



Tate Encounters: Black and Asian Identities, Britishness and Visual Culture

Case for Support

Fit to Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme

The proposal is for an interdisciplinary research collaboration between Tate Britain (a major national cultural institution), London South Bank University (the Social Policy and Urban Regeneration Research Institute and within it the Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group, with a reputation in the area of family studies, diasporas and migration) and Wimbledon School of Art/University of the Arts, (which brings together fine art practice and visual cultural studies).

The project will bring together individual expertise from the sociology of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, post-colonial studies, visual culture and new media studies, museum education and cross-cultural curatorial practice to conduct a participatory three year study. The proposed programme aims to engage critical curatorial practice and progressive museum educational practice in a sustained empirically based study in order to find out more about the migrant and diasporic experience of British art, as well as Tate Britain's engagement and response to that experience. The project will produce in-depth case studies of how fifty London migrant families, primarily from the African/Caribbean and Asian diasporas, encounter, read and respond to Tate Britain and the National Collection of British Art. The proposal is timely for Tate Britain as it actively renegotiates its own national identity and relationship with culturally diverse audiences.ⁱ The research proposal is founded upon a wide sharing of knowledge and the central outputs of the project are directed at the museums and galleries sector, academia and key public sector stakeholders. The research outputs will be disseminated through refereed journals, Tate workshops, an international conference, a Tate publication and a Tate display.

The project is methodologically innovative and will employ practice-led approaches in the investigation of and engagement with art-historical canonical traditions, museology and visual culture.ⁱⁱ Participants will be supported in their own documentation as research collaborators, using a structured, practice-based research model. In parallel with participant evidence, an evidence base will be established independently through interviews and group discussion with the families.

The project will recruit family participation through first year undergraduate students at LSBU, who are the first generation of their family to attend higher education in the UK. The student participants will take part in a programme consisting of sixteen dedicated sessions of four semesters, the wider families groups will be invited to special previews.

The research will generate a set of new readings of the collection and of the public realm of Tate Britain, based upon the exploration of participants' subjective and emotional responses to objects, space and place and cultural memory. The research programme will investigate whether generation and gender are significant factors in the perception and valuing of artefacts and representations. The research will explore the correspondence between the interpretative framework of the empirical case studies and wider theoretical perspectives on cultural reproduction.

Research Questions

The research questions are grouped around the developmental organisation of the programme, extending and elaborating the issues raised:

1. Identities, museums education and visual Languages

1.1 How does identity inform the position of the viewer and the conventions employed in the act of looking?

1.2 How do traditions of visual culture of migrant groups enmesh with the dominant position of the individual spectator?

1.3 How does the subjective apprehension of space and the emotional relation to place and time inform the shaping of the museum experience?

2. Concepts of Britishness, representation and identities

2.1 In what ways does the Tate collection constitute a discourse of Britishness and how does the exhibition and display programme articulate a visual imperialism in which cultural difference(s) have to be read 'against the grain'?

2.2 How does British visual culture and visual language currently frame, shape and represent diasporic/migrant experience and identity?

2.3 How are notions of cultural hybridity constructed in and by visual culture as experienced within domestic family settings?

3. Values, traditions and museums

3.1 In what ways will the cultural encounter between the institutional and work practices of Tate and the diasporic/migrant families be experienced in relationship to their everyday life and culture?

3.2 How is Tate configured, or ranked within particularised sets of 'cultural capital' by diasporic family members?

3.3 Are there generational and gendered lines of difference in the modes and tactics of interaction with the Tate and its activities and if so what are they?

4. Museums, Cultural diversity policies and practices

4.1 What factors inhibit migrant and diasporic audiences from forming meaningful and ongoing relationships with the Tate.

4.2 What factors enable meaningful and ongoing relationships and can conclusions for national museums be drawn from this?

Research Context

The research problematic centres upon the growing recognition that advocacy for greater cultural diversity within the life of museums has been primarily policy led, with the consequence that museums have developed strategies and programmes on cultural diversity without the benefit of an evidence base of how people of migrant and diasporic backgrounds value and interact with national museums and galleries.ⁱⁱⁱ There are twin consequences which flow from this state of affairs. On the one hand, museums' educational practice has adjusted to policy-led initiatives from focused upon how lack of social capital functions to exclude sections of society from participation in museum culture and consequently directed attention to educational outreach projects aimed at establishing community links with traditionally excluded groups. On the other hand, critical curatorial practice has engaged with theoretical perspectives drawn from post-colonial and visual cultural theory in producing temporary exhibitions which foreground diasporic cultural histories and experience^{iv}. Whilst there is an established body of literature examining the relationship between museums and their colonial past, in which the museum is seen to naturalise unequal power in its representations of history, there are few examples of how such perspectives have been engaged in empirical studies of audiences and collections.^v Equally, the scant statistical research on why British citizens, whose families have migrated from the African/Afro-Caribbean and Asian Diasporas, do not participate in the culture of National Museums starts from their non-attendance and so little is known of what migrant experience of specific National collections might be and what value that experience has in broader communities. The small amount of research on migrant participation in museums in the UK suggests that people of Afro-Caribbean and Asian background, are restricted in their participation through factors such as lack of time, cost, lack of interest, lack of awareness, effort, and the fear of not understanding.^{vi} While some research has been undertaken in relation to cross-generational engagement with museums and galleries (AHRC 'Exploring family visitors to art galleries and museums in the UK, Salford University 2006), this has not yet been applied beyond the existing core audiences of museums. There is also a growing literature which describes

and evaluates a range of regional museum educational projects carried out with migrant groups.^{vii}

There is a continuing tension between the educational and curatorial role of museums. The DCMS report, *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life - The Value of Museums* (2003) is centrally about the role of culture in social governance. Museums are seen to have an important role to play in social renewal and the report encourages Museum Associations to develop strategies on cultural diversity in all of their work in order to address what is perceived as the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital. The response to the report by the Museums and Libraries Association (2003), whilst endorsing the stress on cultural diversity, is also keen to point out that the role of collecting remains central to their work and needs recognition and continuing government support. The work of the Centre for Museum Studies at Leicester University, under the direction of Professor Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, has been significant in developing understandings of how museum collecting operates in relationship to the social shaping of knowledge which has led her to privilege education as the central role of museums in the 21st century. Richard Sendell, (2003), also based at Leicester, bears out the research problematic posed here that academic and professional debate upon the future shape of the museum and its funding, needs to be more anchored in and supported by sustained evidence-based research.

It should be noted that we are aware of approaches to the research focus adopted in North America and Australia, whose relationship to colonialism and their subsequent histories of migration, have led to a more overt engagement with cultural diversity.

Research Methods

The research programme is based in cultural theory and practically grounded in empirical study. There is no single point of theoretical attention to our research objectives, but rather a constellation of approaches. For example: the importance of networks and performative acts, (Latour 1999); the uncoupling of fixed boundaries of the experience of time and space (Massey 1993); the structuring of the gaze (Mirzoeff 2000, Rogoff 2003) and how cultural identity is signified (Hall 1995, Gilroy 1997). The application of such theoretical writing to studies of museums has opened up new avenues for thinking about the structural marginalization or exclusion of migrant and diasporic experience.

Whilst the project carries theoretical perspectives, it is not aiming to prove or disprove a particular theory or set of hypotheses, rather it aims to see a localised theoretical matrix emerge from the process of observation and recoding which can be subsequently read in relationship to wider theoretical perspectives. Having built an evaluative evidential base it will be subjected

to a wider discursive analysis, by each of the investigators, drawing upon their particular expertise.

The innovative aspect of the study can be seen in two aspects. First the project intends to constitute the research subjects as research collaborators by using practice-based research methodologies for the purposes of creating visual/media diaries and narratives of the Tate experience. Second, viewed another way, the project will use practice-based research methods as a learning paradigm for the structured programme the participants will experience.

The research proposes two parallel methods of establishing an evidence base. The first will involve the participant groups, the families and a group of Tate employees, in documenting their responses to the 'Tate encounter' through digital video, photography, audio and text. Participants will be provided with portable equipment and instruction in its use and they will have access to dedicated pages on a project website which they will be able to regularly upload material and edit it online. The documentation will take the form of a project diary, in which they will be able to include digital reproductions of works or parts of works, accompanying notes, interviews, written and spoken comment and reflection on directed and undirected aspects of the Tate programme and collection. The family participants will also be directed to collect supporting material consisting of selective documentation of their everyday material cultural practices, which will also be uploaded to the website which will act as a kind of digital 'gallery'. The website will have technical facilitation for the duration of the project. The Digital Research Gallery at LSBU will be used during the project to create dedicated screen based exhibitions.

The methodology for the participants' documentation will be developed from emergent practice-based research models.^{viii} In particular, that of a reflexive narrative. Research subjects will be supported in the development of their own 'research' investigations by an enabling programme developed by the Interpretation and Education Department at Tate Britain. The family documentation will be taken as an evidential base for evaluation and analytic commentary in relation to questions of narratives of nation and identity and the congruence/dissonance between the values and meanings drawn from the Tate collection and the preferential personal choices within the broader visual culture.

The second process of building the evidential base will involve an ethnographic approach exploring family members responses to the cultural setting of the Tate, and their own everyday cultural practices, and shifts in these over time, requires a methodology that focuses on observing and uncovering meaning. Emergent, intensive qualitative and ethnographic methods will generate in-depth process information about the understandings and experiences that are central to the research concern.

Ethnography is concerned with understanding the social meanings, cultures and activities of people in particular 'fields' or settings, and involves a partnership between researchers and informants. This approach will thus enable an exploration of family members' responses to the Tate Britain collection, and their own cultural practices and identities, as well as Tate employees' roles and practices, and through combining these generate emergent perspectives and meanings.

Ethnographic study involves researchers participating directly in settings and activities, collecting data in a systematic manner but not imposing external meaning on them. It entails 'thick description' that makes explicit detailed patterns and discourses of cultural relationships in context through analysis and interpretation. Several methods of data collection are combined flexibly. Participant observation as the families engage with the Tate collection and programme, and Tate employees engage with them, and of families' own everyday cultural practices is the starting point for in-depth interviews. The exact nature of the interviews, and the techniques used, will emerge through the ethnographic study. Researchers' detailed fieldnotes will thus be one source of information. Analysis of the ethnographic material will employ an inductive approach, coding and interpreting data to formulate ideas about meanings, and returning to the data to test and develop the ideas in an ongoing process. This will produce the localised theoretical matrix referred to earlier, which will then be related to wider theoretical perspectives of concern. Each family will form a case study for data collection. The material will be organised as family case studies, but cross referenced by membership of particularised diasporic group, generation and gender.

The resulting body of data developed by the families and the researchers will form the basis for three inter-related evaluations and analysis each carried out by one of the investigators in the first instance and subsequently shared and commented upon.

The first evaluative theme focuses upon the analysis of visual narratives of Britishness, place and belonging represented by the Tate collection, the perspectives arising from the families 'virtual exhibitions', and will take the form of a discursive analysis which aims to synthesise the narrative strands of both data sets in relation to questions of interpretative identity and cultural authority.

The second theme focuses upon an analysis of the responses of the participants' value for the Tate as a meaningful place, the views of Tate Britain professionals towards the organisational goals and the virtual exhibitions created by family members. The analysis here will bear upon an evaluation of the barriers to access, and the relevance of Tate's curatorial programming to the families group. It will also quantify a range of responses in the relationship between value for the Tate Britain and value for other cultural practices on the basis of generation and gender.

The third evaluation and analysis will be of the successes/failures of gallery education and its relationship to the practice-led research approaches to museum and gallery education adopted by the project. It will assess how the families responded to the educational, curatorial and informational material of Tate programmes and how their responses compared to their reflections upon their own curatorial work.

Project Management

The project will be led by Andrew Dewdney at LSBU who will take responsibility for establishing a risk assessment, setting milestones and monitoring progress. He will also manage the website design, development and support. Harry Goulbourne will be responsible for overseeing the family case studies and supervising the research assistant. Victoria Walsh will lead the Tate team, which will include Mike Phillips as a consultant working the families group, producing material for the website and integrating the project with cross cultural programming. She will also supervise a curatorial research assistant who will work with the participants on interpretation and negotiation of the Tate. David Dibosa will work with participants at the Tate and online on questions on interpretations and visual culture.

The LSBU research team will report regularly to the Research Management Group of SPUR under the Chair of Professor Jeffrey Weeks. The Tate team will also report to the newly formed position of Head of Research at Tate. The project will also be scrutinised by the Ethics Committee within the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences at LSBU.

Notes

ⁱ 95% of Tate's visitors are white. Last September Tate Britain created the new post of Curator Cross-Cultural Adult Programmes to help build educational and curatorial programming of more relevance to ethnically diverse audiences.

ⁱⁱ Approaches to practice based research methodology has been developed at PARIP, University of Bristol and papers given at the Joint Journal of Media Practice/LSBU conference on Practice-led research

ⁱⁱⁱ Selwood.S. ('Statistics in the Work of Challenges Posed by Cultural Diversity in a Globalised Context'. Paper given at UNESCO conference in Montreal, Shorter Article, Meaning Culture, *Spiked Culture*. Surveys the history of the social inclusion debates in relation to cultural policies and concurs on lack of evidence base, also that project evaluations are scant and anecdotal.

^{iv} IniVA has been funded by Arts Council England to run a virtual archive of projects and theoretical work relating to post colonial perspectives on museums and curatorial practice. Third Text has consistently focused upon similar issues.

^v Macdonald (2003) usefully summarises key approaches to museological practice informed by critical theoretical perspectives.

^{vi} The Arts Council commissioned an audit of statistical research on diversity and audiences in XXXXX (Francis 1990, Harris Research Centre 1993, Bridgwood, et al 2003),

^{vii} The projects written up in *Revisiting Collections: Revealing Significance*. (Reed 2003 ALM), is of particular interest to this proposal because of the attempt to engage participants in professional museological practices, based upon their own responses and reactions to objects and artifacts.

^{viii} Journal of Media Practice models

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