The Self that Follows the Discipline:
Visual Cultures and the Tate Encounters Research Project

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Prologue

*My mother taught me how to work. She wasn't a lady who lunched. She took
pleasure in places most difficult to find it: washing dishes at the Saxon Inn Hotel,
thinking of her friends and their new life in England: Peter who had got his first job at
Wilders International and had worked his way up the company - the man whose
panache had earned him the envy of his contemporaries, the suspicion of his seniors
as well as the all too conspicuous trust of the white men at Wilders. The new trend in
the company had started with him – the tendency to offer a passage to England with
promises of education and unlimited advancement in the company on the return
home. That was the possibility presented by Empire. My mother knew it. Peter knew
it and so did all the others that followed: my father, whose head remained full of
working-class history but had no knowledge of the way English people worked in
their own smoky cities; Anthony, whose heart stayed full of prayer but kept little faith
in English men with their thin lips portraying their spiritual poverty; Gregory, whose
mouth was full of money, opening only to count and calculate his advantage,
especially any he could score over white men or Indians or especially Jamaicans,
which was worth double to him; Timothy, whose young loins would seek out English
women's thighs to open even as the doors to their tiny terraced houses clamped
shut. Those few men had gained the nickname, 'the tanners', famed for their love of
the shoe industry. And there they all were – young, fresh, with good prospects and
good jobs, safe, or so they thought, in the mother country.*

Introduction: intellectual accountability

How can I ask the question, 'what do you see in that picture?' or, more accurately,
'what does that image signify?' when my years of studying and training already lead
me to anticipate what the answer might be? Indeed, I might even go as far as
scoping various understandings of the term 'image' according to the various aspects
of the person to whom the question is addressed: an art student could be expected to
think in one way, a policy-maker in another, while a non-art specialist – 'the

uninitiated public' – might be expected to think on a entirely different scale. My journey around self-reflexivity in the Tate Encounters Project has forced me to recognize the subtle and not so subtle pitfalls of my expectations – expectations that allow me to think in terms of 'the initiated' and 'the uninitiated', no matter how nuanced my use of such words might be. My recognition, of the places where my habitual thinking often leads, has brought me to a not altogether comfortable place. The challenge in the present text is to address the ways in which one might account for my work and thereby render my role as a researcher more accountable, not least to those to whom my research relates.

Accountability should be taken as a watchword in my current endeavour, since, like many tools in current usage, it is given much work to do. The efficacy of the term should not be placed in doubt. For, within its scope, one can find the work of narrative and its numerous 'accounts', as well as the instrument of audit culture riddled with management and administrative 'accounting'. In making myself accountable in the ambit of a research project, I could be seen to be under-writing the more generalized claim that account-ability serves a function in the democratization of knowledge. Under the aegis of democratic knowledge much can be promised: researchers can claim to have set aside their favourite things, such as the cloak of invisibility or the shield of impartiality – devices designed to protect them from the effects of their thinking. In the current era, during which invisibility has given way to increasingly radiant transparency, we researchers are called to become more explicit about our own motives, to reveal more of our predilections, to confess our artistic indiscretions, and even to hint at our intellectual promiscuities.

How should one approach the task of writing a text through which one could leave traces of an audit trail? What terminology could best encapsulate the evidential drive increasingly necessary to prove ones credentials of democratic accountability? Even the least ambitious writer of detective fiction must be aware that, if an investigation is to seem convincing, compelling even, something about the investigator must be revealed – a character flaw, a failed relationship, a near fatal addiction. I could write of the dizzying scale of my intellectual ambition, the numerous relationships, which were bound to founder, my compulsion to work, my addiction to art bordering on scopophilia. In giving an account of myself, however, I must remember that detective fiction is not autobiography and autobiography is even further from fiction. And what, one could ask, does either have to do with research? In response, I return to 'account'. What is needed is an account of the disciplines out of which I have come:

how do they affect the questions that I ask? How do they condition the knowledge that I produce? In what ways do they inform my objects of study? Such questions embrace the institutional networks and inter-personal connections that I build and those in which I seek to participate: with whom does it become possible to affiliate through such networks and connections? What kinds of affiliations are made possible, even likely? How do such affiliations shape the form, language and tone of the issues I raise? The scope of the questions posed above is broad. No doubt, they could encompass socioeconomic issues, including class, race, nationality, sexuality, and gender, alongside other inflections that mark social exchange.

In the passages that follow, I want to focus on the inter-disciplinary field through which I operate – principally Visual Cultures. I want to address the ways in which my engagement with Visual Cultures informs my understanding of the objects of knowledge and the modalities of exchange that take shape within the Tate Encounters Research Project. Such efforts will, by necessity, border on matters concerning my subject-position or, more broadly, the ways in which I see myself. Questions of racialization, sexualization, genderization and social classification clearly emerge in that regard. I hope, though, to use such issues so that they can inflect my discussion productively – devices to push the openings in my arguments a little more ajar rather than to force them shut.

Visual Cultures and the Roving Eye

I would like to open the present discussion with reference to my writing, which appeared in a previous [E]dition, which made reference to the value of Visual Cultures in delivering conceptual tools with which to analyse the varied experiences[i] of transmigration. For present purposes, suffice to say that receiving ones training against the backdrop of Visual Cultures offers not only conceptual tools but also fundamentally affects the way in which one apprehends objects of visual attention. My PhD in Art History was supervised in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College at the beginning of the present Millennium. Professor Irit Rogoff, an international name in the field, sat alongside Dr Gavin Butt as my co-supervisor. The work of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths could be seen as initiating a series of epistemological departures. We sought to move away from the established disciplines of art history/museology and the conventions that (over)determined what

could constitute an object of visual knowledge and, by implication, what should constitute an object of visual study within such frameworks.

In the intellectual milieu fostered by Goldsmiths College, issues such as artistic tradition, cultural authority and political consensus were set aside as questions not worth the froth on a mocha in the college café (an under-rated onsite venue called 'Loafers', through which many an illustrious name in international contemporary art was forced to pass). What was at stake in those caffeine-fuelled debates (things were always 'at stake' at Goldsmiths in those days) was not sideline issues, such as who had cultural authority and who did not, but rather key questions, for example: what were the conditions through which cultural authority had become possible? How had such conditions changed? What role had art practice played in the transformation of such conditions? Which conditions would allow another formulation of cultural exchange? Under what terms might such conditions be recognized?

Against the backdrop of debates about culture and its conditions, social movements and cultural activism (radical, liberal and reactionary), political considerations took up more space than connoisseurial preoccupations such as period/medium/form or artist/school/nation. Indeed, our preoccupations with conditions and activism famously left the art object itself out in the cold. Our thinking left us open to lampooning, which one might judge as somewhat unfair (although all lampooning is arguably unfair). My take on art objects while I was at Goldsmiths, for instance, could be summed up in the following dialogue:

Q: What is it?
A: Who cares?
Q: Where was it made?
A: Does that matter?
Q: Who made it?
A: For heaven's sake, why are you so obsessed with personality, these days?

What I reveal, in positing such a dialogue, are not the nuances of the field but rather my difficulties in trying to inhabit it. In particular, my attachment to the experience of looking at art was difficult to set aside. My joy in gazing at egg tempera, the pleasure I took in alabaster, which I never dared but always dreamed of stroking, was carefully suppressed through the cool, clear anaesthesis that prepared one for effective critical engagement. After recovering from having art objects surgically removed from my

conscious-ness, I eventually became preoccupied with the 'art event'. For my definition of 'event', I drew on the work of Jacques Derrida, making use of his definition of event as a unique, "irreplaceable and unrepeatable empirical particular."[ii] What did a given art event mean to particular persons in specific contexts? What did art events enable them to say or do? How did those persons understand their relation to the art event as well as the conditions through which they engaged with it? How far did such persons see the art event as related to the emergence of their own sense of agency?

Alongside the precise definition of 'event' afforded by Derrida's discussion, a definition of 'art' was more difficult to finesse. Suffice to say that somewhere along the line, 'art' was seen as discursively produced through networks of art institutions, makers, curators, agents, dealers, critics, collectors, academics and connoisseurs. The role of the artwork, the 'art's work' as we liked to say, was to insert itself in any given discursive formation and produce a lacuna, a caesura, a rest, a gap – something of a space of alterity that would admit something other into the discursive field. Otherness, thereby, became central to the work of art.

The privileging of alterity as the foremost function of art could be seen as part of what Fernando Cocchiarale has identified as the movement of art from the purely aesthetic field to that of the ethico-political[iii]. The break in the visual field occasioned by the artwork correlates to an ethico-political moment in which the social conditions that frame the engagement with the artwork, particularly in a museum setting, become themselves momentarily fractured.
Such claims made for the work of art or, more accurately, for the event of art spectatorship, became situated within left-leaning politics, at the close of the twentieth century, as means of radicalizing an intellectual agenda that appeared to be losing momentum in the post-identitarian era.

The transformative potential that had emerged out of new articulations of feminism, of lesbian and gay politics alongside black and minoritarian struggles was regarded as being neutralized through what was seen as a confinement of the prospects of late twentieth century political projects, such as multiculturalism.[iv] In London, the abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC) and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and the consequent curtailing of their programmes was positioned alongside Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1985), which hampered pluralized approaches to sexual education in schools. Cultural commentators, such

as Kobena Mercer, criticised such confinement in terms of a drift towards 'diversity instead of difference'[v]. Through such moves the radical alterity promised through difference was consistently refused. The affirmation of alterity in the act of art spectatorship was seen, conversely, as a means sustaining an engagement with radical politics in an era when such radicality was becoming diffuse.

'What is otherness for?' was a question that I learned to ask. 'What's at stake?' What did the fracturing of social conditions facilitated through an encounter with an artwork make possible that had not been possible before? My concerns centred on the way in which marginalized subjects took up cultural agency. The resolution of such concerns proved to revolve around issues of the social, of the inter-subjective. How might things be done differently? How might our social world with its exclusions and hierarchies be built on a different basis? The event of the encounter with art's work seemed to me to offer the opportunity to glimpse how things might be otherwise.

In one sense, I saw an opportunity to envision a different kind of living, a sociability that refused the rigid demarcations of life in other social institutions – family; the workplace; the school; the college; the hospital. Viewed in more grandiose terms, one could seize the chance to step closer to broader social change. For, why should social upheaval not begin in the hallowed halls of the museums and galleries? Such an overburdening of the possibilities of the encounter with artwork can be seen as an alibi for the real work of agitating for social change. T.J. Clark's remarks, in his text, The Sight of Death (2006), remind me of that fact. Clark wrote about the way in which he used his engagement with images to emblematize his ethical and political struggles:

> …inevitably…I shall call on my pictures to do too much
> work – to stand for an ethics and politics I find I can state
> only by means of them.[vi]

In a similar way to Clark, I recognize the possibility of an ethical and political elaboration in the encounter with artwork. Somehow, though, perhaps in a generational shift, I feel a slippage in which such an encounter becomes a stand-in, a substitute or, at best, only a proxy for 'real ethics' and 'real politics'.

The suspicion I have that encounters with artworks might simply act as ethico-political proxies emerged out of my work at the fringes of cultural struggles in Britain in the late 1980s. My training as a curator was supervised in Birmingham by figures associated with the British Black Arts Movement, such as Marlene Smith and Sonia

Boyce. Although that training took place years before I studied at Goldsmiths for a PhD, the discussions and fraught activity laid the ground for such endeavours. Throughout it all, I nurtured the belief in the radical potential of looking at art. Museums could act as a battleground as much as the high streets of Handsworth, Brixton and Toxteth had in the years preceding my move to Birmingham for training.

My views proclaiming a radical agenda for museums stood in contradistinction to what I saw as liberalizing 'educational' approaches to an engagement with art. Against the background of late Thatcherism, there had been moves to neutralize social dissent – moves that culminated in the calls made by Mrs Thatcher's successor, John Major, for a 'Nation at ease with itself'. I dismissed such calls as an attempt to co-opt art and broader cultural practice into the twin drives of neo-liberal socio-political economics – bourgeoisification and marketization. Just as the lower middle-classes and broader working classes had been invited to participate in the expansion of international finance capital through the purchasing of shares in newly privatized state monopolies (British Gas, British Telecom, etc.), the nation could see itself at ease with all classes and all races strolling through the hallowed halls of the National Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and, of course, the Tate Gallery.

Tate Modern, inaugurated under John Major's administration but opened under the aegis of Tony Blair's New Labour project, failed, in my somewhat naïve view to position itself in the best way to exploit its radical potential. Rather, Tate Modern, at best, provided a strong example of the social democratization of national institutions under Blair. The Unilever commissions, exhibited in Tate Modern's celebrated Turbine Hall, provided an example par excellence of the Blairite phenomenon: Olafur Elliasson's work (title-date) bore witness to friends, families, lovers occupying the Turbine Hall to gaze at themselves in the artwork's ceiling mirror, to bathe in its phantom sunlight, to pace up and down, taking in its ambience. Rarely has museum space been so variously and spontaneously inhabited. Such events became emblematic of a new relationship forged between a cultural institution and its publics. How far that relationship enabled viewers to enact processes of self-transformation remained unresolved in my mind. The unanswered question for me concerned what the new possibilities of cultural agency offered to viewers beyond the invitation to take part in a picnic on bankside.

If the art museum at the Millennium collapsed culture into leisure in an effortless move, emphasizing art's potential for social recreation and new forms of interaction, it

also point-blank refused the possibilities of political transformation. It did so through its replication of the spectacular dynamics associated with the wider political sphere. To explain what I mean here, I return to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall to Anish Kapoor's mammoth sculpture, 'Marsyas', which spanned close to the entire length of the space. The siting and scale of the work generated a spectacular modality that allowed viewers to do little else than gaze up at the work in stupefaction. Such a gaze suspended any criticality, leaving the viewer overwhelmed in a state that I termed 'shock and awe'. The ethico-political burden that I assigned to the work of art, particularly when sited in a public museum, could not be put into effect. Such a role was to offer a space in which an alternative spectacular dynamic could be put into place – one that would shake up conventional ways of seeing emerging from normative visualities. The museum ought to have been a place eliciting a critique of shock and awe not a re-instantiation of it.

The refusal of the art museum to pursue an agenda of radical social transformation should not have been surprising to me, given my awareness of Marxian and Foucauldian critiques, which facilitated an analysis of the workings of the museum as a neo-liberal institution with a series of disciplinary functions. Tony Bennet's work[vii], for instance, points one towards an awareness of the museum as a space that has continually been assigned the role of social acculturation, inculcating normative bourgeois values in the body of the other – whether in the form of the working-classes or, as more recently, black and other minoritarian groups. One learns how to look. One learns how to behave. One learns how to appreciate. In short, one learns how to conduct oneself as a citizen. One could supplement such an analysis by emphasizing a racial or a national or various other inflections to the museum's normalizing role – at Tate Britain one learns to conduct oneself as a British citizen. Such would have been the inevitable conclusion of my thinking.

The neat geometry of my thinking, almost as symmetrical as a sugar cube, left me somewhat ill at ease. My training underlined the consequences of such critical approaches to museums, encouraging me to remain dissatisfied with an analysis that left no room for a viewer to escape the museum's formative functions. Could there be no resistance to the museum's conforming conditions? Could the subject in the museum be constituted in no other way than as an agent of bourgeois cultural values and ultimately as no more than a minor agent of high bourgeois capital and its investments in visual art? The claims offered by post-structural analysis – pointing always to the cracks and the fissures in any structural operation – suggested that

there were ways in which subjects could use their cultural agency not simply to serve the needs of neo-liberal capital and its cultural institutions but also to serve their own ends. How those ends get articulated and how far they can disentangle themselves from the art museum's drives to (White British) bourgeois normalization is one of the key issues that I bring to our research.

One can see how my intellectual trajectory has impacted on the Tate Encounters Research Project through my engagement with what I term the project's interrogative drive. Project participants are not merely asked to act as objects of an analytical gaze but are invited to engage in a dialogue that situates them as subjects of an enquiry. It is through the sustained posing of questions that the project participants ask of the museum, as a result of their engagement with its practices, that one begins to hear the clearest articulation of their subject-positions. The agency of the participant becomes framed then not in museological terms, such as 'cultural consumer' or 'target audience', but in research terms, such as cultural inquirer and institutional interrogator. Through such means, one could say, I raise the condition of questioning to a space of ethico-political privilege.

To question an institution and its practices is seen as a means of placing the viewer's cultural agency in the service of the development of his/her subjectivity rather than in conformity with the institution's objectifying strategies. The status attributed to such questioning is not without difficulty, however. For, to constitute the conditions of a museum encounter in terms of a question – what is it that I am doing here? What do I want from this situation? Where I am? – leads, as one can see, to a questioning of the self: What is being asked of me in this situation? Who is asking? Who am I? Through such an interrogative trajectory one can recognize a post-structuralist predilection for crisis or, more precisely, crises: the crisis of institutions; the crisis of conditions; the crisis of the subject. Such crises become bearable, if not resolved, only through the constitution of the question as a ground for subject-formation.

In practical terms, participants in the Tate Encounters Research Project become co-researchers, engaged in a collective and individualized endeavour of questioning the institution and its functions. Participants become co-researchers through the sustenance of concerns, which become, over time, preoccupations and are recognized, through dialogue, as questions nested within the range of research questions that populate the project. Interventions in the gallery space are seen as interrogative engines driving questions forward by various means: through the ways

in which they are received; through the methods deployed to support or hinder their realization; through the language used to interpret the activity. 'How can I achieve what I want to achieve in this situation?' becomes the modus operandi of the project rendered explicitly in interrogative form.

Somewhere lurking behind this emphasis on the articulation of questions remains the figure of the puzzler, the detective, the riddler, who always fascinated me as a child progressing from *Batman* to *Cluedo* to *Miss Marple* and *The Name of the Rose*. In my days off from work, watching the Riddler in his green costume frustrate the smooth workings of Gotham City through his endless questions, entertained me endlessly in a distracted-teenager-on-a- Saturday-evening kind of way. As a working adult, ever mindful of the Gothic overtones of the city in which I work, I cannot ignore my own ambitions for my own enquiries to frustrate the smooth workings of the cultural institutions with which I engage. Somehow, by launching a volley of questions one might fracture the institution's casements and vitrines, which seal off the artwork's space of alterity. Such is my hope or perhaps even my fantasy.

Epilogue

My mother encouraged me not to ask too many questions at work. Only the most pressing matters should be raised, she said. My concerns, such as they were, should serve only to demonstrate my awareness of the most relevant issues. The 'how' question was one of the most relevant words in the English language, according to my mother, because the English were obsessed with know-how. It was always a question of technique, with them. How to get the right angle on something was the most important thing to work out in England, the land of the Anglo-Saxons.

I worked almost exclusively with white English people in the Picture Gallery, a company that boasted of its expertise in printing and framing photographs. When one entered the Gallery, one could see examples of our work hung on the walls, while hurried activity took place ostentatiously in the back-room of the shop. Large scale prints of evocative urban scenes, often set in Manhattan, London or Paris, filled the shop windows' large arches, which took up the front of a Georgian terrace on the corner of the Market Square. Working in the Picture Gallery was one of the first serious jobs I ever had. I realized then that you had to size up your colleagues and your bosses as much as your clientele. As my mother would say, you had to get the right angle on people, if you wanted to get something done. And things needed to be

done properly in the Picture Gallery because any mistakes we made had consequences – some of them dire.

As well as framing art photography prints, the Picture Gallery developed and printed everyday photographs on the side. Upstairs, away from the glamour of Times Square and Boulevard St Germain, we handled holiday snaps as well as photos of christenings, weddings, or first holy communions; we provided a bespoke service for every distant elderly relative at a family occasion. A maiden aunt, an in-law, a cousin, once or twice removed, might climb the stairs to the first floor of the Picture Gallery on a Saturday afternoon holding, in their minds, their own unofficial image of a family ceremony. Anniversaries and baby's first steps were among the favourites. The films we developed and the images we printed seemed to offer some kind of solace, even though they were destined to sit in the shadow of an official photographer's framed photograph on a mantelpiece, on a desk or on a sideboard, at any rate, in some hallowed corner of homes that I would never see.

The saddened look and troubled expression that would cross a face when I tried to explain away mistakes was often so heartbreaking that I couldn't bear the guilt. I never managed to mask my professional embarrassment in ways that some of my colleagues had. I ended up extending the Picture Gallery's policies on remuneration for our faults. The 'either/or' phrasing of the company's guarantees became 'both/as well as/and what's more' by the time it issued from my lips: "We'll give you your money back and we'll process your next films free and what's more...." Those words got me into so much trouble with successive managers of the Picture Gallery without protecting me from the bemused look that crossed the faces of our customers. How could it be possible to bring films to us year after year but one day be asked to return home empty-handed? It simply didn't make sense.
"I was there," people would say. "I took the photograph myself. There was nothing wrong with the camera." A searching look met my blank expression but I offered no explanation and, of course, I never asked my customers any unnecessary questions.

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[i] Dibosa, D. 'Migrations' in *Tate Encounters [E]dition* 1, October 2007, p.5.

[ii] Derrida, J., *Speech and Phenomena and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*, trans., Allison, D.B., Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973 (orig., 1967), p.50.

iii Cocchiarale, F., 'Art and Politics at the Margin of Multiculturalism' in *Transnational Correspondence, Arte & Ensaios*, Special Issue, Ferreira, G., Bueno, G., Asbury, M., and Machado, M. (eds.), Universidade Federale do Rio de Janeiro, 2007, p.121.

iv ibid., p.120.

v Mercer, K., 'Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-based Blackness' in *Third Text* 49 Winter 1999-2000, p. 57.

vi Clark, T.J., *The Sight of Death: an Experiment in Art Writing*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p.43.

vii Bennett, T., *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Routledge, London and New York, 1995.