

In Conversation with Axel Rüger

Louisa Stuart-Smith

Axel Rüger is Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts. He is a former Director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Mesdag Collection in The Hague. He was educated at Cambridge as well as in Germany and Canada, and has written books on Chinese and Japanese art.

We live and die by our programme. If we don't have exhibitions we may as well close.

— Axel Rüger

Axel Rüger, former Director of the Van Gogh Museum, joined the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) as the CEO in 2019. What should have been a celebratory period for the RA and a glorious time to be the man in charge, just after the RA's 250th Anniversary in 2018, quickly descended into mayhem as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold early last year. For the cultural sector, the pandemic has been damning. Museums, galleries, theatres, and concert halls alike have had to adapt swiftly to spare themselves from financial collapse. The RA 'tries to generate money normally with exhibitions that appeal to a broad public', and yet it is an 'eternal struggle to make money', says Rüger. The greatest public health crisis of our lifetimes has greatly worsened matters for museums. National and international travel restrictions have severely curtailed visitor numbers and, as Rüger explains, there is 'not an exhibition in the world that can really make money with 20 percent of its visitors'. In response, the RA has had to reduce costs of numerous kinds, and it has been forced to limit the ambition of the exhibitions and events that would draw the public back to the halls of Burlington House. Travel restrictions have also prevented some paintings from being borrowed, such as for the Francis Bacon exhibition (May 2021), which has consequently had to be scaled back. Rüger has been forced to make decisions about 'how long it is viable' to keep exhibitions open. 'We are driven by the exhibitions programme', he says, and the challenge will be to 'retain integrity' as the RA begins to 'grow again'.

Fortunately, Rüger assures me that donations to the RA have not changed much during the pandemic. '[M]any loyal supporters have remained loyal and donated', although some have understandably had to say, 'not right now'. Indeed, 'friends have been remarkably loyal', and the RA is 'still in a lucky position from donors'. Despite these positive lifelines, Rüger predicts, in our interview in October 2020, that the RA will lose £12 million in 2020. The RA does not have a 'regular grant or funding agreement with the government' but 'has made use of the job retention scheme'. Many staff have been furloughed to

cover some of the running costs of the institution while it waits for renewed revenue from exhibitions. Rüger tells me how the RA is 'proud of its independence' but had 'applied to the cultural recovery fund where you could apply for up to £3 million as a one-off grant: help in the short term [to address the current] cash calamity'. The RA's application has since been successful.

Moving to discuss the exhibitions themselves, Rüger explains that they are 'always planned several years out'. Nonetheless, current circumstances are prolonging the wait for some exhibitions which have had to be 'shunted along for next year and so on', and two have been cancelled entirely. Rüger is still hoping to present seven exhibitions in the next year, 'but none of them is really new. They have been on the cards for some time.' Regarding whether any upcoming exhibitions will be inspired by the pandemic, Rüger feels strongly that 'it is too soon ... We need to distil what is good art from the pandemic', he says, adding that the RA is 'here to offer a place of aesthetic enjoyment, reflection, and solace. We are too deep into it. We will need a little bit of time and some clear water after the pandemic. What will that world look like? Some people think we need to change fundamentally.' On whether art produced from the pandemic will reflect health, death, and dying, Rüger is optimistic that it will 'be more about how we live in our world'. 'One of the worst things', says Rüger, is that, during the pandemic, 'we were banned from doing ... what we as a cultural society do best: providing a community, inspiration, and beauty'. So, he has no current plans to devise exhibitions about the pandemic. Until society has had enough time to heal, the RA will focus on its opportunity to provide a space for escapism.

The RA is, however, certainly moving with current societal waves. Rüger asserts that the RA is 'trying to be more inclusive' and that it 'wants to try harder'. He adds that diversity 'needs to be reflected by who we are' with a 'more diverse body of Royal Academicians and amongst our staff. We need to think and get more perspectives.' Taking place in winter for the first time, last year's Summer Exhibition demonstrated the RA's active efforts to be inclusive and to showcase artists from a broad range of backgrounds. Rüger highlights the rooms curated by Isaac Julien CBE of his own work. I ask Rüger what he thinks are the most effective ways in which

we can integrate the study and understanding of global art in the Western canon of the history of art. His response is thoughtfully engaged with the Decolonise Art History movement. 'Northern Europe', he says, 'has a great history of museums and galleries. We in Europe and particularly Northern Europe, because of our colonial past, have a certain paternalistic attitude.' Looking forwards, Rürger is keen to increase diversity at the RA. 'We need young art historians to go into the field who are from different backgrounds, to look at art with different perspectives. As a German, I have a different experience from my British colleagues, but as a middle-aged white man I can only be open-minded, [and] not bring those views.'

Our conversation then turns to discussion of the RA's relationship with politics more broadly. Rürger has a clear stance on the institution's position. He asserts that 'the role of the Academy should be a platform for allowing debate and exchange, rather than taking a firm stance. Different opinions should be expressed through the art on the walls.' In other words, Rürger's vision for the RA is that the art speaks for itself and encourages viewers to contemplate political ideas and debates. He tells me that it would be futile to try to impose a political stance on the institution, because 'as a group of artists, [the Academicians] will never agree on anything at the RA. The only area where I can see the Academy taking a firmer stance is art education and art in the curriculum.' Rürger concludes, on this matter, that the role of the museum is multi-purpose, with a responsibility to provide a space where people can disconnect and enjoy the beauty of art, as well as contemplate current affairs. Rürger highlights the power of the museum, especially during the pandemic, and especially of artists, whom he praises for being able to 'help us express emotions that we may not be able to express ourselves.'

Our interview comes to an end with Rürger revealing his vision for the RA in the coming years. I ask him if he intends to push the RA in a more modern direction, and what genres of exhibition he thinks London audiences will gravitate towards when they open again. He asserts, 'I think the Academy should definitely be contemporary. We have living artists after all.' Acknowledging his audiences, he continues: '[P]eople, as they become older, tend to be more conservative. But we also have the schools.' There is evidently a fine balance to be struck between appealing to both the RA's younger and older demographics. Rürger is sensitive to this, and he explains that the large-scale exhibitions that the RA produces do not make the institution the place for 'super cutting-edge art making ... We have a certain status and a certain position. We might want to be a bit more experimental, but that is more for places like the Serpentine.'

During the first ten months of the pandemic, the country's primary focus was on science, the development of vaccines, and economic survival. However, as we pass the first anniversary since the pandemic began, society is craving a return of culture and a revival of the arts. The RA reopens on 18 May 2021, with an array of exciting new exhibitions featuring David Hockney, Michael Armitage, Tracey Emin, and Edvard Munch.

Louisa Stuart-Smith is a third-year undergraduate in History of Art at Trinity College, Cambridge, interested in Italian medieval and early Renaissance art and architecture. In 2021 she will begin an MPhil in Italian medieval afterlife images. She became the Art Section Editor at *CJLPA* in summer 2020, and integrates her study of History of Art with performing in and directing historically inspired operas and plays.
