Cultural Inequality, Multicultural Nationalism and Global Diversity

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)¹

‘... Is the era and the goal of ‘cultural diversity’ in the arts now over? Has the globalisation of the art world - "let a thousand biennales bloom" - 'solved' the problem?’ Stuart Hall (2010)²

Introduction

For sometime now Britain has been experiencing a crisis in liberal/left progressive thinking about cultural diversity, which has opened the cultural field to an emergent and aggressive critique of ‘cultural welfarism’ and its instrumentalist policies. In the place of New Labour cultural policies, these new positions seek to maintain the legitimacy of cultural value based upon a nationalist and Eurocentric model of arts heritage coupled with cultural entrepreneurship. There is nothing startlingly new in this remix of heritage and enterprise and it is not for the first time that this conservative emphasis has been the basis of arts policy. As this emphasis unfolds in future government policies it will be a matter of traditional emphasis and choice. However, in an equal and apparently opposite response to the increasingly common recognition of the problems of cultural instrumentalism within the professional cultural sector, the left/liberal position has been to extend the underlying entitlement argument of cultural welfarism to that of social justice as a means of promoting cultural equality. In what is a difficult argument to make, because it appears divisive, it can be argued that this extension to the idea of the museum of social justice conceptually continues the discourse of social exclusion and cultural deficit. Centrally, it continues with a practical programme, of access, education and multiple voice perspectives, which reproduce the very boundaries between mainstream and margins, which it seeks to dissolve.

Both the New Labour and New Conservative positions on culture accept a political gradualism, which seems not to recognize the pace of global change. The argument here is that in cultural policy terms the political differences in positions which have been identified are in effect two sides of the same coin of British multiculturalism, which is failing to grasp the new conditions and forces of capital and labour now propelling people, products and profits hither and thither across the globe.

A recent conference, ‘From the Margins to the Core: An international conference exploring the shifting roles and increasing significance of diversity and equality in contemporary museum and heritage policy and practice’, held at the V&A in conjunction with the School of Museum Studies at Leicester University (2010), was one such attempt to review the progress of multiculturalism within the museum sector.³ The conference assembled a formidable set of contributors from the British museum and galleries sector to address questions of embedding diversity, widening participation and establishing social justice in both museum policy and programme. Tate Encounters, a three-year collaborative research project, contributed to the conference on the basis of an analysis of its fieldwork in which two major assertions were made. Firstly, that enabling and inclusion practices of the museum based upon unexamined social demographic categories set by government funding, could only shore up distinctions
between a margin and the core and, in the case of BME categories, could only reproduce a racialised view of human subjects. Secondly, it was argued that far from cultural diversity policy representing a central challenge to the core values of the museum, the implementation practices aimed at increasing equality and diversity were used to contain and manage the risk of external challenge to the core. These are the bold outlines of an argument, which in detail needs much more space to evidence, however, the point here is that some amongst the conference organisers and participants disputed such a position, seeing it as a mischaracterisation of the efforts of work around diversity policy development that had taken place historically, identifying it, interestingly in what follows as a neo-conservative position. This paper explores in more detail the arguments contained in this response in an attempt to understand the limits of multicultural debate and where it might usefully be opened out and taken in the future.

**Tricky Territories**

In 2006 London South Bank University (LSBU) was awarded a major research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) strategic research programme, 'Diasporas, Migration and Identities'. The grant was to undertake a three-year study in collaboration with Tate Britain and Wimbledon College of Art to consider the obstacles to access for diasporic communities to the national collection of British art held at Tate Britain. The project was titled 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture'. The emergence of the AHRC national research funding stream coincided with an additional research initiative launched by the national Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 'Identities and Social Action Programme'. In part, both of these initiatives can be located in the context and aftermath of the political and academic debates sparked by the Macpherson Report into the Metropolitan Police’s handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The report was singular in pointing to institutional racism in terms of, ‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin.’

In 2000 the Runnymede Trust published The Parekh Report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain. In commenting upon the institutions of the arts, media and sports the report stated: ‘But the overall message of the chapter, in the words of a specialist who gave evidence to the Commission, is that “the arts and media sectors do not see any implications for themselves in the Macpherson report”, for they do not recognise that institutional racism needs urgently to be addressed within their own domains.” In prefacing its recommendations the report insisted that, ‘The concepts of equality and diversity must be driven through the government machinery at national and regional levels. Responsibility for making them real must be devolved to the local levels at which theory becomes practice, where real change does or does not take place. Verbal and financial commitment from the government is essential, but the test of real change is what happens on the ground.’ The Parekh Report reflected the evident desire for real change, recommending the need for coherent policy, audits of existing practice, target setting and financial penalties, all similar to the practical approach of the Macpherson report. A decade further on and we might now consider how much progress has been made in embedding the concepts of equality and difference in our national cultural institutions.

In the forging of the research collaboration between LSBU, Tate Britain and Wimbledon College of Art, that formed Tate Encounters, lay three mutual understandings: firstly, that despite over a decade of substantial dedicated funding and activity framed by policies of 'cultural diversity' that no significant increase in art museum attendance had been realised in 'minority' audiences; secondly, that academic debates centred around Post-colonialism had not notably entered into curatorial discourse or practice; and thirdly, that museological debates had not opened up a space in the art museum where policy and practice might meaningfully engage with each other to form a new model of curatorship – or indeed audience engagement.
At the heart of Tate Encounters lay the ambition to interrogate and analyse the connections and disconnections between the policies and theories of cultural diversity and their playing out in practice. This move into and through the art museum could be seen to represent one of Stuart Hall's 'tricky moments' for all members of the research team. In creating the conditions for the emergence of a reflexive enquiry, the project's endeavour was marked by a desire not to reproduce accounts of power and dominion over knowledge and representation in the art museum, but to arrive at a working account of the key issues that have both defined and confined the project of 'cultural diversity' work in a national cultural institution. Arriving at a new description of how cultural diversity operated at Tate Britain involved a constant negotiation with the institutional discursive location that a research project so obviously focused upon cultural diversity occupied in relationship to its perceived context of multiculturalism.

The politics of multiculturalism do not form part of the historical or naturalised context of the art museum, but are inherently entwined in the contractual obligations to central government, primarily through the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's 'Public Sector Agreements' with national institutions such as Tate. Following on from a plethora of action reports produced by the Arts Council of England during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the National Museum Directors' Conference (NMDC) formed a 'Cultural Diversity Working Group' in 2004, which concluded in 2006 'the need for a step change' in addressing issues of access and representation. On each side of Hall’s door of ambivalent mainstreaming, in and outside of institutions, opinions on the best ways to promote equality and the recognition of difference, were complex and contested. The publication in 2007 of Culture Vultures: Is UK Arts Policy Damaging the Arts? and Sonya Dyer's report Boxed In (2007) evidence a moment of challenge and dissent in these debates and was notably followed by Richard Hylton's vociferous attack in The Nature of the Beast (2007) in which he declared, 'Since the 1970s, cultural diversity initiatives within the visual arts sector have arguably exacerbated, rather than confronted, exclusionary pathologies of the art world. They have compounded the problems of tokenism and racial separation within the arts sector.'

Stuart Hall's warning of 'ambivalent mainstreaming', sounded at an event at Tate Britain in 2006, came as the final building stages of the new home for Iniva were being completed at Rivington Place. During this panel discussion, initiated by Mike Phillips as Curator: Cross-cultural Programmes at Tate Britain, Hall made a recurring plea to retrieve and to sustain the historical specificity of the conditions and contexts in which the proposition of cultural diversity had emerged and entered into common currency 'like sliced bread'. Hall saw clearly that the loss of collective historical memory had divested multiculturalism of its value and that any collapse of different generational relations and motives in the quest of migrant artists to join the project of modernity would end in the diversion of another moment of assimilation. In contrast, Hall and others recognised post-war commonwealth migration and the generations which came after as a longer process of globalisation which had been identified and announced eleven years previous during Iniva's seminal conference at Tate Britain on 'The New Internationalism'.

In the contemporary visual arts, the history and current identity crisis of Iniva is a good example of the unforeseen consequences of the conflicting discourses of multiculturalism and cultural diversity in relation to the continuing processes of globalisation. The tensions and contradictions of this expanded field of modernism, anticipated by the Iniva conference, but now framed by a new turn to internationalism through emerging new non-Western markets, revealed itself quite clearly in the research of Tate Encounters in two specific ways. Firstly, throughout the two-year fieldwork period, self-selected students from LSBU who came from diasporic backgrounds readily identified in Tate Britain a call to their attention as the subjects of cultural diversity policy, while simultaneously experiencing Tate Modern as subjects of a global, unregulated culture. Secondly, during one of over forty public discussions carried out as part of the Tate Encounters: Research in Process, artists including Hew Locke, Raimi
Gbadamosi and Faisal Abd’u’llah readily noted how they felt implicitly framed by policies of cultural diversity and Britishness at Tate Britain, while at Tate Modern they assumed the status of ‘international’ artists. This conflation of identity with the local politics of cultural diversity at Tate Britain contrasted to the perception of artistic autonomy and subjectivity at Tate Modern offers a clue to the extent to which the racialisation of cultural diversity policy has obfuscated and indeed delimited the invitation not only to a diversity of artists but to audiences as well.  

At an early stage of Tate Encounters, we came to see in stark terms that defining the barriers to cultural access or entitlement in terms of those not represented in the museum, either as artists, professionals or visitors, was framed and overwritten by the discourse of social exclusion, which, without recourse to an understanding of the museum’s present inclusions, practices and reproductions, positioned all of those outside of the museum as implicitly lacking some cultural value. Importantly, Tate Encounters was made to see by its voluntary participants that invitations to the museum based upon racialised or ethnicised identities reproduced a structural inequality from the outset and whilst such inclusive overtures were aimed at redressing some unspoken cultural deficit, left the culture of the museum without challenge.

The Tate Encounters research continues to point to a new set of cultural conditions in which the imagined ‘excluded subject’ of widening participation perfectly understands the offer of the museum, but cannot meaningfully accept the museum’s terms of engagement, whilst the museum, for its part, struggles to understand the new authority of this subject and hence is unable to recognise, or produce, a new audience. The research points to cultural developments in which the transcultural experience of migration, based upon global capital and labour flow, together with the transmedial experience of digital culture, now places every individual museum professional in exactly the same cultural space as that of every other individual subject in respect of the meaning of museum objects. If this is broadly correct it does denote far-reaching implications for the project’s view of cultural policy, education and the role of museums.

In parallel with the studies of ‘excluded subjects’, Tate Encounters also developed an evidence base for accounting for the ways in which cultural diversity policies have circulated within institutional networks and what work they do. The research developed an analysis, which suggests that cultural diversity operates institutionally as the management of risk to the longer term, and some would argue central purposes of the museum, which are those of acquisition, collection, and conservation. On this view cultural diversity networks are far from open, or rhizomatic, but function as institutional enclaves and narrow channels of communication, cut off from larger networks of both private and public extension.

More broadly the project has come to understand many of the responses to the Tate Encounters analysis to date as a significant apprehension, if not reluctance, on the part of practitioners to abandon the politics of identity and representation as the historic basis for progressive cultural engagement. This it is argued is a sign of a larger intellectual and political problem, which is articulated as the limits of multiculturalism.

**Discerning the fault lines**

In March 2009 Tate Encounters ran a four-week series of public discussions at Tate Britain as part of its ‘Research in Process’ methodology. There were four strands to the discussions which involved contributions from artists, academics and practitioners contributing to the attempt to articulate a cultural and political history of the British art museum, response to cultural difference. One event, ‘The Changing Status of Difference: Cultural Policy from 1970 to the present’ serves well in discerning the lines along which the crisis discussed above continues to be shaped. The three panelists spanned a period of arts policy development...
from the early 1980s to the present, encompassing practices and perspectives within the Arts Council, GLC, the NMDC and the Greater London Authority. The panel consisted of Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey, Munira Mirza, Director of Policy, Arts, Culture and the Creative Industries, Greater London Authority, and Sandy Nairne, Director, National Portrait Gallery.

Lola Young voiced a number of narrative threads across her own participation and involvement in the practical politics of diversity over this period, identifying the shifting language in which issues of diversity had been negotiated and how cultural policy initiatives, however well intentioned, inevitably reproduced a positioning of the subject as ‘other’. For Young, the very term ‘cultural diversity’ was just the latest cipher for ‘other’ in a binary logic which out of frustration had led her to engage with the politics of representation intellectually defined by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. She further marked herself as someone who had argued, and continues to argue, from the position of a cultural practitioner, academic and politician for a complex politics of cultural representation. From the perspective of the Tate Encounters' research Lola Young’s recognition of the binary logic of racialised thinking is well made and parallels the logic of Tate Encounter’s fieldwork. In addition, her call for a more complex cultural politics of representation, one that goes beyond the simple multicultural populist model of a fair aggregate of cultural bits, as well as a policy that is not based upon a market view of culture, is also germane to the current debate.

Sandy Nairne addressed directly the politicization of culture and recognized how interior and narrowly focused the discussion of art and society had been during his time at both Tate and the Arts Council, as well as more generally within British contemporary visual arts in the 1970s. He saw that the setting of targets for proportional funding for BME arts at the Arts Council in the 1980s was no more than tokenism and went on to identify his own and others’ recognition of the need for ‘structural change’ in who controlled cultural programming. At the Arts Council this had led to a raft of initiatives aimed at promoting ethnic minority arts, including, Decibel, Iniva and the building of Rivington Place. Finally, in his time as Director of the National Portrait Gallery he acknowledged that since the National Museum Directors Conference working party in 2004 on staffing and governance, little had changed and that the then Minister for the Arts and Culture, David Lammy had essentially told the Directors’ group that it wasn’t for the government to lay down the rules, but for them to take responsibility for creativity and representation in the cultural field. Sandy Nairne's characterization of cultural diversity initiatives within British visual arts can be understood in similar terms to that of Lola Young in which, over the past three decades, arguments had been made within established cultural institutions to extend the parameters of what to fund, strategically develop, and programme so as to include Britain’s cultural minorities. In both views progress over the period has been gradual and uneven, but their position remained one of the continued need to press for greater equality in all aspects of cultural representation, in employment, artistic programming and in audiences.

From Tate Encounters’ analytical position, both Lola Young and Sandy Nairne's contributions interestingly revealed the limit and evident frustration of a conception of cultural politics based upon representation. In this highly established model culture is seen to be made up of identifiable, settled communities, formed along class and ethnic lines, of different sizes, shapes, interests and outlooks, which through cultural diversity policy can be recognized and acknowledged, proportionally, by representations and representatives within cultural institutions. In contrast, our research suggests that culture travels along new lines of force, extending beyond the existing institutional boundaries of which the defining feature is that of mobility and transition, involving the spatial, material and virtual. In this view of culture, the challenge is no longer that of achieving fair and proportional systems of representation, but of mapping a new sense of a public realm and acknowledging new kinds of connectedness. In these terms Tate Encounters seriously questions policies aimed at promoting greater inclusiveness based upon a now historical conception of culture. Tate
Encounters’ rejection of the historical and conceptual basis of cultural diversity initiatives was shared by the third contributor, Munira Mirza.

Munira Mirza saw cultural diversity policy as arising from a ‘post modern’ rejection of modernist cultural authority and its continuity with the Enlightenment project. In this sphere, left/intellectual generation had embraced a cultural relativism, the consequences of which were, proverbially, to throw out the baby with the bathwater. In wanting to challenge the European canon of High Culture, Feminism, Leftism and community arts, and academic post-modernism had collectively rejected the transcendent nature of great art. In the process of critique, those responsible for shaping cultural diversity policy lost sight of the fact that culture transcends circumstances and attains an objective and universal condition. For Mirza, cultural relativism’s emphasis upon the local and situated nature of cultural reproduction abandoned any universal notion of cultural value. In policy terms, the consequences of these intellectual and political developments have been that culture has become increasingly harnessed to and made to work for political social goals. It follows from Mirza’s argument that the instrumentalisation of culture in strategies of targeting Black and ethnic minority artists and communities is the consequence of an intellectual position of cultural relativism. In calling for a rejection of cultural welfarism, Mirza sees the task as one of reasserting the canon and the importance of artistic authority and expertise. For her, cultural policy must find a way of liberating contemporary creativity from the burden of having to be representational.

Tate Encounters’ own analytical position also identifies the redundancy of cultural welfarism, but far from aligning this with cultural relativism the view is posed that cultural diversity policy is not relativist enough. There is little to be gained in attempting to revert to the past in an era characterized by its globalizing compression of time and space and little usefulness therefore in attempts to restore the particularity of the European canon. Such a view is supported by the research material of Tate Encounters which demonstrates the shifting boundaries and contexts in which the museum experience is subjectively engaged. This would seem to suggest that relativism is precisely a basis upon which to establish future cultural policy.

**Changing Times**

Across these three presentations it is possible to see both shared historical conjunctures as well as breaks, which operate along generational, class cultural as well as political lines. It is clear that the development of a British multicultural perspective, which was drawn together and given political and practical expression by Ken Livingstone’s leadership of the GLC, was forged by the experience of Post War Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani migration and settlement in urban city contexts. For Lola Young, it was the children of that first generation, the first generation of Black and Asian Britons whose experience of racism led them, with the British liberal left, to resist and demonstrate against overt as well as implicit forms of racism in their communities and in the institutions of education and culture. As Sandy Nairne acknowledged, his and other white educated liberal’s entry into cultural diversity came from the very real politics of a Black and Asian British generation. This, however, is not the generational experience of Munira Mirza, who makes the point that her sense of racial or ethnic identity was of a later and different formation, one in which she sees a counter cultural politics which rejected the established elitism and adopted instead a ‘postmodern’ relativism. For Mirza BME categories are racialised and ultimately to be rejected.

There are a number of reasons why Tate Encounters considers that the politics of representation have come to an end, all of which result in the newer recognition that the Internet as well as newer, globalised forms of migration has radically changed the relations of communities to the idea of nation. The politics of representation of the earlier period rightly
problematised the stereotypical nature of dominant cultural representations, pointing out not only the racist basis of Black and Asian representation, but also the invisibility of Black and Asian culture, together with the absence of positive representation. In making these arguments at the level of representation, it was thought possible to create an authentic and collective representation of Black and Asian experience but in pursing such a politics of simple authenticity it reproduced its relation to dominant culture and produced a reification of difference. Hard as is was to realise this at the time, and virtually no one did, the politics of the representation of Black, minority ethnic culture could do nothing other than mirror and hence essentialise the racialised subject of the dominant white imagination.

More practically in terms of an involvement with cultural policies, the politics of representation attached itself, within parliamentary liberal politics, at the limit of its claims for greater equality, which is to say that Black representational politics elided itself with the Labour politics of equal opportunities. In doing this it had to relinquish any claims to a position, which would identify the British State as culpable in the machinery of the reproduction of inequality. This was a high price to pay for reforms, especially in the field of education as well as in culture, which even today remain beyond realisation as already noted.

In the cultural sphere the politics of representation, now coupled with that of the politics of equal opportunities not only could not challenge the structural reproduction of social inequality, but could neither mount a challenge to the terms and conditions of competition for equal opportunities. It was confined to wanting to join the cultural club, to demanding to participate in culture on the terms that dominant culture set. This is the import of Stuart Hall’s warning about mainstreaming.

The new critique of the representational politics of multiculturalism is now gathering force and in Munira Mirza’s version of this, the result has been the call to reject the politics of Cultural Welfarism, because it has reproduced a racialised view of culture in the place of a contemporary creative heterogeneity. But the move to replace national representational multicultural with a plea for the universality of creative culture and aesthetic competence and experience is clearly a traditional and conservative move. The claim for the universality of creative culture is the other side of the same coin to the essentialism that claims the authenticity of localised ethnic or racialised cultures. In the end both see culture and its products through highly selective and teleological histories, derived primarily from the binaries of nineteenth-century definitions of art and science, in which cultural definition wavers between individual aesthetic experience and anthropological tradition and custom. The current organisation of British public cultural institutions continues in large part to maintain this historical split in which contemporary art is located within the discourse of European Modernism and the history of aesthetics, whilst the rest of the world’s cultures, and their diasporic extensions in migrational settlements remain resolutely contained in the anthropological discourse of heritage.

More broadly we have come to understand many of the responses to the Tate Encounters analysis to date as an reluctance on the part of practitioners to abandon the politics of identity and representation as the historic basis for progressive cultural engagement. This it is argued is a sign of a larger intellectual and political problem, which is articulated as the limits of multiculturalism.

The central and highly abstract overarching argument of Tate Encounters is that whilst cultural institutions cleave to cultural dualism in order to rationalise their missions and practices, changes in the world and Britain have outstripped the capacity of their binary logic to explain what is currently happening. Whilst the classificatory systems and practical institutional technologies of people and things is all still in place its explanatory power is near exhaustion. Tate Encounters is not alone in reaching for a model of cultural practice, which centrally recognises the transformations taking place in the processes through which cultural value is currently being lived. The concepts which seem to us to have practical utility and
reach are some of those derived from those intellectual movements of the 1980s, which first began to notice and chart changes in the condition of late Modernity. Such changes are centrally associated with what has been labelled as the Postmodern and its associated epistemological relativism. Far from seeing the stress on the relative, constructed, situated and particularised nature of culture as the cause of the current confusion, we see it as opening up the space for new ways of configuring and connecting cultural production, reproduction and value, which museums could benefit from, if only a move could be made beyond the anxiety of the possible loss of cultural authority. What seems clear from the research is that cultural authority cannot be maintained by a simple insistence on some kind of inherent, fixed and ultimately universal meaning of the objects of collections, which is represented by the stock of historical expert knowledge and validated by custodial practices. The cultural authority of major national cultural institutions is greatly enhanced precisely at moments when they successfully reshape their practices through a grasp of new movements and patterns in cultural production and equally, when they are able to jettison residual definitions. Far from cultural relativism undermining the pursuit of the best that has been thought and written, it opens the way into a reflexive culture, which is happy to test all claims and continuously and openly revalue historical culture in the light of present contingent and changing realities.

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1 Black British Art: The revolt of the artist, 17 May 2006, Tate Britain panel discussion: http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/stuart_hall/default.jsp

2 Progress Reports: art in an era of diversity. INIVA, 2010

3 For the full programme of this conference see http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/66393_file.pdf

4 For further information about Tate Encounters see the Tate website at and the project’s archive website at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch-majorprojects/tate-encounters/ and process.tateencounters.org


6 Section 2.12 http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/29/32.html

7 As above, section 3.21

8 See http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/resources/nmde-reports-and-publications/diversity/


10 The differences generated between the two museums revolve around the distinction between National and International Art. To be cast as a British Artist as well as a Black or minority ethnic, subject is therefore to fall within the British politics of multiculturalism and its diversity strategies. It is further the case that artists who collaborated with Tate on educational programmes, related to the historical collection, were often recruited in order to put the other side of the colonial view contained in the collection.

11 This is a complex point that needs more space to expand upon than is permitted here. Suffice it to say that the cultural space referred to is that of digital culture and the expanded visual field, which has established a new default of distributed networks of meaning, which levels subjectivity. In this the cultural worker is a knowledge holder, whose practices of knowledge are contained by the analogical technologies of the museum.

12 Over the course of the Tate Encounters research the fieldwork period, which involved student participants, with a migrational family background in workshops and media productions were largely understood as a diversity project of Tate Learning, which was a strongly marked department, tasked by the institution with delivering cultural diversity.
The results of all of these deliberations are available as audio files on the Tate Encounters Archival Website. www.tateencounters.org

See http://process.tateencounters.org/?cat=6. This discussion was co-chaired by Mike Phillips and Andrew Dewdney.

This is a further highly condensed point requiring elaboration beyond the scope of this paper. It is part of the argument about the new conditions of digital culture, in which culture is globally distributed and in which the older hierarchies of knowledge and experience are challenged.