

TATE ENCOUNTERS: BRITISHNESS AND VISUAL CULTURE

SELECTED SECTIONS FROM FINAL PROJECT REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL (JUNE 2010)

SUMMARY

Tate Encounters was a three year project funded by the AHRC strategic programme Diasporas, Migration and Identities. It was a collaboration between Tate Britain, The Centre for Media and Culture Research at London South Bank University and Wimbledon School of Arts, a constituent college of the University of the Arts.

The research team consisted of Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa, Morten Norybe Halvorsen, Tracey Reynolds, Isabel Shaw, Sarah Thomas and Victoria Walsh.

The project was an enquiry into national cultural diversity policy and practices and how they were articulated within a national museum. The project posed a number of questions relating to the relative absence of visitors from Black and minority ethnic groups to Tate Britain, focusing in particular on policy, barriers to access, modes of spectatorship, notions of Britishness within the National Collection of British Art and how ideas of audience and viewer were held and mobilised by Tate staff in exhibition production.

During the fieldwork period the project enlisted the participation of over 600 first year undergraduates from London South Bank University, who visited both Tate Britain and Tate Modern and who responded to their encounter through questionnaires and essays. A group of 12 students, with migrational family histories took part in an in-depth, two year study working with a visual anthropologist, to explore their responses in encountering Tate Britain. The project used digital media technologies as the default mode through which participants documented their experience, which were screened and discussed at Tate as part of an experimental public research programme.

In parallel, the project conducted 38 interviews in an ethnographic, organisational study of the production of the Tate Britain exhibition 'The Lure of the East' (2008), which formed the basis for an analysis of the currencies of culture diversity and audience within Tate.

To extend the level of engagement the project held a 4-week programme of public discussions, 'Research in Process', involving 72 participants, Tate staff, academics, cultural workers, policy makers and artists in responding to the questions posed by the research and fieldwork data. The project produced 6 editions of an electronic publication on the Tate website containing working papers on theory and method together with participant responses. In addition, the project produced an independent archival website containing films, visual and other essays from the participants, audio recordings from the Research-in-Process events and the ethnographic films of the participants and their families.

The project was an interdisciplinarily collaboration which included and crossed sociological currents in the study of culture, anthropology, Art History, Visual Cultures and Museum Studies. In relationship to thinking about Diasporas, Migration and Identities the research data supported a 'de-essentialised' notion of identity, rejecting racialised cultural discourse in support of forward thinking about the fluidity of identity in this new phase of global migration as it impacts upon the cultural life of London. The currency of transmigration has given the project the means to define and test the idea of 'transvisuality' in relationship to viewing positions. The project engaged in cultural diversity and multicultural policy discussion with the DCMS, Arts Council England and Tate policy and planning groups.

The collaborative and embedded nature of the research programme at Tate has notably contributed to the development of a research culture at Tate relevant to the study of publics and audiences and is located within Tate's strategic research centre, 'The Art Museum of the Future'. The project adopted collaborative and participatory methods and applied the notion of reflexivity as a practical approach to critical evaluation and reflection within the professional field of the practices of museums.

CHANGES

Please indicate any changes, during the lifetime of the research programme, to the original Aims and Objectives.

The original aims of the project remained consistent throughout the three year period. The original programme identified three related contexts in which the research questions were generated: visual culture, curatorial practices and narratives of Britishness; cultural diversity, social capital and the role of museums in social renewal; and, practice-led approaches in curation and museum education. The overriding objective of the research programme was to bring issues and concerns of these related contexts, "into a common framework in order that we can empirically test and analyse the assumptions and underlying arguments of each of them". This aim was maintained.

In detail we can report the following;

1.1 The aim to explore new and alternative, transcultural readings of the National Collection of British Art and the space and place of Tate Britain with migrant students, families, artists, theorists and educators was achieved, although in method the project worked with both a larger overall sample of student participants (600) whilst working with a smaller group of voluntary participants (12 in total) who sustained an encounter over two years and which involved their own families. The project reported that it had revised the qualification for participation to include migration from any country to the UK.

1.2 The aim to explore the relation between the lived and everyday culture of the museum and the values represented by participation in the Tate Britain programme was realised through constituting 12 participants as co-researchers who produced in-depth descriptions and accounts of their interactions. An analysis of co-researchers' responses, as well as an analysis of student questionnaires and essays informed a number of the online working papers as well as being included in several conference presentations.

1.3 The aim to explore Britishness as a narrative of collection, exhibition and display was achieved through the development of an understanding of transvisuality in relationship to transcultural experience and is evidenced in the co-researchers' responses and discussed in the online working papers.

2.1 The aim to look at a number of issues related to 'barriers to access' was achieved across the three strands of the programme. The student participants provided quantitative and qualitative evidence of the ways in which they experienced museum visits, whilst the organisational ethnography study (38 interviews) provided evidence of how notions of diversity audiences circulated in museum practices. Both sets of evidence have been drawn upon in papers relating to the conceptualisation of audience and how and why the museum gathers information on visitors.

2.2 & 2.3 The aim to examine cultural diversity policy at Tate Britain in the context of wider debate and discussion surrounding widening participation and multiculturalism was sustained throughout the programme and led specifically to a presentation to the DCMS in 2007; participation in Tate's policy and planning meetings on diversity and audiences throughout the

programme; presentation to the V&A/Leicester University Museum conference from the Margins to the Core (March 2010) and a paper for Third Text report to the Arts Council on the subject of institutions and diversity, (May 2010).

3.1, 3.2 & 3.3 The aim to develop practice-based research approaches and self-reflexive methodologies of media documentation in relation to reading exhibitions in the context of digital media communication was sustained throughout the fieldwork period with participants. The project supported participants through a dedicated intranet and technical and equipment support. Two of the RAs were media practitioners, an anthropological filmmaker and a new media artist, provided continuing support and advice and in the preparation for the Research-in-Process events additional technical support was provided by the artist Paul Richards.

Please indicate any changes, during the lifetime of the research programme, to the original Research Questions.

The original research questions withstood the test of the programme and formed the basis of the data generation. As with all research some of the questions came to the fore, whilst others became subsumed, or we understood to be subsidiary parts of larger questions. In brief we can comment here on the specificity of each question.

Questions (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'? and (2) How does British visual culture and visual language currently frame, shape and represent diasporic/migrant experience and identity? remained constant and formed the basis for the strand of considering modes of spectatorship and viewing positions. They also informed our approach to the design of the organisational study of The Lure of the East Exhibition (2008). Certainly the concept of 'reading against the grain' underwent considerable development as did that of 'British visual imperialism', becoming focused upon understandings of hypermodern media environments and the idea of transvisuality and transmediation. The question (3) How are notions of cultural hybridity constructed in and by visual culture? helped to transpose questions of visual imperialism, with its implication of dominant viewing tropes, to that of the hypermodern and global.

Question (4) In what ways will the cultural encounter between the institutional and work practices of Tate and the diasporic/migrant families be experienced? was in essence practical and formed the basis of the design of the ethnographic fieldwork. Questions (5) How is Tate configured, or ranked within particularised sets of 'cultural capital' by diasporic family members? formed the basis for a student questionnaire and essay question, the analysis of which superficially tended to confirm existing views of the art museum's position in highly differentiated forms of cultural capital. In general the research moved away from using the concept of cultural capital, seeing it as over-classificatory.

Question (6) Are there generational lines of difference in the modes and tactics of interaction with the Tate and its activities and if so what are they? did not form the basis of any specific fieldwork, although it did inform an account of the participants having a specific generational profile. Generation was a more critical question in relationship to the politics of multiculturalism and the question of identity politics, which was discussed in the panel discussion, 'The Changing Status of Difference', as part of the Art & Politics: Uncertain Practices week of the 'Research-in-Process' events.

Questions (7) What factors inhibit migrant and diasporic audiences from forming meaningful and ongoing relationships with the Tate. and (8) What factors enable meaningful and ongoing relationships, and can conclusions for national museums be drawn from this? were again the practical basis upon which participants were inducted into the fieldwork. They formed the basis for a series of twelve participant workshops at the start of the fieldwork and went on to be the question some co-researchers asked themselves in relationship to their own submissions.

Question (8), relating to what can be learnt by Museums from the findings of Tate Encounters, forms the basis of an analysis of how Tate Britain conceives of its audiences and has fed into wider questions of how audiences are classified for the purposes of making informed decisions about audience development.

It can be said overall that the original questions remained the basis upon which the research was conducted and upon which conclusions have been drawn.

Please indicate any changes, during the lifetime of the research programme, to the original Research Methods.

The project sustained its original outline of methods, although in practice honed and developed them. It used a bottom-up theory approach, employing dialogic and relational methods, including approaches from Ethnography, Actor Network Theory and Action Research to gather an empirically based data set, which has been used as the basis for evaluation using discursive analysis drawn from cultural theory and visual analysis. The volunteer student participants were constituted as co-researchers and as well as generating much of the 'research data' were actively involved in its evaluation. The methodology for the participants' documentation was developed from emergent practice-based research models, in particular that of narrative reflexive modes.

Over the period of the research cultural diversity policy was primarily supported by published policy documents and audience attendance statistics which demonstrated that 'BME' groups were not attending galleries and museums in proportion to their national demographic. Funding agendas of the period reflected social inclusion policies and required publicly funded bodies to demonstrate how their programmes would meet and enhance widening participation in national culture. This was the socio-political context of the research project which, in its original submission, led it to argue that there was little or no sustained analysis of barriers to access in existing studies and that there was a need for a longitudinal study employing qualitative research methods. A related problem of framing the research subjects in the socio-political context of diversity policy was situated in the use of language. The full title of the original proposal submitted was 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture, Black and Asian Identities'. This nomination of Black and Asian identities was a reflection of the dominant pattern of UK migration and settlement in the post war period which has informed cultural debate and policy on British identity, but more recent patterns of UK inward migration from former British colonies, the rest of the world and the enlarged EEC have rapidly changed the demography of Britain. In this more globalised context the linguistic racialisation of national and cultural groups has been stretched to the limits to the point where the definition of cultural groups in terms of ethnicity or race characteristics is once again centrally problematic, as demonstrated by the volunteer students' resistance to this categorisation. On the basis of this analysis at an early stage the project dropped the exclusive focus upon British Caribbean and South Asian migrants in favour of inviting participation on the basis on inward migration to Britain, within three generations in a family, from anywhere in the world.

As an embedded, action research project, the research team and student participants critically negotiated real and potential misrecognitions of the project as cultural diversity work in action and out of its reflexive and emergent practice it was agreed that the original stated output of a photographic exhibition would be abandoned and replaced by the 4-week 'Research In Process' programme. This decision was made in order to resist any confusion within Tate and beyond of the 'research work' of Tate Encounters with 'gallery education work' which often adopts the photographic display as its format of evidencing individual creativity in outreach projects. As a consequence, greater time was invested in the discussion, planning and technical realisation of the students film projects that were subsequently screened as part

of the Research in Process.

In constructing a research methodology which embraced critical reflexivity and emergent practice the project was able to avoid the potential epistemological reification of the object of study in which volunteer participants became research subjects to be drawn into a laboratory defined by an overly scientising gaze.

Achievements

Using your original aims and objectives as a framework for your response, please briefly identify the achievements or highlights of your research programme. Your response should, where possible, be evidence-based. If your aims and objectives have been amended following consultation with the AHRC, please refer to the amended version. Please also refer to Help, as scheme-specific guidance may apply.

The objectives of the research were organized around three programme strands: cultural policy centred upon diversity; the national collection, focused upon narratives of Britishness and; the expanded field of contemporary visual culture, organized through new media. Over the two year fieldwork period a significant body of qualitative data was generated related to the these strands and used as the basis of an evidential analysis, including:

- 300 student questionnaires / 200 student essays on Tate Modern and Tate Britain
- 12 student workshops / 12 in depth student research projects / 5 extended participant family edited ethnographic films
- 38 Tate staff interviews / 72 participants through the Research in Process

The achievements of the project are related to what the research revealed in terms of areas of problematic practice and what Tate, and by implication other art museums, might undertake to improve or change the ways in which they understand and reproduce notions of audience.

The research identified an implicit racialised discourse in cultural diversity practices, which existing audience taxonomies reproduce, culminating in the larger reproduction of notions of deficit culture in policies of inclusion and participation. In contrast the research evidence of over 600 student participants pointed to contemporary subjects whose identities are more open and fluid and who have a sophisticated critique of the exclusionary practices of museum culture. Thus a de-essentialised notion of identity opened up the space to understand new subject positions in which migrational experience plays an important part. In contrast the organizational study involving 38 Tate employees revealed that notions of audience are highly differential and occupy positions of distance or proximity in relationship to Tate's mission. A major achievement of the research is therefore to conclude that there is no one unified, clear understanding of audience in operation, neither in policy, nor practice, and moreover, that the language of audience is mostly professionally unreflexive and in the specific case of diversity practices, operates within Tate as the distribution of risk to what are perceived as the central and core mission.

Following from the limits of enacted diversity policy both in conception and implementation, the third strand of research opened up a more fruitful enquiry into the visual practices of viewing works in the museum. This research collected a substantial body of visually based media artefacts and visual ethnographic material from participants. The analysis of this material sustains the reading of new migrational subject positions and led the project to see that the concept of transculturality offered an explanatory framework for considering contemporary urban British experience. In particular it led to the framing of the twin concepts of the transvisual and transmediation as sophisticated and sustained modes of meaning generation both in and outside of the museum. The highly developed transvisual practices of what the research defined as the atypical or non-museum visitor also led to the recognition that the continuation of curatorial practices based upon Western Modernism, with its

aesthetising trope, limit Tate's exploration of ways in which the historical collection engages with the wider history of British visual culture.

In generating research data and its analysis the project achieved a model form of embedded and collaborative research that operated to prefigure reflexive professional practices of audience. In synthesizing the three strands of enquiry the research developed an interdisciplinary set of research practices that allowed for a transdisciplinary view of the art museum. Through such processes the research has illuminated the absence of a knowledge of audience and therefore the restrictions of art museum practices focused upon audience development.

If there are any additional achievements that do not clearly relate to your aims and objectives, please indicate these below. You may, for example, wish to provide evidence of intangible achievements that could not have been anticipated when you commenced the research programme. If you have identified such achievements under the 'Changes' section, there is no need to repeat the information here.

The research has interestingly led to a wider programmatic call for more empirically based, qualitative longitudinal research on how notions of cultural value in the public realm are produced and circulated and how the cultural authority of the museum can be bought into new relationships with the emergent authority conferred by transculturality and digital media. This represents an additional achievement, given the more specified and local starting points of the research in 2006. The strand of the research focused upon cultural diversity policy led to the analysis of the underlying racialised discourse contained in policies of social cohesion and widening participation. In museological terms this had the outcome of reinforcing an historical paradigm of 'deficit' culture and directed the research towards the need for a greater understanding of audience taxonomies, which the successful award of the AHRC Collaborative Doctorate (Museology Call) now takes forward from October 2010.

The other twin strands of the research, visual spectatorship and new media practices, have opened up much larger questions for the art museum. These relate to the continuation of a modernist curatorial paradigm in modes of exhibition and display within the art museum, which has historically been at odds with contingent everyday life, as noted originally by Pierre Bourdieu, but now possibly surpassed by a digital culture, in a period of what the transdisciplinary synthesis of the research acknowledged as, a condition of hypermodernism. The implications of this for Tate, as for museums in general, relate directly to Tate Online and Tate Media and the wider role of the Internet as the default mode of visual communication. How are museums, which are fundamentally analogue systems, to relate to their present and future audiences through a digital mode of storage, transmission and reception? In posing this question Tate Encounters has led its research out to a new and urgent agenda for museums, which forms the basis for its current and pending AHRC application (Ref: AH/H039856/1). The aims of this new work are fourfold. Firstly to develop and test sustainable models of embedded collaborative audience research based upon constructing new interdisciplinary knowledge hybrids. Secondly to establish a new theoretical account of the individual encounter with the art object in the light of the digital remediation of the visual field, as a basis for rethinking the socio-aesthetic reception of art. Thirdly, through such online encounters to contribute to the development of new cultural taxonomies which can be used by museums in thinking about audience development. Finally to further understandings about how social and cultural difference is entailed in the apprehension and valuing of art objects in museums in relationship to their digital cultural experience.

Importance

Subject Area

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Tate Encounters indicated it would be of value to three areas: Cultural Policy, Arts Management and the Creative Industries; Museums and Gallery Studies; and Cultural Studies and Popular Culture. The differential subject interest in the art museum, from sociology, art history and cultural studies, stood in contrast Tate Encounters, which argued for and established an interdisciplinary and in the event transdisciplinary model of research collaboration which aimed to integrate the theory of practice with the practices of the art museum to create more coherent and effective forms of knowledge-exchange and use. This outcome has importance for museum studies. The findings of the research suggest that museums can be understood as networks of people, ideas and things which operate across and beyond the museum in creating value. This application of theories from science and technology studies to the art museum allows for a reconfiguration of the problematics of audience that for museum professionals is suggestive on new reflexive practices and for scholars and researchers it opens up new ways of constructing objects of attention in the museum.

The importance of the achievements of Tate Encounters for cultural policy studies lies in repositioning, indeed centring, the experience of viewers and the construction of audiences and the practices of public engagement, in a direct relationship to exhibition and display. Its situated and longitudinal nature, generally beyond the scope and capacity of most research practice and academic study, produced a rich and sustained qualitative account of how different strands of practice play out. In the synthesised analytical framework, the project's importance to Museums and Gallery and Cultural Policy studies rests not only in its specific policy findings, related to diversity policy, but in pointing to the larger and more urgent need to consider the relevance of the art museum in a global, technologised century. Whilst specialist accounts have critiqued and analysed cultural policy formation and impact and museum studies has detailed the institutional take up and response, Tate Encounters research points to the need to look at the intersection of policy and implementation from the position of the lived practices of visitors and their professional enablers. Finally, the project has also been identified of interest to Humanities research practice in terms of collaborative interdisciplinary approaches evidenced by the conference invitation from the AHRC / DMI (Leeds 2009) and Westminster University (Dec 2010).

In Visual, Material and Cultural Studies, the third related subject, the qualitative data has allowed for the analysis of a conceptual overview of contemporary subjectivity in relationship to digital culture. There are two key important achievements here, which have significance for the ways in which the visual and visuality have been considered in relationship to viewing positions in Museums. The research articulates two related concepts of meaning generation, or interpretation, that of the transvisual and transmediation. The first signifies an important shift in the relationship between subject position and culture brought about by migrational processes and the second articulates the recoding processes brought about by digital culture. Taken together the articulation of the viewing position of the contemporary subject suggests sources of cultural authority which lie beyond the traditional expertise of the museum specialist. This new synthesis will, we believe have importance for art, media and gallery education, as evidenced by the invitation to produce a paper for the National Journal of Art & Design Education and the Journal of Visual Culture, following a presentation at the International Conference of Visual Cultures (June 2010).

Outside Academia

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The key stakeholders of Tate Encounters included government departments engaged with cultural diversity (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS), government-sponsored agencies (Arts Council England, ACE), policy makers and consultants, and the museum and wider cultural sector. Tate's own direct engagement in and take-up of the project was crucial to its validation and success. Tate Encounters both looked to Tate and the non-academic stakeholders as active participants in the research as much as recipients of its findings. As a consequence of the high level of support and engagement secured through the Tate Organisational Study, the project was consistently invited to discuss its progress and findings. The first major presentation took place in 2008 to the Tate for All working group chaired by the Director of Tate National responsible for Tate's policies of equality and access across staffing, collections and programming. This was followed by an invitation to lead a Tate-wide, cross-departmental seminar, Tate Think, in February 2009 which focussed on curatorial narratives of display and audience engagement. In September 2009, a further presentation was made to the Tate National department which brought together Directors and Chief Curators from Tate Liverpool, Tate St Ives, Tate Britain and Tate Modern and which highlighted the need for a new audience typology beyond Marketing's socio-economic categorisations and models of cultural deficit. From October - December 2009 Tate Encounters was invited to participate in a series of working seminars called for by the Tate Trustees to inform Tate's Audience Development Strategy, 2012-15 which included discussions with representatives from DCMS, the policy think-tank Demos, and the consultancy group Audiences London.

In order to extend the research process and data gathering into the public domain of the museum itself, the project took over a central gallery at Tate Britain for a month-long programme of recorded interviews and panel discussions with 72 participants including academics, cultural critics, artists, politicians, policy-makers, Tate staff and the co-researchers which each week addressed one of the key research strands of the project. The value of this experiment primarily lay in the critical cross-exchange and interrogation of practice, theory and policy within the museum context itself, enabling tacit knowledge to be made visible and questioned across practices, policies and disciplines. All of the proceedings were recorded and uploaded to an archival website (www.tateencounters.org). In 2008 the project was also invited by the DCMS to present its emergent findings to an invited audience as part of the department's Black History Month programming and from this early discussion of the negative impact of the racialisation of diversity policy and the limitations of fixed notions of identity the project continued to engage with policy makers. In 2008, Tate Encounters further discussed its findings and implications for debates on multiculturalism in a closed seminar sponsored by ACE through the journal *Third Text* which led to the commissioning of a special edition reviewing the status of cultural difference and policy making to which Tate Encounters was invited to submit an article (Sept 2010.) Further invitations were also issued to Andrew Dewdney (2009) and David Dibosa (2009) respectively by the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) to make two presentations on related questions of multiculturalism in the 21st century and the value of Visual Cultures as a disciplinary practice towards more globalised readings of British visual arts. Finally, following a keynote paper at an international conference organised by the V&A and Leicester University in March 2010, the project has been invited to submit a chapter to the book publication of the conference contributions (Routledge 2011/12).