Museums of Modern Art and the End of History', Stuart Hall argues that the 'post-colonial' is not the end of colonialism but rather the reconvening of all the contradictions and problems which constituted colonialism in a new context.[1] Echoing this, contemporary artist Sutapa Biswas (b. 1962), whose work is the focus of this essay, has stated that she has come to dislike the term 'post-colonial' precisely because we are still 'in the colonial'.[2] Responding to the complicity of visual culture within the history of imperialism and within the enduring colonial project, Sutapa Biswas creates a visual language which challenges Euro-centric visions of the world by mobilizing her own complex subjectivity as a British-Indian woman. In 1986/87, twenty-one years after her family was displaced from their home in Santinikaten, West Bengal, Biswas made her first visit back to India, after which she produced a photographic series entitled *Synapse* (1992). Through this visually and conceptually complex work Biswas drew on her re-encounter with India, engaging with the inter-relation of identity and homeland, memory and desire while also challenging the colonizing gaze of the photographic image. In the black-and-white photographs that comprise the *Synapse* series, Biswas brings her own body into image relation with ancient stone temples of Hindu culture (*plate 1*), drawing the attention of a British arts audience to representations of women which are neither violent nor othering. These temples, in their pre-colonial representations of an erotic, liberal sexuality provided a visual resource for her decolonizing, feminist artistic project. The artist's engagement with Hindu iconography, as well as a range of cultural referents from India and other parts of the globe, has challenged the Eurocentricity of the history of art that was taught to Biswas as a student of fine art in a British university. Beginning from her own experience of migration to Britain from a post-partition India, and of navigating the pain and pleasure of inhabiting two worlds, Biswas has, as *Synapse* exemplifies, consistently and deeply explored the potential of bringing together events, histories, spaces and experiences, in order to produce what Griselda Pollock and Mieke Bal have termed 'a migratory aesthetics'.[3] In their conception, the term captures the way in which art forms provide knowledge of migration histories. I wish to argue that Biswas's own 'migratory aesthetics' hinges on her mobilization of the synaptic which not only makes visible the aesthetic dimension of *migration*, but – in relation to the focus of this special issue – can be read as one lens through which to visualize the potential and problematic of the global.

Detail from Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, 1984–85 (*plate 3*).

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1 Sutapa Biswas, *Synapse II*, 1987–92, top image. Diptych, hand-printed black-and-white photograph, 112 × 132 cm. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/ Artimage. Photo: Sutapa Biswas.

Synaptic Visualizations

The title of Biswas's *Synapse* series is drawn from anatomy, meaning the site at which electrical signals are transmitted from one nerve to another. This anatomical event is taken up by the artist to figure in her work as 'a place where two people meet; a place where two ideas meet; a gap across which two people's ideas meet'.[4] In their introduction to the catalogue for the original exhibition of *Synapse* at Leeds City Art Gallery and the Photographers' Gallery (1992), Nigel Walsh and David Chandler acknowledge that within the series, Biswas courageously places herself within the intertwining histories of British and Indian culture, expressing 'the conflicts and contradictions that yoke together migration and self-identity, intimacy and estrangement, integration and alienation, pain, pleasure and desire'.[5] Through this essay I wish to argue that the concept of synapse, as described by Biswas, and taken up within her many works in different ways, is important in relation to the focus of this special issue on art history and the global, because it engages with the notion of both the 'meeting' of ideas and the gap that exists within that meeting: what Walsh and Chandler express as the conflicts and contradictions that come with having intertwining identities, visions and experiences of the world. At the time of writing this essay, Biswas is in the post-production stages of her new work *Lumen*, which has now been exhibited as part of two major exhibitions at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (26 June 2021 – 20 March 2022) and Kettle's Yard

(16 October 2021 – 30 January 2022), and which is alluded to in the introduction of this special issue. The word lumen – a hollow passageway through which blood flows, as well as a measure of visible light – figures in this new work as a metaphor for the passage between two worlds, signalling for the artist both a euphoric and traumatic event.[6] I argue that what I am calling Biswas's synaptic visualizations of the world can be read in relation to Aruna D'Souza's compelling proposal for a global art history in which 'no centre exists, no single locus of power dominates, and all participants speak a language made strange by the conversations into which they are thrown'.[7] Indeed, there is an aspect of 'making strange' throughout all of Biswas's work in the way in which she collides different worlds in order to disrupt the familiar and disorient the viewer. It is thus through the lens of synapse that I wish to closely read two of Biswas's film works: *Kali* (1984–85) and *Birdsong* (2004). Through an analysis of these two particular works, I argue that by drawing on the different dimensions of her identity – as British and Indian, but also, among other identities, as woman, mother and artist – Biswas addresses and challenges idealized notions of post-colonial unity, while also pointing to the possibilities of seeing and knowing across different vantage points.

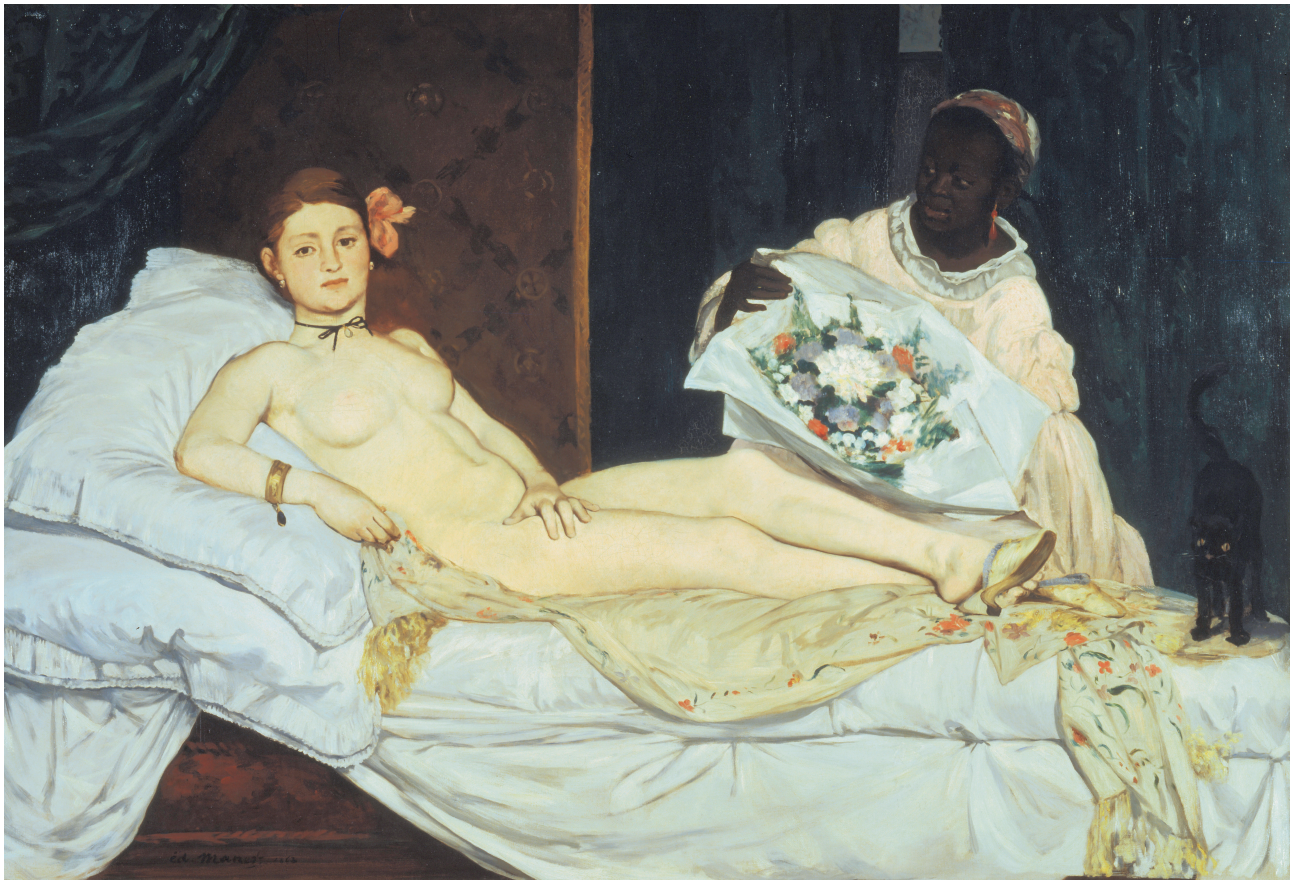
Mobilizing Other Art Histories

Throughout all her work, Biswas creates new visualizations of the world, while also employing artistic critique and analysis as a means of social change. Her critical attention to the history of art began during the early 1980s while she was a student in the Department of Fine Art at the University of Leeds, where she became aware, and began to challenge, the silences on the course concerning issues of race in relation to art and representation. This was thrown into relief for the artist during one particular studio 'crit' in 1982 when a fellow student presented his artwork which comprised re-workings of various images from visual culture in order to liberate those subjects usually written out of art history. One of these images was Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) (*plate* 2). In his adaptation, the student had added a speech bubble to the painting in order to give voice to the young courtesan 'Olympia' who is modelled in the painting by Victoria Meurent. In his attempt to empower the unnamed subject, the student had also offered a speech bubble to the cat depicted in the painting at the foot of the bed. What Biswas has pointed out, and what clarified, for her, the absences within the socialist, feminist discourses that structured the teaching of the 'new art history' at Leeds, was the failure of the student to also attribute speech to the figure of the Black female servant, Laure, who attends to Olympia within the painting.[8] This absence derived from the critical discourse on *Olympia* at that moment, specifically the work of T. J. Clark, who was Professor of Art History while Biswas was a student at Leeds. Clark's art-historical reading of *Olympia* in his book *The Painting of Modern Life* situates the painting in relation to a view of the social and political conditions of modern life but overlooks Laure's position as a *black* woman living and working in Paris in the nineteenth century.[9] Thus, bearing witness to the differentiated struggles of women of colour, Biswas has consistently sought within her art practice to find tools that challenge erasure, and, vitally, to reinscribe those who have been silenced or made invisible back into art and art's histories.

The first major work she produced while at the University of Leeds in relation to such a creative, political struggle was the remarkable large-scale painting *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1984–85) (*plate* 3). The work is a collage of acrylic on paper and Xerox images, pasted together by masking tape and then mounted onto canvas, which depicts the Hindu goddess Kali. Kali is worshipped variously as Divine Mother, destroyer of evil and the most powerful personification of Shakti, the cosmic energy which is

both a creative and destructive force. In Hindu iconography, as in Biswas's painting, Kali is depicted as having four arms and hands, representing these two aspects of her personhood: in her left hands, Kali brandishes a steak-knife and a decapitated head in and in her right hand is the red hibiscus, the flower which symbolizes Kali's creativity. Around Kali's neck is a garland of severed heads which, in Biswas's version, depict white-faced men, who stand as symbols of historical violence: one is drawn in the likeness of Hitler, another sports the moustache of the archetypal colonialist, a third, with blond hair and round face looks, somewhat anachronistically, like Donald Trump.[10] Within *Housewives with Steak-Knives* is another referent which departs from traditional representations of Kali: in her left hand, alongside the red flower, Biswas's Kali waves a flag on which is pasted a copy of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofornes* (1612–13), in which the Assyrian general Holofornes is beheaded by the Israelite heroine Judith and her maidservant Abra. Through these intersecting referents – a Hindu goddess, the faces of Western patriarchal and colonial rule, an iconic feminist painting from European art history – Biswas produces a work of immense artistic and political force. Not without humour, Kali's destructive, creative energy is drawn upon by the artist to imagine a new order in which the evil forces of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism are overcome.

I wish to look more closely at the presence of Gentileschi's iconic painting within Biswas's representation of Kali, and to read it in relation to my focus on the synaptic in Biswas's work. In deploying this particular history painting within her composition, Biswas sets up a conversation between two iconographic representations of women as strong, fearsome, violent forces, which each counter the classic portrayals of women within Western art history as passive objects of desire. On the other hand, at the



2 Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 × 190 cm. Paris: Musée D'Orsay. Photo: Wikicommons.

3 Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, 1984–85. Oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil, white tape, collage on paper mounted onto stretched canvas, 2.45 × 2.22 mm. Bradford: Bradford Museums and Galleries. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/Artimage. Photo: Andy Keate.

time of its making *Housewives with Steak-Knives* also posed a challenge to the tendency of second-wave feminist discourse to overlook black women's experiences and to subordinate race within the analyses of women's oppression.[11] Within Biswas's creation, it is a female deity venerated within the Indian subcontinent who conquers the entangled systems of patriarchy and imperialism, symbolized by the severed heads around her neck. In relation to this, it is interesting that while the term 'synapse' derives from the Greek 'synapsis', which means to make contact or touch, it is also significant that, when introducing the term to the *Textbook of Physiology* in 1897, neurophysiologist Charles Sherrington chose it as a word that would convey the union of two *separate* elements. Thus, we should not read Biswas's work as simply making a

connection between iconographic references from different art-historical contexts but as creatively, synaptically drawing attention to the differentiated experiences of women across the globe whose oppression has been, as bell hooks argues, determined by the intersectionality of race, capitalism and gender.[12]

While I have shown how the iconography of *Housewives with Steak-knives* can be read synaptically, it is also important to attend to the form of the painting, which can likewise be read in relation to Biswas's dual identities as both British and Indian. The formidable painting is hung so as to lean away from the gallery wall, towards the viewer, giving it a sculptural quality which is further reinforced by the laying of paint and collage on to the surface of the canvas. The tactility of Biswas's work brings to mind both the encaustic surface of Jasper Johns's *Flag* and the assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg. It can just as easily be read, in relation to Indian miniature painting which, as in the work of the American abstractionists, juxtaposes three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. The seventeenth-century painting *Devi in the Form of Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods* (*c.* 1660–70), for example, housed in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, uses impasto, layering paint in thick layers so the paint is raised above the canvas, as it is in *Housewives with Steak-Knives*. Writing on the work of Biswas, Gilane Tawadros has argued that:

> the mythology of racial superiority, and the contingent concept of progress [. . .] erases non-Western cultures from the map of history, rendering them fixed and immobile in an ahistorical vacuum and in the back-ground to the central imperatives of European progress.[13]

In so doing, Tawadros argues that the politics of Biswas's work lies in her countering this mythologization.[14] It is thus significant that in producing *Housewives with Steak-Knives* as a work that functions as an incisive social commentary on different forms of oppression, Biswas draws on art-historical references from both the Indian and Anglo-American contexts, mobilizing them in the present to critique the related systems of patriarchy and imperialism.

There is a third dimension of this painting which can be read as a synaptic visualization. Within *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, Kali wears a red patterned tunic, which Biswas had consciously modelled on a piece of clothing she had bought in a British high-street fashion store. However, when she returned to India after making the work, amongst the belongings of her late grandmother Biswas found an image of Kali wearing a patterned top with the same design as the one she had painted.[15] Having not remembered this image when making the work, her subsequent recovery of this matrilineal visual 'memory' had a major impact on her thinking about it afterwards. For Biswas, the likeness between the two images stands as a particular temporal state in which she found a way to speak across the spaces of India and Britain, as well as across different generations of women, through which her own subjectivity has been formed. Within neuroscience, synapses play a vital role in the formation of memories. For Biswas, the creation of images functions synaptically in the sense of enabling her to access, and mobilize, her early memories. *Housewives with Steak-Knives* thus serves to signify the loss she experienced when leaving India and her grandmother behind. Through the recovery of her matrilineal history in the creation of this painting, Biswas counters the violent familial rupture she experienced by being displaced from the place of her birth. In *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, the figure of Kali – who, importantly, is associated with motherly love – can thus be read as a synaptic visualization in the sense of both signifying the artist's formative experience of displacement while also imaging

a connection between her two homelands, thereby countering the violent severing of worlds.

Kali

To further my analysis of Biswas's synaptic visualization, I now wish to turn to a film work that also depicts the figure Kali. Like *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, *Kali* was made for the artist's degree show at the University of Leeds in 1985 and was subsequently selected by Lubaina Himid to be presented as part of the exhibition *The Thin Black Line*, which took place that same year at the Institute for Contemporary Arts.[16] *Kali* performatively enacts a synaptic visualization of the global, addressing the meeting of worlds and the discord produced through that encounter. Now housed in the Tate collection, *Kali* depicts a recording of a performance that took place in January 1984. The camera does not passively document, however, but rather it constructs a particular view that positions the spectator both within and, at times, outside of the action. *Kali* centres on the interactions of two performers – the artist herself and a second artist, Isabelle Tracy.[17] According to Biswas, herself and Tracy each function as two characters within the film – themselves, artists within the British education system, and the Hindi figures of Kali and Ravana, who exists within Hindu mythology as a multi-headed demon king who represents the essence of evil. Dressed in crudely made costumes with painted faces, the performers hold puppets that represent Kali (Biswas), and Ravana (Tracy). The film shows the two performers enacting a series of ritualized interactions which sees Ravana being defeated by Kali. The film is overlaid with a soundtrack: one part a narration spoken by the artist in Bengali, the language of her birth, and the second part a recording of songs, sung in Bantu from the anti-apartheid play *The Hungry Earth* by the South African Bahumutsi Theatre Company of Soweto.

Partway through the film, before the performance begins, Biswas brings a third person into the room, into the view of the camera. The new person is Griselda Pollock, who was, at the time of making, the artist's lecturer and has since been a key contributor to the critical discourse on Biswas's work. According to Pollock, she had been waiting outside the studio expecting to enter and assess the artist's work. Instead, she unwittingly became a part of the performance. Within the film, Pollock comes into view wearing a pillowcase, which had been placed on her head as she entered the studio. We witness Pollock being led to a seat in the centre of the room, from where she watches the performance through the two small eye-holes cut into the pillow-case (*plate* 4). Within the introduction to the film, Biswas speaks directly to the camera, against a backdrop of a painted Union Jack, stating that Pollock plays the part, not only of spectator, but also of 'imperial forces' (*plate* 5).

The specific presence of Griselda Pollock in the film can be read in relation to the feminist intervention in the discourse of art history, which Biswas encountered while a student at Leeds. To a certain extent, it was feminism, through Pollock's radical intervention, which had given Biswas the tools for challenging the canonical histories of art and thus it is significant that it is she who is made to encounter the strength of the Mother Goddess Kali slaying the demon king. Yet Kali also translates literally as the black goddess and thus Pollock's role as 'imperial forces' is made to signify a series of relationships, not just between man and woman but also between good and evil, East and West, dominant and dominated. Through *Kali*, Biswas explicitly challenged the exclusions she encountered within the 'new art history' at Leeds. As both Biswas and Pollock have since acknowledged, this was a version of art history that was committed to a Marxist and feminist critique of the visual but was silent on issues of race. In her

close reading of *Kali*, Eva Bentcheva argues that the act of masking Pollock reverses the power dynamics between staff and student. Reflecting the experience of Biswas, who found that her own cultural history was overlooked on the course, Bentcheva points out that Pollock is not only deprived of her social identity, but also denied the power to respond with facial expressions.[18] As 'spectator' Pollock's own limited view is echoed by the camerawork, which in turn limits the vision of the viewer: close-up shots focus in on certain aspects of the action in the room, giving a sense that there is always something taking place outside the frame; the camera shakes and intermittently goes out of focus; and black frames further obscure the spectator's access to what is happening within the studio. Pollock's position as outsider is demarcated further when, as part of the performance, Biswas paints a circle around the chair on which Pollock is seated.[19] This positioning is reinforced by the Bengali soundtrack which Pollock presumably cannot understand and which further signifies Pollock as being outside of the action.

In an interview I undertook with the artist in August 2017, Biswas described to me in detail her formation as a child of an Indian academic father, growing up in London after her family migrated from West Bengal in 1965.[20] This included a sense instilled in her of having the right to full participation in British society. She recalled, for example, being taken to the Victoria & Albert Museum and told that the public collections belonged to her. This contrasted, however, with the somewhat alienating experience of arriving at the University of Leeds, where, as discussed above, the critiques of race were missing from a curriculum that was beginning

4 Sutapa Biswas, *Kali*, 1984–85. Video, projection, colour and sound (stereo), 25 minutes, 28 seconds. London: Tate. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/Artimage. Photo: Tate.

5 Sutapa Biswas, *Kali*, 1984–85. Video, projection, colour and sound (stereo), 25 minutes, 28 seconds. London: Tate. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/Artimage. Photo: Tate.

to think about art in terms of the exclusionary experiences of gender and class. Reflecting on this in an essay for a catalogue on Biswas's work, Pollock says that within *Kali*:

> I was made to function as an icon of imperialism around which Biswas's enactments of resistance would be performed. Centred, yet made vulnerable by being deprived of the position of protected observer, I could not distance myself from the mythological representation of a historically conditioned struggle, which was concretized in Sutapa Biswas's experience as an Asian student in a British university art department.[21]

Pollock also argues, however, for the significance of *Kali* for the *development* of the critical art history that was being taught at the University of Leeds:

> Sutapa Biswas's presence [on] the course, however, was itself a factor in the evolution of the Leeds project. It was she who defined the absences in these seemingly radical discourses deriving from Marxism and feminism. It was she who named the imperialism that still structured analyses speaking in undifferentiated terms of class and gender, never knowing the issues of race and colonialism. It was her critique that forced us all to acknowledge the Eurocentric limits of the discourses within which we, the staff, practised.[22]

Within *Kali*, the conflict between Kali and Ravana represents the defeat of man by woman but, as I stated earlier, Kali is also made to stand in for the East and, in particular, the images, stories and histories that have been lost through imperialism. Yet *Kali*, like *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, also addresses the way in which the women's movement in the West has often ignored the differentiated struggle of women on the basis of race and class. Within the film, Kali becomes a device through which Biswas addresses her own subjectivity and cultural identity as an artist growing up in Britain but born in India. She does this partly by colliding different cultural referents which bring Kali into relation with global resistance movements that have fought against race and class-based oppression. For example, recordings of songs from the anti-apartheid play *The Hungry Earth* – presented at the National Theatre (London) in 1983 – address black working-class life in South Africa, told through the struggle of mine-workers under oppression. Biswas has also stated that the performance within the film is informed by fringe theatre movements from around the world, including the long history and present of experimental theatre within India.[23] This attention to the inter-related forms of oppression across the globe makes *Kali* akin to 'synapse'. The work creates an encounter between cultures, art forms, histories and geographies which have contributed to Biswas's own subjectivity. It is precisely her access to these different vantage points that enables Biswas to create her synaptic visualization. The work functions politically by bringing artforms from India and South Africa, both former British colonies, and reversing the colonial domination of those colonies. Indeed, Pollock writes of *Kali* that: 'it challenges the construction of Orientalist myths' which 'projects that which is named as the Orient as belonging to a permanent past'.[24] Instead, Biswas creates a disorienting visual and sonic experience, which de-others her Indian culture, making the story of Kali function as the central referent within the work in order to defeat the imperial imagination which has been constructed by British art and art history.

Within the filmed introduction at the beginning of *Kali*, Biswas specifically recounts a meeting with a guest lecturer on the course who saw some figurative drawings that the artist had made. Biswas says that this tutor read her portraits as reproducing stereotypical images of women. In the introduction Biswas states, however, that she did not think these images were either weak or passive; instead, she points to the way in which her images had been read by this tutor within the history of Western image-making, rather than within the context of Indian iconography, through which Biswas had discovered 'fearsome' images of women, of which Kali is one. By centring the figure of Kali as source of feminist strength and power, the film not only reverses the student–teacher power relation but it also reverses the structure of white spectatorship in which non-Western cultures are consumed and appropriated by the Western gaze.

Kali is also significant in giving form to what has preoccupied Biswas throughout her work as an artist: the way in which history impacts upon the present. Her work counters the myth of Asian femininity which is reinforced through contemporary representations, representations which were being directly addressed by black women artists as part of the feminist project of the 1980s. In an article for *Ten* 8 in 1984, for example, Pratibha Parmar analyses media images to explore the Othering of black women in contemporary discourse. Through her analysis, Parmar argues that the visual construction of Asian women within the British media is directly related to their oppression within British society. Parmar challenges the stereotypical image of Asian women as being, contradictorily, quiet, submissive, dominated subjects to be pitied, and as exotic, 'full of Eastern Promise'.[25] She uses as examples an image

of a Sikh wedding, printed in *The Sunday Times* in 1983, in which a nineteen-year old Sikh woman is portrayed – through images and captions – as a 'young unwilling bride being assembled for a wedding she so fatefully seems to accept'.[26] In contrast, she points to another set of images in an issue of *The Sunday Times* magazine, from 24 May 1981. These were documentary images of Bombay 'cage girls' taken by Mary Ellen Marks, which conform, Prabha points out, to 'sexual voyeuristic fantasies' that are both sexist and racist. In relation to Prabha's analysis of these naturalized images which circulated widely within the British news media during the 1980s – but which can also be read historically in relation to the colonial imaginary – Biswas's artwork can be read as posing an important challenge to the dominant representations of Asian women in Western culture. In drawing on the figure of Kali, Biswas thus offers a challenge not only to the history of art, but to a language of imagery which was being constructed at the time of her making the work that had its roots in imperial relations and that was functioning to subordinate Asian women within British society. *Kali* is thus synaptic because, in addressing this politics of representation, it enables Indian culture to speak on its own terms within the spaces of a British art school.

Birdsong

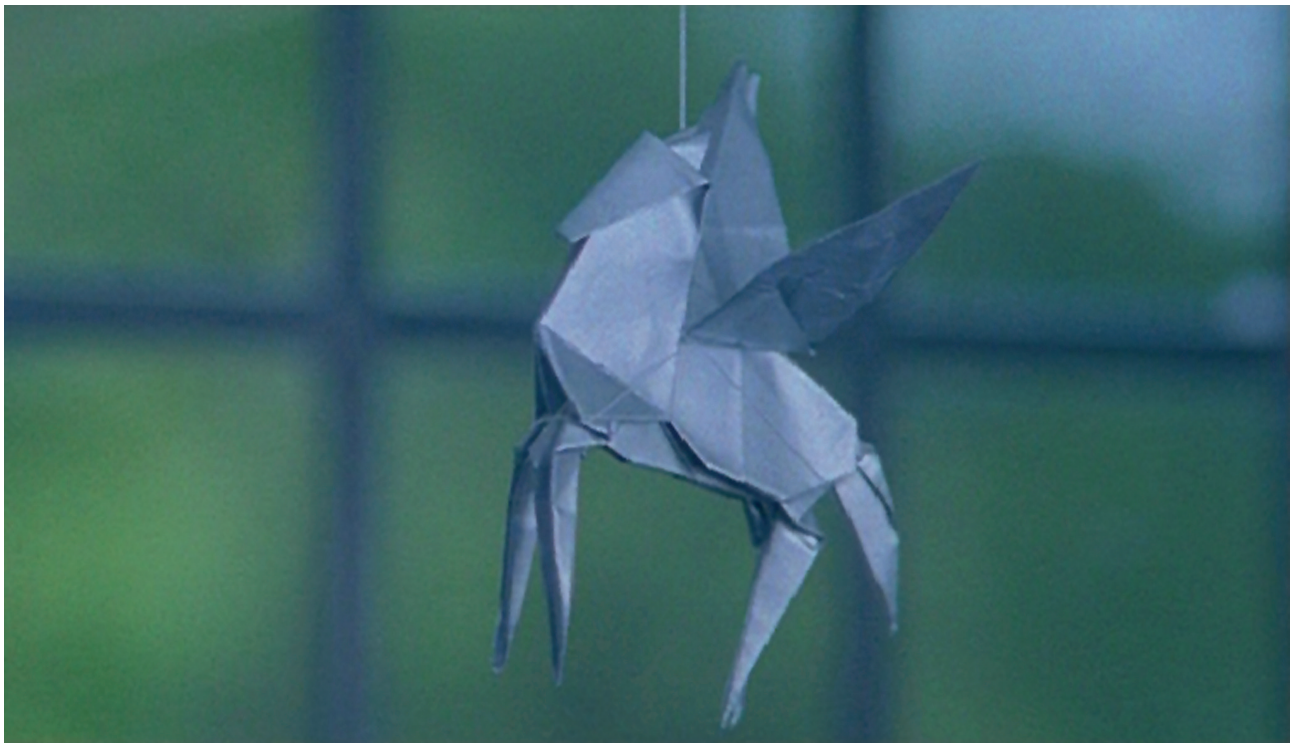
Having analysed *Kali* for the way in which it performs Biswas's intervention into her British art education, I now wish to turn to a second film work, made in 2004, to further consider the way in which Biswas's work produces synaptic visualizations, which bring together different times and spaces in order to make strange the familiar. In doing so I wish to argue that *Birdsong*, like other examples of Biswas's work, can

6 Sutapa Biswas, *Birdsong*, 2004. 16 mm film transferred onto two DVDs, dual screen projection, colour, no sound, 7 minutes, 7 seconds. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/Artimage.

be read for the way in which it critically attends to notions of Britishness and British art. *Birdsong* is a silent, 2-channel video, originally made on 16 mm, which was commissioned by film agency Film and Video Umbrella as part of a touring exhibition produced by the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva). The work begins with a close-up shot of a paper winged horse, a mobile suspended in front of a window, which turns gently, poetically, in the breeze (*plate 6*). Two screens show the same image, almost, but not quite, in synchrony. In the second shot, the camera lingers on the face of a young boy who sits silently in an ornately furnished living room. Subsequently, however, this tranquil setting is disrupted when a pair of legs, belonging to a horse, appear in view, serving to partially obscure the boy's face. The horse moves in and out of the frame, offering glimpses of its tail hair, then its bridle, casting shadows over the young boy's face. The boy begins to smile. He moves his head but stays seated. Eventually, the camera pans out, revealing, surreally, a full view of a saddled horse standing within the living room, directly in front of the young boy (*plate 7*). The horse looks silently towards the window, echoing the boy's meditative repose. Then, the paper pterippus comes back into view, turning gracefully, on and on.

The starting point for *Birdsong* was Biswas's desire to speak across two events in her personal life that signified the opposing states of presence and absence, emergence and loss. At the time of conceptualizing the work, Biswas's son Enzo, who is the young boy in the film, had recently uttered his first full sentence, which was that 'I'd like to have a horse to live with us'. When asked where the horse would live, the child responded, 'in my living room'.[27] Within the film, this childhood desire – signifying, according to Biswas, the process of finding a place in the world through language – is transformed into reality. At the same time as her son was 'becoming', Biswas's father was dying, an event Biswas has stated signified, for her, the notion of losing presence, voice and history in the world.[28]

Within the film, therefore, a complex liminal or synaptic space is created, in which the artist visualizes a bridge between reality and desire, which itself maps onto



7 Sutapa Biswas, *Birdsong*, 2004. 16 mm film transferred onto two DVDs, dual screen projection, colour, no sound, 7 minutes, 7 seconds. © Sutapa Biswas/DACS/Artimage.

8 George Stubbs, *Shooting at Goodwood*, 1759–60. Oil on canvas, 127.5 × 204 cm. Chichester: Goodwood House. Photo: Trustees of the Goodwood Collection/ Bridgeman Images.

larger political themes of history and race. Through the film a wish, usually confined to childhood imagination – defined indeed by its absence in space and time – is brought into reality and visibility. For Biswas, the spaces she creates are 'dream spaces' but she also aims for them to touch her daily experience.[29] The detail of *Birdsong* must be closely attended to because it reflects the complex layering of significations that set up this meeting of worlds. The establishing shot of the spinning horse evokes the notion of timelessness, while the sitting room in which the film is set evokes a period sitting room. On closer inspection, however, the nostalgic quality of the room's furnishings is disrupted by a series of objects which both reference history but which also locate the work in the moment of the film's creation: contemporary magazines and editions of historical novels, and plastic toys owned by the artist's son. There are also significations of different places: the origami horse alluding to Japan; an Afghan rug patterned by the 'elephant foot' typical of the Aqcha design; furniture made from mahogany, indigenous to the Americas; and, most prominently, an Arabian stallion. Thus, this quintessential British period sitting room is, in fact, constructed from decorative objects which derive from various parts of the non-European world.

Reinterpreting British Art

In relation to this meeting of worlds, Biswas has consistently brought history of art into dialogue with everyday lived experience. She has said that in her work the grand narratives of history paintings meet 'the undisclosed uncelebrated domestic spaces of the everyday wherein you will mostly find the voices of the ordinary men and women who for me make the stuff of life'.[30] In interviews about *Birdsong*, Biswas has stated that her primary art-historical reference for the film was George Stubbs's painting *Shooting*

at Goodwood (1759) (*plate* 8). The painting depicts George Keppel, 3rd Earl of Albermale, shooting with his brother-in-law Henry Fox. In his provocation for 'There is no such thing as British Art', Richard Johns observes that Stubbs is one of a handful of English men who constitute the canon upheld by the National Gallery in London.[31] Thus, it is significant when addressing the global in Biswas's work that it is Stubbs, one of the canonical English painters, who forms the primary art-historical referent for *Birdsong*.

Within *Birdsong*, Biswas mobilizes the Stubbs painting both aesthetically and conceptually. When creating the film set for *Birdsong*, the artist was faithful to the colour palette used by Stubbs in *Shooting at Goodwood*. While the sitting room looks as if it is in an English country house, it was painstakingly constructed by the artist within a dilapidated room located in a 1930s house in High Wycombe. The particular dark green of the painted walls in the film, for example, was sourced by Biswas with reference to heritage catalogues to emulate the green of the landscaped eighteenth-century estate of the Stubbs painting. Within the foreground of *Shooting at Goodwood*, seen attending to the horse, there is the figure of a black servant who is thought to be either Thomas Robinson, named after the Governor of Barbados, or a footman, Jean Baptiste, who came to Goodwood from one of the French colonies. He is depicted in the painting wearing red breeches and a yellow coat, mirrored by the yellow trousers and red coat worn by the boy in the film. Biswas has spoken about her interest in the black servant, in relation to the way in which her work functions as a signifier of imperialism.[32] Within *Shooting at Goodwood*, the footman is crouched next to the horse, the head of both man and animal oriented in the direction of the shooting scene. For Biswas, however, the footman is looking beyond the group of huntsmen to a world beyond the painting.[33] Through this manifestation of her son's desires – the absurd placement of a horse in a sitting room – Biswas liberates the man from his position of servitude. So, too, the horse – itself a signifier of the British empire (an Arabian stallion was first brought to Britain by King James in 1616) – is released from the position of service. Thus a painting drawn from the canon of British art is reinterpreted by Biswas in order to create a synaptic visualization through which the desires of a black man from the eighteenth century are brought into conversation with the wish-fulfilment of the artist's son, made manifest through an act of maternal love.

Complex Temporalities

While Biswas's work makes visible the politics of representation that persist in visions and narratives past and present, her work also attends to the artistic medium itself. In the case of *Birdsong*, the work is particularly about what film can do to time. In the opening shot of the film showing the spinning paper horse, references to Eadweard Muybridge's early automatic electro-photographs of a 'horse in motion' and its prefiguring of cinema, seems particularly pertinent. In her reading of *Birdsong*, Laura Mulvey states that 'the materialisation of wish-fulfilment and fantasy has long standing associations with the cinema, suspended as it is, somewhere between magic and reality'.[34] In relation to this, she conceptualizes a history of cinema that has sought to explore the 'complex temporality' in which cinema is caught up, but which it usually seeks to conceal.[35] However, within Biswas's work, 'complex temporality' is made manifest in relation to her experience and vision of the world. As I stated earlier, in my reading of *Kali*, the artist has spoken about the effect of travelling back to the place where she was born, a journey which was an act of travel across both space and time, to a homeland that was at once familiar and unfamiliar. Indeed, when building the set for the film – sourcing the furnishings and the objects, each of which was carefully selected and placed – Biswas has said she wanted the film to look like

a grandparent's house that belonged to both this world and another.[36] Propelled by her own physical journeys, the artist uses the manipulative possibilities of film to capture the disorienting temporal experience of leaving her childhood home – the home of her grandparents – and encountering a new place for the first time. The film operates synaptically, by bridging between the states of fantasy and reality, between past and present and between proximity and distance. The horse, for example, is both materially present and static within the sitting room but might also be read as a signifier of flight and freedom. The furnishings in the room evoke other times and other places, but the presence of the artist's son, surrounded by contemporary books and toys, locates him in the present. Mulvey argues that film is connected to both movement and stillness: in its proximity to the photographic image, it is linked to preservation, to the suspension of reality.[37] In *Birdsong*, this stasis is captured by the materialization of a young boy's greatest desires, as the horse stands unnaturally still, freezing this moment in time. But this is not a photograph and as the film moves on, the horse moves, the image fades and the origami horse returns, turning on and on. In this play between stasis and movement, *Birdsong* constructs a bridge between different temporal states: the wish-fulfilment of her son creates a momentary intervention into the space of the real, in which time stands still. This play with time also relates to the artist's personal experience of displacement and the half-remembered images of Biswas's early childhood home, thousands of miles away from this evocation of a British country house. Thus, as another example of the synaptic, the playful imaginings of the artist's own son are brought into relation with the artist's own yearning for a lost homeland.

Conclusion

The art of Sutapa Biswas offers a rich resource through which to think the global. Within her work, she shows how the global should not be understood as conflating different cultural experiences into a single, unified whole but rather in terms of the potential to create spaces that allow an encounter between different worlds: this is the visualization of the synaptic. Biswas's work is aesthetically beguiling and poetic but, in bridging past and present, the grand narratives of painting and the language of the everyday, it also steers clear of sentimentality or nostalgia. In *Birdsong*, a derelict Art Deco house is transformed, through a gesture of artistic creativity and childhood imagination, into a space evocative of both absence and presence in which the wish-fulfilment of the artist's own son, the magical act of placing a horse in the living room, is actualized, rendering the world of the real insecure. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes the ways in which the photograph produces desire. This desire, he argues, is neither oneiric (as in to dream) nor empirical (to literally seek the enactment of a new reality), but fantasmatic, the meaning of which is to 'bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back somewhere inside myself'.[38] In Biswas's work, this sense of desire is given form in relation to her argument, cited at the beginning of this article, that we are still 'in the colonial'.[39] In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes that:

> As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world – that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions. He who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me.[40]

In speaking about *Birdsong*, Biswas has referenced Fanon's central question, which is 'what does man [or woman] want?' In her visual reworking of Stubbs's *Shooting at Goodwood* through *Birdsong* she focuses on the expression of the black servant, a colonial subject displaced from his homeland. In the expression of the man, looking beyond what she describes as the space of the master–slave relationship, she has stated that Stubbs saw something in him that relates to questions of desire and humanity. This desire is figured within her work through the wish-fulfilment of her son Enzo, which signifies bringing the subjectivity of Stubbs's depicted servant into dialogue with Biswas's lived experience through a nexus of colonial, imperial relations.

In *Kali*, absence also becomes presence, but here Biswas's synaptic act was to transform the absences in cultural education into a presence, bringing into the British university art school system alternative representations of women drawn from Hindu iconographic culture in order to challenge and interrogate the Eurocentrism of feminist discourse within the academy, as well as making visible race and class as axes of oppression. Thus, rather than finding in Biswas's work a celebration of the global, as such, we can read it as enacting a synapse, a meeting of worlds, through which our entangled and mutually implicated human relations are brought into view. Sometimes this creates a space for connections between different perspectives, artforms, narratives and cultures; at others, it creates rupture and unfamiliarity, envisioning what D'Souza has articulated as 'the productive value of discord'.[41] Biswas's work, therefore, can be read as creating synaptic visualizations, producing images in which the interplay of memory, desire and reality can be given form as a vehicle for social transformation.

Notes

1 Stuart Hall, 'Museums of Modern Art and the End of History', in *Modernity and Difference (Annotations 6): Stuart Hall and Sarah Maharaj*, ed. Sarah Campbell and Gilane Tawadros, London, 2001, 8–23.

2 In writing this article I am indebted to an unpublished paper presented by Sutapa Biswas at a conference I co-organized entitled 'A Feminist Space at Leeds: Looking Back to Think Forwards', which took place in the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds on 16 and 17 December 2017. The event brought together artists and scholars who have been involved in the feminist project sustained by Professor Griselda Pollock over forty years.

3 Biswas's work was one focus of the Migratory Aesthetics' conference, convened as the output of a research collaboration between Professor Mieke Bal at the University of Amsterdam and Professor Griselda Pollock and the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History at the University of Leeds in 2005–6 which sought to explore the aesthetic, as well as political, dimension of migration histories.

4 Sutapa Biswas, Artist's Statement for the *Synapse* exhibition, the Photographers' Gallery, London and Leeds City Art Gallery, 1992–93.

5 David Chandler and Nigel Walsh, 'Foreword' in *Synapse: New Photographic Work by Sutapa Biswas*, ed. David Chandler and Nigel Walsh, London and Leeds, 1992, 3.

6 Sutapa Biswas, Artist's Statement, <https://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/lumen> [accessed 30 January 2021].

7 Aruna D'Souza, 'Introduction', in *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, ed. Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza, New Haven and London, 2011, vii–xxiii (xvii).

8 In her book *Differencing the Canon*, Griselda Pollock retraces the historical threads of Laure as part of her feminist intervention to address the repression of women within art history – Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, London, 1999. Another important corrective to the overlooked figure of Laure was the recent exhibition 'Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse' held at the Musee D'Orsay (26 March–31 July 2019).

9 The figure of Laure has been addressed variously by art-historical scholars since the publication of T. J. Clark's work. See, for example, the final chapter in Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*; and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, 'Still Thinking about Olympia's Maid', *Art Bulletin*, 97, 2015, 430–451.

10 In a video made about this painting, Biswas points out that through making the work she learned that nineteenth-century representations of Kali often depicted the severed heads looking like British colonialists – 'Housewives with Steak-Knives – Sutapa Biswas', British Museum <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=192968895739956> [accessed 30 January 2020].

11 For more on this see Hazel V. Carby's important essay, 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in *Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1980s Britain*, London, 1982, 212–235.

12 See bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, 1981.

13 Gilane Tawadros, 'Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, Chicago and London, 1996, 240–264, 256.

14 Tawadros, 'Beyond the Boundary', 256.

15 Moira Roth, 'Reading Between the Lines', in *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell, Manchester, 1995, 31–43, 37.

16 This exhibition recognized the failure of both the black arts movement and the feminist art movement in Britain to make sufficient space for the work of black and Asian artists in Britain. The work of Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan and Maud Sulter in *The Thin Black Line* is significant because, as Himid has argued, it 'repositioned the black female presence from the margins to the centre of debates about representations and art-making' – Lubaina Himid, curatorial statement, *Thin Black Line(s)*, Tate Britain, 2011 <http://lubainahimid.uk/portfolio/thin-black-lines/> [accessed 30 January 2020].

17 Biswas made two versions of this film – the one I have chosen to write about, which is 25 minutes and 28 seconds, which was shown at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in 1985, and a longer one, which is 36 minutes and 18 seconds, which is informally identified by Biswas as *Kali/Raw*.

18 Eva Bentcheva, 'Who Belongs in the New Art History? Exploring Cultural Boundaries in Sutapa Biswas' Performance Artwork *Kali*', *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, 6, 2014, 3–26, 13.
19 Bentcheva,'Who Belongs in the New Art History?', 13.
20 Sutapa Biswas, unpublished interview with the author, 15 August 2017.
21 Griselda Pollock, 'Tracing Figures of Presence: Naming Ciphers of Absence, Feminism, Imperialism and Postmodernity: The Work of Sutapa Biswas', in *Sutapa Biswas*, ed. Sarah Campbell, London, 2004, 22–41, 26.
22 Pollock, 'Tracing Figures of Presence', 24.
23 See, for example, Badal Sarkar's anti-establishment 'Third Theatre', through which he took experimental plays out of the theatre and onto the street.
24 Pollock, 'Tracing Figures of Presence', 30.
25 Pratibha Parmar, 'Hateful Contraries: Media Images of Asian Women', *Ten 8*, 16, 1984, 71–78, 75.
26 Parmar, 'Hateful Contraries', 76.
27 Stephanie Snyder, 'An Exchange: In Conversation with Stuapa Biswas', *Sutapa Biswas*, ed. Sarah Campbell, 8–19, 10.
28 Biswas has stated that birds were the subject of the last conversation she had with her father before he died, and that birdsong was the first sound she heard afterwards.
29 Snyder, 'An Exchange: In Conversation with Sutapa Biswas', 10.
30 Sutapa Biswas, unpublished paper for the conference, 'A Feminist Space at Leeds', 15–17 December 2017.
31 Richard Johns, 'There's No Such Thing as British Art', *British Art Studies*, 1, https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/conversation.
32 Sutapa Biswas, 'Artist's Statement', in *Sutapa Biswas*, ed. Sarah Campbell, 20–21, 21.
33 Jean Wainwright, 'Sutapa Biswas', *Luxonline*, <https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/sutapa_biswas/essay(4).html> [accessed 6 December 2019].
34 Laura Mulvey, 'Birdsong', in *Sutapa Biswas*, ed. Sarah Campbell, 48–57, 53.
35 Mulvey, 'Birdsong', 48.
36 Snyder, 'An Exchange: In Conversation with Sutapa Biswas', 9.
37 Mulvey, 'Birdsong', 52.
38 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, 1993 (first published 1980), 40.
39 Biswas, unpublished paper for the conference, 'A Feminist Space at Leeds', 15–17 December 2017.
40 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London, 1986, 218.
41 D'Souza, 'Introduction', xvii.