

COURTAULD INSTITUTE

The Manton Centre for British Art

Alan Bowness and Postwar Art

Thursday 22 Jan 2026, 15.00–18.30



The Manton Centre for British Art is pleased to present a symposium on Alan Bowness's invaluable contribution to post-war art in Britain.

The landscapes of culture in Britain changed dramatically in the postwar period, powered by the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946. Contemporary art moved centre stage, regional collections and exhibitions were encouraged, while Art History expanded as a discipline with the new universities in the 1960s. Alan Bowness was instrumental in many of these transformations. He described himself as “art historian, teacher and administrator”.

Bowness was an influential teacher at the Courtauld from 1957 to 1980, and his students peopled the new Art History Departments. Best known as Director of the Tate from 1980-1988, his early experience as Regional Art Officer for the Arts Council convinced him that works of art should be accessible to a broad public and not just in London. This led to the creation of Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives; a new wing at Millbank; and the launch of the Turner Prize. Bowness developed an astonishing number of institutions, museums, archives and collections outside London, and improved the Tate's permanent collection. Throughout his career Alan Bowness made exhibitions and wrote about art as a scholarly art historian, a critic, and a supporter of contemporary art.

On the publication of a collection of his writings, this symposium will take the form of conversations between people who worked with Alan Bowness in different contexts – exhibitions, teaching, museums, acquisitions, publications. The event will address four themes from his work, with contributions from leading art historians, museum curators, critics and artists.

This event is organised by Professor Steve Edwards, Manton Professor of British Art and Director of the Manton Centre for British Art, The Courtauld.

Image: Alan Bowness in his Courtauld office, December 1968. Photograph by Erhard Wehrmann.

Programme

15.00–15.10 **Welcome, introduction** Mark Hallett, Dawn Ades

15.10–16.00 **Session 1: Museums and Patronage**

*Richard Calvocoressi, Richard Deacon, Richard Morphet,
Led by Richard Calvocoressi*

This session has a particular focus on the Tate under Alan Bowness's directorship (1980-88), including acquisitions for the collection, both historic and contemporary (for example the work of Richard Deacon); establishment of the Turner Prize; museum expansions in this period - opening of the Clore Gallery and of Tate Liverpool; laying the foundations for Tate St Ives. It will also refer to the setting up of the Barbara Hepworth Museum, St Ives, in 1976; and also of the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 1993, when Bowness was director of the Henry Moore Foundation, as well as his involvement with the creation of The Hepworth Wakefield (opened 2011).

16.00–16.30 **Session 2: Teaching at the Courtauld, 1957-79.**

Chris Green with Dawn Ades

In this session, Chris Green, in conversation with Dawn Ades, reflects on his memories of Alan Bowness's research supervision, how he shaped the teaching and research done at the Courtauld between the mid-1960s and 1980, and how he ran the 'Modern Department'.

16.30–17.00 **Tea Break**

17.00–17.55 **Session 3: Alan Bowness's Writings on Art**

*Richard Cork, James Finch, Rachel Rose Smith, MaryAnne Stevens,
Chaired by Dawn Ades*

Alan Bowness was a prolific writer on both historic and modern art, publishing in a range of settings from magazines and newspapers to scholarly journals. The contributions to this session will consider Bowness' writings on 19th century French art, as well as the artists of his own generation which for whom he was such an eloquent advocate.

17.55–18.30 **Session 4: Exhibitions and Curating**

Henry Meyric Hughes, Sarah Wilson, chaired by Richard Calvocoressi

This session will discuss Bowness's role in exhibitions abroad, such as 'Recent British Painting (Stuyvesant)' (1974), and 'Un siècle de sculpture anglaise' (1996), both in Paris; and his involvement in successive British Pavilions at the Venice Biennale (1960s-80s), drawing on Henry Meyric Hughes's personal experience of these. It will also touch on the '54:64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade' exhibition at the Tate (1964) for its inclusion of numerous French and US artists.

18.30 **Drinks Reception**

Speakers

Dawn Ades CBE, FBA: Professor Emeritus, University of Essex and editor of Bowness's selected writings

Richard Calvocoressi CBE: former Director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and of the Henry Moore Foundation

Richard Cork: art historian, critic and broadcaster

Richard Deacon CBE, RA: Sculptor and winner of the 1987 Turner Prize

James Finch: Senior Curator, Royal Academy of Arts

Chris Green FBA: Professor Emeritus, Courtauld

Henry Meyric Hughes: Former Director, Visual Arts, British Council; former Director, Hayward Gallery; co-founder of Manifesta and one of its curators in 2026

Richard Morphet: Art Historian and former Keeper of the Modern Collection at Tate

Rachel Rose Smith: editor, Ben Nicholson catalogue raisonné; former Tate and Heong Gallery curator

MaryAnne Stevens: former Director of Academic Affairs at the Royal Academy of Arts; scholar, independent curator and lecturer

Sarah Wilson: Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Courtauld

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