

Faction

Mike Phillips

Reflecting on the meanings that emerge from a process of practice-based research presents any number of difficulties. Let's assume that reporting any research outcome can be based on platforms that represent two ends of a scale. On one end is a tradition that breaks down a mass of empirical data into parts that can be examined, in order to provide concrete answers to specific questions. On the other end are theorists whose work tunnels into a research experience to unearth nuggets of evidence for positions derived from the study of established textual arguments and beliefs. Although there might be exceptions, it is generally true that, on both ends of the scale, the reporting arranges its results into a totality, which obscures the personal experience and the specific identities of participants, while placing researchers in a godlike perspective - moving, but unmoved.

Narrative enquiry challenges this perspective, because narrative can be brought to bear in a way that reveals elements that are repressed, unconscious, or marginalised within the routine of participants' relationships. Narrative, therefore, becomes a way of achieving a deeper insight and a more effective analysis of difficult and enigmatic events and responses. It also offers opportunities for self-reflexivity, as well as a form of representation for everyone involved in the process.

Individual lives are made up of stories. Relationships and events are crafted in the mind in the form of stories. Our own lives become a species of grand narrative in which all the other narratives we encounter meet and flow together. The story of my life is a record of my identity – a point where collective, individual and cultural stories converge.

This fact, however, presents a problem in using a strictly non-fictional narrative to analyse the outcome of a myriad of converging stories. That is to say, a strictly factual narrative would, by definition, omit a series of speculations, emotions, guesses, which, in the context of an enquiry into motives and desires, might be

supremely important. On the other hand, the exclusive use of fiction might pre-empt the material's potential for independent analysis while, at the same time, raise issues of credibility and trustworthiness.

Tate Encounters is a research project that sets out to explore the relationships of diasporic and migrant families with British cultural institutions, using Tate as a model or paradigm. The process announces a level playing field between participants and the institution. It demands a commitment to self-reflexivity on the part of the investigators and researchers – all members of the project are, in this sense, co-researchers. What we are all studying involves the interaction between the institution and its practices and a specific sector of its potential audience. In this regard, the project continually explodes the hierarchical implications of a group of researchers studying a group of subjects – we are all also subjects. The problem becomes one of finding ways to represent the spirit of this process, as well as remaining true to the requirement of collecting and disseminating credible and usable data.

Initially, in the context of Tate Encounters, the solution to these problems appeared to be a narrative which based itself on factual events, but exploited fictional techniques, e.g. speculative outlines of character, fictionalised descriptions of actual events, heightened dialogues, and reshaping events as stories with a comprehensible development and outcome. The clear difficulty here was concerned with offering a broadly based participation to everyone involved in such an outcome. This had to be done, it was obvious, in order to locate ourselves in between the poles of traditional outcomes and to reflect the spirit of the project. The eventual solution has been to create a digital doorway that would provide an arena for ongoing reports from every member of the project – clustered around specific themes, e.g. memory (the first theme), public and private spaces, and so on. For example, in my first attempt to reflect on the project's first event, the first paragraph set out to use a fictional approach that would reveal something about my own motivations and offer up the kind of speculative exploration that takes advantage of the ability to locate events within the privileged arena of fictional representation. The paragraph that follows is the start of my first attempt to explore the theme of memory in the context of the visual cues that shape the act of remembering.

Theme – Memory: The Aubrey Williams Study Day

In the usual run of things, I'm quite relaxed about going into Tate. I love walking through the car park. Something about the big ivy-covered wall that towers over the space always gives me a lift, especially when it's sunny, with little spikes of radiance, like sequins, glinting among the leaves. So I'm usually expecting to feel good when I walk through the gate at the back. Not this time. I was feeling uneasy and a little worried, because this was the Aubrey Williams Study Day, the first public event of the research project, and I had a nagging sense that it wouldn't go well. If I was completely truthful about this, I'd have to say that I wasn't all that worried about whether or not it would go well, and I'd framed the thought in my mind like that as a matter of self protection – a little white lie - if such things really exist. No, that wasn't it. The worm crawling around my mind was something about the memories that were coming together when I thought about Williams.

The account above became a story about my family, and my own memories concerning Tate. I wrote about my first contacts with the idea of visual representation and its meaning, and about Williams' place in a network of relationships. This, in turn, said something about my identity as a migrant and the references that identity offered me in my confrontation with the artistic traditions that I encountered in my relationship with Tate. I worked at Tate as Cross Cultural Curator within the department of Education and Interpretation, which involved organising talks and other events in the context of current exhibitions, as well as curating exhibitions myself. My relationship with Tate, however, actually began about fifty years ago when I first started to visit the gallery as a child.

The research group will set out to respond to this narrative on the website in a variety of different ways, which might amount to their own personal narrative about this or another event – perhaps a sentence discussing or analysing what has been written, perhaps discussing their own view of Williams, or soliciting a response about some of the issues that come up within the narrative. This is, in a sense, simply the first tranche of the cluster of narratives around memory, which will allow participants to create and reproduce narratives. These can be either fictional or non-fictional (and visual or written), to be published periodically on the website, and which can be about the project, about themselves, and about relationships and events within the entire process. An edited version will be one of the project's outcomes, while the entire output will eventually be available for study.