

It is my pleasure this evening to say a few words in praise of the “High Priestess of Whitechapel”, the awesome – truly awesome – title by which Iwona Blazwick is known to many of us. Whether as director of the Whitechapel since 2001, or as head of exhibitions at Tate Modern, or as director of exhibitions at the ICA, Iwona has been a major force in the art world. In her nearly forty years as curator and director, and also as critic and lecturer, she has helped to shape this world – our world – in many different ways.

Iwona has identified and supported many of the most celebrated artists of our time. As a curator at the ICA, she “discovered” Damien Hirst. She gave Sarah Lucas, Franz West and countless others – including several members of the Royal Academy – their first major shows in the UK. She has also reacquainted us with artists who have been forgotten or marginalised. And she has fought to close the gender gap: the Whitechapel now shows more female artists than any other gallery in London, and the work of these artists is celebrated by the Max Mara Art Prize, the pre-eminent art prize for women, which she launched.

But Iwona has not only provided a platform for artists; she has redefined the very context for art, continually questioning how we look at and interpret it. Most famous, perhaps, is her highly influential rehang of the Tate Modern Collection in 2000, which rejected chronology and arranged the entire collection by theme. As director of the Whitechapel since 2001 she has staged highly original and intelligent exhibitions such as *Adventures of the Black Square*, which traced the history of geometric abstraction and its development outside the obvious European and North American centres, or *Electronic Superhighway*, the first to explore the impact of computers and the internet on art today. Such shows illustrate her observation that “the story of art, as we’ve known it and taught it and presented it, is only one story, and there are many others.” Iwona’s larger project of broadening and complicating the art canon reaches beyond the exhibition space. The remarkable “Documents” series devoted to critical theory, initiated by her and published by the Whitechapel, have extended its influence globally, while at the same time the Gallery has engaged with local secondary schools and established community projects with, for example, Bangladeshi and Somali women.

Iwona has also been a smart cultural entrepreneur. Her robust pragmatism coupled with her intuitive understanding of emerging tendencies in art and culture have generated sorely needed income for the Whitechapel Gallery. She oversaw a major expansion of the Gallery – during the recession – that doubled its space. This new space does not merely provide more room for art and for visitors. It has enabled the Whitechapel to demonstrate in exhibitions of different scales and character the extraordinary diversity of contemporary art. In this way Iwona's intelligence, boldness and energy have not only benefited the Whitechapel. London now stands – thanks in large part to her – at the very centre of the contemporary art scene.