The View From 2005: Developing the Tate Encounters Proposal

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The application to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for the research project was the result of my appointment at Tate as Cross Cultural Curator in the Adult Programmes Team of Interpretation and Education Department at Tate Britain.

One of the requirements of this new post was to create a research bid within the AHRC's strategic funding programme ''Diasporas, Migration and Identities'. The bid was seen within Tate Britain as an integral part of a wider programme aimed at broadening the gallery's ability to reflect the interests of a culturally diverse audience. Behind this programme was a deliberate, although, diffuse intention of contributing to a change of attitudes within the institution itself.

A number of distinct choices presented themselves. Research in this field, from the point of view of the museums and galleries, seemed to divide itself into specific categories - discussing issues of cultural policy, and exploring theories of art and art history. The AHRC initiative seemed to require applicants to take a deliberate step outside of the established models by focusing attention on audiences, and on a specific kind of audience. In my own experience museums and galleries had been concerned with migrant audiences, largely because migrant audiences, apart from specific and specifically targeted occasions, failed to turn up in any significant numbers. The AHRC initiative offered an opportunity to examine the interaction between museums and their audiences.

The programme of work I was already doing offered a number of clues about the area in which the project might be located. One of my first activities at Tate Britain was to host a series of lunchtime discussion forums for around twenty various activists from a migrant or ethnic minority background). These were informal and unstructured conversations where we discussed our work and our views about the institutions in which we worked. By and large these conversations confirmed my sense that the minorities' feelings of distance and alienation which had often been noted by various kinds of research into audiences were shared, almost equally, by the black and Asian people who, with varying degrees of satisfaction, actually worked in the same places. All of them located minority disaffection firmly in the practices and beliefs of the institutions.

In comparison, my conversations with academic researchers tended to start from the assumption that there was something peculiar about ethnic minority audiences which inhibited them from appreciating the riches that the museums had to offer. My (admittedly sketchy) reading in the topic left me with an impression which these conversations reinforced. Academics, and academic/museum researchers had found enormous difficulty in inventing or operating methods which allowed the 'subjects' to enter the process or establish any form of dialogue. Researchers came with questions which fixed and limited their interests. One problem was simply to do with the language academics use in addressing their topics, which inevitably silenced their 'subjects' or reduced them to incoherence. Another problem was the fact that enquiries almost

always began from the speculations of previous researchers. All too often the assumptions researchers brought to their observations were stuck in the past, or mired in stereotypes of one kind or another. I was frequently reminded of eighteenth and nineteenth century racial science, partly because of the extent to which researchers in their anxiety to frank their 'scientific' credentials focused on categorising 'subjects' into race, gender and age, while ignoring the nature and the transforming point of the migrant experience.

Part of the work associated with the Cross Cultural post which I was undertaking at the time of these discussions was a series of talks about Black British art and artists. These focused on the history and the identity of black artists in Britain and the significance of their work to British identity. One inspiring aspect of this series was the fact that a clear outline of a history which threw up a network of interests emerged from the lectures and debates around the topic. The ideas articulated by such figures as Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy seemed effectively to move the debate around the topic out of the racial margins, organising a confrontation with the direction and meaning of contemporary art.

All this seemed to focus what I was hearing from my various conversations about a research project. At every level black and Asian people were saying 'we don't want to be studied any more. We know what's wrong. The point is to do something about it.' In contrast the academics and museum researchers were saying 'we don't know enough'.

The project had to begin with the concept of a dialogue which would take place across and between disciplines as well as giving the participants a status which would empower them to express their own attitudes and beliefs in their own language. This was the origin of the provisional title 50:50. There were very few models, however, which outlined the methodology that a project like this would require. In a sense this was a relief, because it meant that we had the freedom to be more or less inventive. The paucity of previous work along these lines also allowed us the freedom to choose the areas in which we could operate, as opposed to testing exhaustively theories established in very different conditions. The problem then began to be creating an application which retained this approach, while coming within the framework of a conventional academic research project. One major difficulty was arriving at a consensus between the history of academic research and an innovative approach. The papers I wrote in the run-up to preparing the applications outline some of the difficulties.

2005 Papers

Notes on defining 'Diaspora'.

Black thinkers in Europe and the USA, since Olaudah Equiano first made the claim in the 18th century, have seen a parallel between their own experience and the Jewish history of forcible dispersion. In succeeding centuries the concept of diaspora gradually became a useful idea in the practice of black writers and artists, especially in the context of the development of Pan Africanism and Marcus Garvey's Back To Africa movement in the early twentieth century.

The term 'diaspora' encapsulated the notion of a relational network, produced by forcible dispersal and reluctant scattering. It is also based on the idea of movement, in which the characteristic motivation is being pushed outwards. Diaspora differs in its essence from the idea of exile, voluntary displacement, or long term travel. The word itself implies flight following violence or the threat of violence. Slavery, pogroms, genocide and the prospect of death by starvation all figure in the construction of diaspora. Diasporic identity therefore tends to be focused on a process of remembrance and

commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the grief of dispersal. A diaspora is, therefore, a community located in various parts of the world, but taking their identity and their focus from remembrances of events and characteristics which produced their dispersal.

So the idea of diaspora outlines a space between the obligations of one's place of residence and the pleasures and duties associated with one's place of origin, however long ago and far away. The consequence is that diasporic identity presents a consistent and irreducible challenge to notions of ethnic sameness and essential nationality. To be part of a diaspora is to maintain a balanced tension between two versions of identity, cutting across the limits and control of the nation state.

NB! While diaspora has become a short hand for such features as skin colour, religion etc, its meaning is inextricably connected with dispersal and its consequences - to talk of African nations, for instance, and black Britons as being part of a 'black diaspora', is to confuse apples and oranges and misunderstand the point of the term. The essence of diaspora is not about racial or ethnic characteristics - it is about memories reconstituted on the far side of a forcible break with a continuous past.

Notes on Cultural Capital

Taking Pierre Bourdieu as a starting point is deceptively attractive. Surprisingly none of the post-Bourdieu literature seems to have explored the question of the differences between Britain and the French management of 'culture' and national identity. In the wake of the recent 'banlieu' riots the lack of a historical perspective in applying Bourdieu's arguments about cultural capital and class barriers to Britain seems to present a glaring problem. In the circumstances many of the discussions about sociological method round this issue seem like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

The argument tells us that museums do not cater for most ordinary working class visitors and their families. The suggestion is that visitors experience art museums as a test of their cultural capital which they fail. What they learn is to devalue their own taste. Bourdieu argues that cultural institutions of various kinds conceal the arbitrariness of taste by presenting elite taste as universal; while claiming to represent universal knowledge museums actually represent the interests of a dominant patron class. (Visitor surveys confirm this picture – e.g. The Henley Centre survey (1995) NB! The term museum actually encapsulates a wide range of visitor attractions – there is evidence of a higher percentage of skilled manual visitors to industrial heritage sites for example.

On the other hand, education and access has recently (especially in the wake of Lottery funding) become an urgent issue for museums and galleries. In England, at any rate, the pursuit of display has seen fundamental changes in the last decade:

> Managing a heritage attraction is about much more than traditional museological concerns like conservation, interpretation, education, and access. It is about managing a shop, a catering operation, a wedding venue. It is about commissioning market research, choosing design agencies, project managing, buying computer systems, applying to the HLF, persuading people to join a Friends scheme, writing business plans, lobbying politicians, organising special events that bring in more money than they cost. (Geddes 2001)

The proliferation of temporary exhibitions, the increasing use of virtual displays, the policy of rehanging and new explorations of collections, are symptoms of the sector's shift to seeing itself as being in the business of attracting visitors, rather than being the

repository of objects. At the same time this new mission and its use of new technology produces elaborated didactic forms of communication, words and images which enable new and complex narratives to emerge from the traditional collections (for example the exhibition Black Europeans at the British Library).

A complex dialogue emerges. These explicit narratives and clear interpretations now clash repeatedly with 'postmodern' and aestheticised approaches to display, which privilege bricolage, pastiche, montage and quotation. Within the art museum both of these struggle with traditional notions of preserving and displaying a heritage based on traditional art history.

This last point illustrates the difficulty of taking Bourdieu or any other purely social science survey as a starting point. Art museums are no longer, if they ever were, static presentations of an unchanging elite taste. The debates and contradictions within the sector demonstrate the extent to which 'traditional beliefs' are now under constant challenge *from within*. On the other side of the coin, class is no longer a rigid marker of cultural capital. In the last two decades the relationship between audiences and museums, including art museums has begun to definitively altered by a number of factors:

(i) the politicised and politicising employment of 'culture' as a feature of debate about national identity (e.g. riots of the 80s, the GLC, Islam)

(ii) the democratising thrust of funding within this debate (e.g. the Lottery, the National Gallery and Raphael's 'Madonna of the Pinks')

(iii) the response of the sector as exemplified in marketing and PR – (e.g. posters in the tube are aimed at a public which watches TV and visits the cinema)

(iv) the impact of lottery funding campaigns (e.g. the TV programme *Restoration,* the use of TV competitions to raise awareness ; C4's public Art competition; the proliferation of public art and installations). All these factors have set out to provoke and elicit from the public at large a claim on the 'heritage', which has had an effect on the nature and the ownership of 'cultural capital'.

(v) The internal debates of the sector are in fact a mirror of new meanings for cultural capital (Stuart Hall, *Whose Heritage?* 2002) argues that African art has been dominated by the search for forms of modernity and goes on to outline the burst of creativity emerging from the ethnic minority communities. The museum sector's adoption of 'cultural diversity', seems to be a delayed recognition of these factors, driven by a demand by ethnic minorities for a curatorial practice which takes account of their presence. Hall's argument takes for granted the assumption that this process of recognition on both sides is actually the foundation of a new statement about the function and content of cultural capital.

In this sense the battleground outlined by Bourdieu's premises has shifted dramatically, but Bourdieu's work provides us with an invaluable background to the development of research and policy in the sector over the last half century. In Britain, at any rate, the status of his arguments about the articulation of class and the authority 'elite culture' is, more or less, available for challenge. On the other hand, the location of social and economic power against the concepts of cultural capital and cultural space, remains an important platform for exploring relationships between audiences and the institutional gatekeepers.

As it happens a number of disciplines have focused in a number of different ways on precisely this point. The field of urban studies provides an interesting counterpoint where influential thinkers, such as Richard Sennett and Geoff Mulgan, extended the logic of cultural space to establish a discourse about cultural planning: "an uneasy blending of social democratic principles of access sand equity underpinned by an anthropological definition of culture, and a neo-liberalism that endorses, in particular, treating the arts and cultural activities as industries. The result is a hybrid model that fosters using culture as a tool for animating the urban landscape, reviving local economies, nurturing community cultural identity, and fostering social equity"(Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Culture,* 2003).

It is possible, therefore, to read through a variety of disciplines a progressive discussion in which cultural capital reveals itself as a process, rather than as a static property which can be owned in perpetuity by a class. Cultural capital becomes, instead, part of a struggle over cultural and social territory, *between* different groups within the body of nation, which sometimes are identifiable by class formations, and sometimes not. On the other hand, the most intense expressions of this conflict are outlined by the attempts of the ethnic minorities to define and reclaim cultural capital; as an expression of their own complex identities. In this sense the museum sector has correctly identified this aspect of the debate about their nature as crucial to their prospects of laying claim to the guardianship of the nation's heritage.

Even if the sector had been slow in adopting the rhetoric of 'exclusion/inclusion' government policy was increasingly driven by a multi-disciplinary focus on notions about cultural capital and its positioning in a network of ideas about social equity. (NB! Note the sense in which the term *social* capital has become a shorthand for a range of arguments).

A characteristic statement of the new consensus is made by the influential policy researcher Richard Sandell in his paper – 'Social inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change' (*Museum and Society, 1,(1)47-48)*:

> The term 'social exclusion' has secured increasing popularity and usage since it was first coined in France during the 1970s. Since then the term has largely replaced 'poverty' in political discourse and within European social policy …Though the meanings and understandings of social exclusion have shifted through time and continue to vary from context to context, central to the concept is its multidimensional nature….. Adopted as one of the UK government's highest priorities, social exclusion has been defined by the Social Exclusion Unit, situated within the Cabinet Office, as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, poverty and family breakdown.' (DCMS 2000:7). Calls for museums to contribute to the combating of exclusion and the promotion of exclusion have therefore prompted a debate around museums' potential to not only enhance access for those groups identified as at risk of social exclusion but to play a more direct role in combating the disadvantage and discrimination which those groups experience. For some within the sector, these new roles and social responsibilities may represent and inappropriate departure from the traditional goals assigned to museums; goals that centre on the functions of preservation, display, interpretation and education. However, some within the sector ,including museums which have been individually working in this way for many years, are enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by a political agenda dominated by social inclusion and have begun to advocate more widespread adoption of inclusive values, goals and working practices. Furthermore the Heritage Lottery Fund has led a sector-wide needs

assessment which includes identification and analysis of the strategies that will be required to reposition the sector to ensure museums can deliver outcomes in relation to exclusion.

Alongside the pronouncement of new government expectations, made explicit in their policy guidance, research findings have further fuelled the debate, presenting empirical evidence of the impact of museums on disadvantage and social inequality. The emergence of this and other data is likely to further influence professional discourse and encourage debate around the social role and purpose of museums. How might the far reaching changes in museum policy, and concomitant changes in practice, now demanded by government be facilitated throughout the sector?

The crisis of evidence versus advocacy

In this context, government-based and politically driven research units, supported by studies of the culture of specific sites, and flanked by the sponsorship of Lottery funding have created a new orthodoxy. On the other side of the street, researchers from 'purer' disciplines have launched full-blooded attacks on the apparent confusion in recent policy between evidence and advocacy, and on strategies derived from government sponsored assumptions about the social impact of cultural institutions. Research within the sector itself has also begun to express a growing concern about the fact that policy has outstripped the development of a credible evidence base. A recent report for the MLA (*New Directions in Social Policy,* 2004) identifies major weaknesses in the evidence base for current policy stating that there is "[a] lack of any substantial longitudinal, comparative data on social impact/ absence of an agreed model for describing social impact/ comparative lack of research into social impact related to cultural diversity and health/mental health."

The argument is suggestive of the fact that policy has emerged from several research streams, fed by a variety of disciplines, but which continue to evade inter-disciplinary strategies (or effective co-operation). The result has been a yawning gap between the rhetoric of exclusion/inclusion and the evidence for the social impact of cultural sites on their environment. The MLA report makes the point succinctly:

> … research into the social impacts of culture will only have come of age when it is routinely included with broader research frameworks – whether it is studies of quality of life, citizenship or economic development. It is becoming clearer that culture has a major role in these issues, but a full understanding of that role cannot be achieved by studying 'culture' in isolation. The need now is to acknowledge the weaknesses in the evidence base and to move on to develop more robust methods: longer-term, more systematic, research and a more realistic appraisal of the spill-over effects of cultural investments.
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> This will involve being more explicit about the role of research vis-à-vis other sources of information, as well as greater clarity about the relative strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies. We should not expect case study-type work to diminish in this area and we are likely to see a growth in qualitative work. This is all to the good. But where claims are being made for particular effects, we should not be afraid to demand some harder evidence of these effects

Diasporas, migration and (national) identity – advocacy in the cultural field

Migrants, post-migrants and diasporic families are the subject of the most intense and sustained advocacy in the cultural sector. The social and political reasons are more or less self evident. "Evidence? What evidence?" one might ask from the viewpoint of a political strategist. "Aren't recurring riots good enough for you?"

In comparison social scientists and theorists (Young, Williams et al) have established a network of evidence and theory about class and culture which might have served as the basis of policy arguments about the social impact of Britain's cultural sites. These also might have been part of the vision informing the Sennett / Mulgan axis which drove the funding of iconic regeneration projects like the Baltic in Newcastle, the Glasgow Riverside and so on.

In any case, the argument for the social impact of cultural sites on the body of ethnic minority "new" citizens is largely an offshoot of such disciplines as postcolonial and gender studies. Advocacy in this field, therefore, has tended to spring from a network of theoretical arguments, many of them more or less unconnected with the evidence or experience of actual individuals living and working in Britain. This is a history which presents a number of problems, not least the fact that policy makers have also tended to collapse understanding of ethnic minority 'cultures' and cultural relationships into the framework of pre-conceived conclusions about class and culture. Typically, Sociology's only present answer to the problem of recent conflicts between migrants in Birmingham is to return to the idiom of 'poverty'.

Research in the cultural sector has tended to focus, either on isolated patterns of behaviour within specific ethnic minority communities, or on postcolonial speculations about the post-imperialist and 'exclusive' status of cultural sites. The area in which the 'new' citizens encounter institutions and interact with their structures has, so far, more or less evaded scholarly exploration, and in research terms is almost devoid of content. In this field advocacy is almost entirely unsupported by evidence. This may partly be a problem of methodology - the mobility of migrants within the social field can defeat attempts to isolate specific effects. Equally, the developing response of cultural sites to the political social pressures can defeat attempts to freeze relationships. Longitudinal studies over time require a more settled will than has been available, and so on. Ethnography, statistical studies, the study of social structures outside and inside the museums, management studies, et cetera have all been brought into play at one level or the other. What is clear, however, is that head counting, or detailed descriptions of ethnic minority culture, or investigations of museum culture, have not yet furnished the sector with broadly credible observations about the reciprocal meanings of a sustained encounter between 'migrant' groups and cultural sites.

Managing the crisis- my view from Tate Britain

> There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that interactions of various sorts with museums, archives or libraries can have a variety of beneficial effects on individuals. These effects are of two primary kinds: educational in the broadest possible sense, in that they effect the development of new skills, new attitudes and new awareness; and social, in that they can be linked to the formation of new relationships and connections with other people. In other words, they can contribute to the formation of human and social capital. The processes by which this takes place is complicated and it is unclear how individual capital becomes

> social capital. Perhaps more important, however, recent work in both economic and social development suggest that both are needed for the development of 'socially inclusive creative places' (Gertler 2005) (MLA)

The meaning of Tate Britain and its collection of artefacts to contemporary metropolitan London is unknowable in any definitive sense. What is more knowable is Tate Britain's sense of itself, through its direction and governance and communication. The artefacts, however much scholarship surrounds them, remain enigmatic and polysemic, capable of endless translation across cultures and generations. The meanings attributed to art objects change with scholarship and curation as well as through audience participation and response. In addition, interest in particular works of art, schools and periods, is framed within a larger 'conversation' formed by contemporary cultural media. Traditionally media's representations of British Art and art institutions has been framed by a high-low culture binary opposition. The historical collection at Tate Britain has many potential readings, and inflected meanings, each of which depend upon the relationship of the viewer(s) to the work, institution and tradition.

Tate Britain functions as a metropolitan museum. Its audience is made up from UK and overseas visitors as well as from sections of the London domicile population. How visitors negotiate their experience of the Tate is little known in any depth. How individual visitors construct meaning in relationship to artefacts and categories of artefacts is also little known in any systematic way. How any individual experiences Tate Britain and gives value to their experience will be influenced by a number of broad factors, including, familiarity with the institution or similar institutions; knowledge of art and the value placed upon art within their cultural world.

How contemporary migrants and peoples from historical diasporas relate to and value Tate Britain remains the least known or studied audience. The project will undertake systematic and in-depth studies of individual family members responses to their encounter with Tate over a three year period, thus providing a major study of visitor engagement in order to gain a greater understanding of what frames of reference, cultural tropes, values and experiences arise.

One of the questions that might be asked is what kind of contact zone does Tate Britain represent in relation to the fact of and recognition of cultural difference? How does Tate Britain recognise and respond to issues of migration, diasporas and identity contained within its historical collection?

<u>Interdisciplinary</u>

The choice of a partnership between Tate Britain and London South Bank University is strategic and meaningful. The experience that Tate Britain brings to the table is already interdisciplinary. It should be clear that, in common with the rest of the museum sector, Tate Britain's view of its role as a national institution and its responsibilities to a rapidly changing perception of national identity, is the subject of intense internal debate. There are now in place, specific programmes aimed at exploring the challenges of new definitions of cultural capital and cultural space.

At another level Tate Britain is deeply engaged with the view of the artist and with their own grip on their role as the inheritors of an art history/heritage. In this context Tate is also presently engaged through its collection and acquisitions with the historical consequences of migration, diaspora and their association with modernity. A characteristic view of the experience from the artists' side of the table can be stated like this as I have written elsewhere:

Instead of reclaiming and reconstituting historical identities, our history has delivered us into a process of reshaping, becoming a different kind of individual self; and this is a process which takes place in a sustained dialogue or conversation with all the elements which go to make up this new self. This signals the emergence of a new consciousness, springing from the time and place which contains it, and linked to various other narratives about migration, about urban experience, about tensions between nationality and citizenship.