

## **Identity, Difference and the Art Museum**

### **Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture**

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*“When you go through the door... [of ‘ambivalent mainstreaming’] it is a dangerous territory, it is an incredibly tricky territory and all sorts of monsters are waiting on the other side to assimilate you up.”*

Stuart Hall. (2006) Black British Art: The revolt of the artist

[http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/stuart\\_hall/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/stuart_hall/default.jsp)

#### **1. Introduction**

This short paper rehearses a particular perspective and an argument about cultural diversity policy and perspectives, based upon the fieldwork experiences of Tate Encounters, however, the resulting perspectives are not based directly upon any specific analysis of fieldwork, which still awaits systematic analysis. The perspective offered here is therefore a tentative and emergent view from the project, which relates specifically to a critical reflection upon the original formulation of the research proposal and its methodologies.

Tate Encounters is now eighteen months into a fieldwork programme in which it is building a body of qualitative data in a three-year research programme funded by the Arts Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) 'Diasporas, Migration and Identities' Programme. The data being collected is of three kinds; video interviews with a variety of participants on the subject of museums, cultural policy and visual culture; interview notes from interviews with Tate Employees in an organisational study of Tate Britain and; image/text/video material uploaded to an Intranet site, generated by participants about their own responses to Tate Britain. Our eventual aim is to make much of this material available to other researchers and interested parties as an online archive. Between February and April 2009 we will continue our method of gathering video interview material based upon encountering Tate as part of a research Display in Gallery 61 at Tate Britain.

#### **1.2 Tate Encounters set out to provide greater understandings of how Tate Britain is situated within the discourses of Britishness and Cultural Diversity through its**

museological practices. To do this we set up a programme of research which would investigate:

- a) the ways in which Tate Britain produces and reproduces itself and its audience organisationally
- and;
- b) how a group of voluntary participants with migrant backgrounds engaged with and made sense of Tate Britain as audience members

1.3 The project is due to present its findings in March 2010, which means that much of the substantive analysis will take place in the later half of 2009. That said the approach of Tate Encounters has been to make available its theoretical and methodological thinking, along with selective ethnographic video material as work-in-progress, in a series of online publications entitled Tate Encounters [E]ditions. This approach will continue with the publication of three more research paper editions, the first of which is due in October of this year. Beyond that, as we have indicated above, we are planning a major research display at Tate Britain between February - April 2009, and an academic conference in the Autumn of 2009.

1.4 Therefore at the present time, our developing perspectives are not based upon any completed or systematic analysis of our qualitative material, rather a deep familiarity with the process of generating qualitative material, the often intense discussion it has generated within the research team, and our wider participation and understanding of cultural debate. This is possibly a risky basis upon which to present an argument from within a research project, but engaging with others in a series of ongoing rehearsals of critical ideas is one of the project's reflexive methodological modes. For a variety of reasons we think it is a timely opportunity to engage in a discussion about issues of cultural diversity and Britishness with the wider Tate community and the DCMS.

## **2. Identities and Difference**

2.1 In the first report of the project to the AHRC in January 2008, we acknowledged that our original thinking about one of the key subject groups in the study had dramatically changed. Very soon after starting we dropped the subtitle of 'Black and Asian identities' from the original application title and shortened it to Tate

Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture. In our terms this did not represent a retreat from the politics of cultural diversity, nor a change of heart about investigating migration and Diaspora as a means of understanding Tate Britain. For us it represented a way forward in our practical engagement with voluntary undergraduate participants from the university, and a break through in our initial conceptual thinking.

- 2.2 All of our early engagements with voluntary student participants pointed to the fact that they resisted being addressed through and constituted by race and ethnicity categories. In addition the one criteria of participation, that they or their family must have migrated to Britain, had produced a wide set of Diasporic journeys. Our voluntary participants had family ties and roots from Malaysia and Bangladesh in the East, through Latvia, Ukraine, Norway, Poland, into mainland Europe, Eire, Spain, Nigeria, Ghana and on to the Caribbean in the West. Everything about our engagement with participants on the project was telling us that the social categories and thinking, which developed with the patterns of post war migration to Britain from the Caribbean and South Asia, no longer fitted with the reality of global migration for an aspirational group in education.
- 2.3 With this greater sense of diversity (what some have called super-diversity) in front of us, we became aware of how racialised ways of thinking have deeply penetrated debates about culture and diversity, including that of our own initial project formulation (we know that biological difference does not warrant the division of the human race into sub racial categories and that scientific knowledge is itself framed within socially constructed notions of difference). In critiquing racialised epistemologies and wanting to move away from their operational reach, we also recognised that there was no easy alternative model. To think, speak and act in non racialised ways is difficult and awkward.
- 2.4 However, the pigmentation of our skins is a material fact, with real consequences for who we are and how we see and behave towards each other. Difference has long been structured by relations of power, exploitation and domination, and these can not be forgotten nor wished away. In Britain being 'White' is naturalised as neutral and normative, being 'Black' is the charged term, to be marked out against the norm, or so it has been.
- 2.5 But the historical conditions which led to these particular social and cultural classifications of difference are not immutable, and with globalisation and its forms of

super-diversity, individuals can occupy more fluid and transient positions. In such a situation, hailing subjects by the centralised demographic categories of race and ethnicity makes no sense. It also brings into question the normative assumptions of whiteness, which now becomes a charged term.

- 2.6 The classification of people by race and/or ethnicity in various forms of demographic census, institutional monitoring, or in forms of social science research is meaningful only insofar as it provides quantitative measures which can be correlated against other behavioural, performative, or predictive measures. Racialised forms of classification which attempt to define the life experience of individuals, the social life of groups, and the culture of communities, are, in a globalised world, highly questionable.
- 2.7 The policy of targeting individuals and groups according to BME categories has been adopted in order to produce positive cultural change, i.e. greater social cohesion, equality of access and provision and cultural inclusivity, but structurally, it reproduces racialised thinking. Whilst the intentions which lie behind targeting strategies reflect a democratic impulse – equality in access and participation – the outcomes and effects are limiting precisely because the category reproduces the division between BME and everything that it is not. Thus it can produce no lasting transformation of knowledge, imagination or creative practice within the social body.
- 2.8 The policy of targeting has another limiting consequence in looking to the private sector practices of commercial marketing. Here the language of marketing also share the tactics employed to segment and target different sections of a market in order to maximise sales, which has been imported into cultural organisational thinking. What is wrong with the concept of a segmented market for culture is that it reduces the relationship of active creative communication, to that of product and consumer in which the market decides and divides according to the principle of exchange.
- 2.9 If you combine public policy minority targeting with the business models of segmented market targeting you might get something for everyone, but only according to their existing means and values. Again nothing of the social and cultural body is transformed.

### **3. Dissolving majorities**

- 3.1** The rejection of racialised thinking requires the effort to speak/invent a new language of recognising, valuing and living with difference. This is something which potentially takes place everywhere, but also has a formal engagement in specific critically reflexive contexts, of which research is one, education another, and creative practice yet another. In our research team it remains something that comes in and out of focus and we struggle to give words and meaning to it.
- 3.2** The effort to imagine and describe the world and our experience in terms of a new majority is not about dissolving difference, as if it were some liberal form of assimilationism where society now consists only of a collection of individuals within a given historical nation state. Nor is it a majority imagined as the sum of its minority and separate parts, this has been the limit and frustration of multiculturalism. The central effort in this new grasp on culture is to populate it with the narratives of journeying of the experience of late twentieth century mobility, and of crossing all kinds of geographical and social borders. Raymond Williams talked critically about the emergence of 'mobile privatisation' in post war British society, which he saw centrally as the combination of the growth of the nuclear family, consumer affluence, and centralised broadcast communication. Globalised mobility represents a challenge to all those terms and demands a re-imagination of the relationship between individuals, their affective groupings, and the public space of culture. Such a process starts with the experience of migration, which includes a reevaluation of the place of 'tradition' and its more recent formulation 'heritage', and has major implications for what we understand by Britishness. Transmigration narratives are central to any account of a post colonial and post nation society.
- 3.3** In Tate Encounters we have crept up upon this larger and more abstract politics of culture not through polemic, but through the embedded and engaged process of 'narrating ourselves' within and towards the institution. Our stock of research practices have developed from the continuing encounter with the institution, what it is to be there, how that feels, how we engage, what responses we receive.
- 3.4** The terms, transmigration and transcultural speak more to the experience of global migration and super-diversity, than that of immigration and settlement. The global

condition of a transculturality can be recognised in new patterns of migration, from Africa and Eastern Europe in particular. Transculturality changes the terms of cultural identity worked out within, and in relationship to post-war settled British migrant communities

- 3.5 For TE participants this meant resisting an older identity politics and claiming instead the space of mobility and change. For TE researchers this space opened up a different way of telling the story of culture and belonging.

#### **4. How to change fixed and static viewing positions and monologic narratives of Britishness.**

- 4.1 Our ethnographic organisational study based upon the production of an exhibition at Tate Britain gives some clues. The organisational structure is founded upon and reflects a hierarchy of viewing, which travels in one direction only, from the vision of the artist, through the authority of the expert curator and historian, and hence to an assortment of departments whose job it is to manufacture the audience through marketing, publicity, media and education.

- 4.2 This process of constructing the audience conceals the narrow cultural base, which connects the programme to a recurrent audience, through a market segmentation that universalises and biologises the viewer in categories such as kids, families and youth, and marginalises those subjects who are deemed to fit into the sub-categories of Black, minority or ethnic. This process is so profoundly naturalised, given that the majority of people who perpetuate it share the same cultural myth of the one-way direction of the cultural message.

#### **5. The organisation of culture – the problem for national institutions**

- 5.1 Between April 2007 and the present, we have brought 400 undergraduate LSBU students to Tate Britain to introduce them to the Tate Encounters project. Of that total 10% have participated in the Tate Encounters project. From that sample 15 participants have become co-researchers, engaging in a deeper and sustained ethnographic study. Over the next six months a further 20 students will join the project and we will bring a further 200 new undergraduates to Tate Britain. We will

administer a questionnaire to the total 600 about their view of Tate Britain in the context of their wider cultural activities.

5.2 What characterised participants initial encounter with Tate Britain? Beyond the individual and particular aspects of those early experiences a common picture emerges. The first thing to say is that their reactions were strong, passionate, questioning and critical. It is also true to say that they were somewhat in awe of the institution and maintained, initially at least, a reverential position. On reflection we have come to see their initial set of responses as highly polarised. On the one hand they demonstrated passion and interest in visual culture and the value of museums, and on the other, there was confusion at what they saw as a place of closed privilege. Their initial responses therefore reflected Tate Britain as a highly formal organisation, isolated from the everyday life of the city, with little active relationship to their own contemporary experience of culture. They experienced Tate Britain as encouraging forms of controlled behaviour in which the visitor was always under surveillance. They experienced Tate Britain as a place of prohibition rather than permission.

5.3 This is of course a characterisation of an initial set of responses, which does not account for all their points of interest and engagement. We provide it here as a point of departure for their subsequent encounters and exploration with us in relation to the questions posed by the project. Over the next eighteen months our participants began to explore their first encounter in more detail, to examine those things which had brought them through the door, and in turn, led back out to their intimate world and the world at large. In doing this they all developed narratives of identity, belonging and not belonging, what we have referred to as transcultural perspectives and modes of transvisuality in making sense of individual works. They have done this through interviews with us and in their own forms of documentation. We have at present over 100hrs of videotape. Our visual anthropologist has visited and recorded family members of participants. We undertook 15-recorded interviews during the Lure of the East Exhibition. This work will continue over the next six months until the end of the fieldwork.

5.4 The reasons why this group of voluntary participants have stayed with the project, and who they are, relative to other kinds of audience members, will be the subject of further work, but we can categorically say here that one of the sustaining reasons for continuing was the privileged access and support they received by being part of the

project. Hence they valued the privileged access as an aspirational group. Tate Encounters operated as 'a secret door' into the deeper recesses and workings of the museum through which they could develop greater understandings and develop further insights into their own reactions and experiences. Simply put the project legitimated their presence in the museum and gave them the status needed to overcome their initial reactions or what might be termed barriers to access.

5.5 In addition to the ethnography work focused upon our audience, we also undertook an ethnographically based organisational study of the production of a paid exhibition at Tate Britain. This has involved conducting 30 interviews with Tate Employees, written up as field notes and framed within a number of organisation theory frameworks, to think about and begin to construct an account of how the audience is produced in the process of exhibition production. It will, as we continue to say, take a further six months before the fieldwork is complete and a further year in total to develop a full analysis. But what are our first hunches about how the functional operation of different sections and departments in Tate Britain construct ideas of programme relevance and audience address? How, if at all, can we track the idea of cultural diversity within this?

5.6 Our caveat holds that these are early days in developing an analysis but some things have struck us forcibly:

- The current organisation of Tate Britain does not encourage understandings about audiences
- The current organisation segments audience into largely meaningless categories
- The current organisation universalises audiences

5.7 There should be nothing contentious in recognising that Tate Britain's museological practices are not easily accessible to anyone not already inscribed into and familiar with the formal codes and conventions of European and North American Art.

5.8 There is a very strong direction of travel in the process – from valued artefact to its appreciation. The artefact arrives with guarantees and authority for the visitor to take in. The visitor is in one sense superfluous to the organisational processes of collection and acquisition. They take what is presented on trust, brought to them through a public function, which operates along private lines.

## **6. Media, Culture and Authority**

6.1 Tate Encounters has used digital video and online media as a means of collecting data, and more importantly, of giving cultural form to the new narratives of the transcultural culture. The development of the world wide web and the wide ranging application of digital technologies is a central part of the very globalised economic and social processes which have created transculturality

6.2 Museums are aware of the power of online media as a first destination for visitors. Museums are expanding their use of websites to market their programme, make collections known through searchable image databases, and provide a range of related interpretive and educational materials.

6.3 Whilst museums are not strangers to the use of media, they differ in their view of visitors augmenting their own experience through video or photographic documentation. The outright prohibition of the use of visitors using media in some Museums is primarily for copyright reproduction reasons. Restrictions on the use of personal media in Art Museums is a barrier to the development of two way cultural traffic.

## **7. New directions for Cultural Policy Strand – (Pragmatism plus critical thinking.)**

7.1 The current uneasiness about defining culture, reflected in the policy oscillations between access and excellence, displays an absence of centred debate. Moving to an anthropological definition of culture as the life worlds of peoples is not a sufficient base form which to re-examine tradition and heritage. Nor do we believe that the embrace of the market will help in forging debate about what is to be included in our central thinking about British culture. At its best culture is always a set of arguments and the current moment needs cultural policy to be engaged in and promote argument.

7.2 The selective tradition of British culture is not dismissed by a globalised view of subjectivity and identity, it is not a simple relativism, but it does challenge the established centres of cultural authority. Transculturality is about legitimating multiple forms of cultural authority.

7.3 One of the implications of the argument contained in the emergent perspective represented above is that we need to find sustained ways of reversing the direction of cultural traffic, putting transcultural mobility of experience and seeing at the heart of knowledge. But how to create the necessary authority for this.

7.4 Creating a non-consumer based, non multicultural, non assimilationist, non elitist paradigm of culture is one possibility which emerges from the critique tradition of intellectual debate in which culture was itself an argument.

8. As we pointed out at the start of this report, the development of the transcultural, and more particularly the transvisual as a viewing position and as an alternative direction of thinking about diversity in the museum, is not based upon an exhaustive analysis of the fieldwork data. We have yet to look in any detail at the participant ethnography, over 200hrs of it, and we have only just begun to develop a framework for the organisational analysis. Our eventual aim is to bring both of these studies together in a single overview of the art museum's production of its audience.

8.1 One of the longer term goals of the project is to begin to work out from the specifics of the analysis to a more programmatic view of museum practices in respect of the production on audience, in order to provide more specific direction about how various museological practices can be opened up to one another. In our view, this would be a contribution towards the establishment of what we have termed the Social Museum.