

An Encounter with Tate Encounters

Sejul Malde

My encounter with the Tate Encounters Research Project began at the outset of my career change journey and initially represented an opportunity to build experience with which to inform my future career decisions. But looking back now, it has become clear to me that the project has become more useful than that. It provides the context through which I can reflect on other personal encounters, those that shape an understanding of me: my histories, my values and my motivations. This paper is an attempt to articulate those reflections, which I hope in turn, will provide a useful personal reflection on the project itself.

Before reflecting on these personal encounters, I should say something about my involvement in the project and how I hope to apply this within the analysis contained in this paper. My involvement broadly comprised three phases. The first, an initial articulation of my interest in the project through correspondence with Andrew Dewdney and Victoria Walsh. The second, through the role of informal volunteer and observer, supporting the series of project interviews and discussions hosted at Tate Britain. The third, through reviewing material generated by the project in the context of my current MA studies in Culture, Policy and Management at City University.

All three phases were prompted by a certain degree of curious enquiry as opposed to a definitive intention on what may be revealed. Each in turn has resulted in additional personal experiences that further provide useful subject matter for this paper to make sense of. Moreover, the themes explored through this project provide useful lines of enquiry by bringing into focus methods of interpreting my personal experiences. Through referring to notions of spectatorship, cultural capital, meaning and heritage, within a multidisciplinary context, the project has widened my field of vision. This paper does not seek to contribute to the discussion of these concepts, but instead use them as a broader palette of interpretive tools with which to interrogate my own identity.

So, what interrogations of my identity does Tate Encounters open up? As a project that explores encounters between people from migrant backgrounds and an important national arts institution, an obvious examination would be of my relationship as a second-generation immigrant with these institutions. Yet the project has revealed in me a different intrigue, not so much in my own relationship with such arts institutions per se, but instead with art more generally as a wider site of personal experience and influence. Within such a field, two specific personal encounters come to mind for further exploration. The first occurring a decade ago and involving a sudden desire to engage with the contemporary visual arts scene in London that had previously held little pull. The second, an encounter that incorporates this very moment in time, driven by my experiences with the Tate Encounters project, leading to

the pursuit of further study and a potential diversion in personal and career fulfillment. Interrogating my identity through the exploration of personal encounters with art in this way is prompted by a recognition of the growing impact art has held on me. Yet it curiously appears to sit outside the areas of common influence derived from my cultural, educational and professional backgrounds. What do my own experiences with art reveal about me that a logical analysis of common influences can shed no light on? This paper provides an opportunity to delve deeper into this question.

Moreover my intrigue to further explore these artistic encounters comes from the potential change they allude to in my character, namely a move away from rationality. As someone growing up within a fairly traditional Indian family environment, an educational pursuance of rational and traditional disciplines was advocated from an early age. Academically this led to further study focused on Mathematics and Sciences and a subsequent degree in Law. Professionally this resulted in pursuing a career in Tax Consultancy, which developed into Project Management within the Finance sector. A consequent emphasis on rules and reason abounded resulting in a passion and curiosity for life framed as black and white but little tendency to revel in the grey.

An over emphasis on rational pursuits meant that as a child there was little encouragement to develop a relationship with the arts. That is not to say that my family was culturally inactive. There was an engagement with Indian cultural forms such as music and film, yet for me this did not appear to translate into an obvious personal attachment with the arts. Similarly, whilst growing up, my peers had no influence in this regard. Coming from comparable family backgrounds, they also held no discernable artistic interests. Moreover, a recurrent memory of being told by a teacher during a primary school play rehearsal to mouth the words to a song instead of singing them, possibly damaged any emerging artistic confidence I may have possessed.

As a child on school trips I had visited the various major London museums but there was little recollection of prior visits to art galleries. Perceived images resided in the back of my mind of places containing dreary old paintings depicting figures and scenes that held no particular connection to me or my circumstances. Into my early twenties, it was not just my disinterest in what I perceived art galleries to contain that held no appeal to visit. I was far more interested in exploring the social life London had to offer, where I could indulge my outgoing nature through collective reveling. Visiting an art gallery seemed like an introverted individual experience that held no purchase on me. It is therefore a curiosity that over a decade ago I became suddenly prompted to engage on this basis. Over the course of a few weeks I visited a range of exhibitions such as *Ant Noises* at the Saatchi Gallery (Boundary Road), *Francisco Toledo* at the Whitechapel, *Sonic Boom* at the Hayward, *Out There* at White Cube 2 and *The Art of Star Wars* at the Barbican. I also visited the collections at Tate Modern, Tate Britain, National Portrait Gallery and National Gallery.

Yet the curiosity of this pull towards art cannot be assessed purely through looking at prior experience of, and exposure to, art itself. Factors such as my personal motivations and influences at that stage in my life must also be given due credence. At the time I was undergoing a process of change. Professionally I had just completed a very challenging professional qualification in Tax and was nearing 5 years in the same role. Whilst I was happy and motivated within my job I could sense myself growing increasingly impatient for change. This however was not promoted by a desire to switch jobs but instead by a need to address new personal challenges. My personal life had been very settled; I lived with my parents, was financially secure and had a strong group of friends, many of whom I had known since school. It had, however, begun to feel too settled. I longed for a shake up of the routine, a changing environment and new exposures. With that in mind I took an 18-month sabbatical to travel. It was within the bubble created between taking the sabbatical and formally embarking on my travels that my visits to the galleries and exhibitions mentioned took place. My curious choice of spending time viewing art alluded to this personal desire for something different, combined with becoming suddenly time rich in London.

On reflection this encounter with art involved a duality of roles, both as a visitor and spectator of art. Becoming a visitor to art galleries provided a quick opportunity to effect a change, in both my accustomed environment and my normal activities. During this period I had begun buying *Time Out* on a weekly basis and instead of focusing solely on its familiar sections, I had started diverting my attention to the art pages. Here I had begun getting acquainted with names of exhibitions, gallery spaces and their locations. I cannot say if particular reviews held any sway, yet decisions were made where to go and what to see. It was possible that a written description of a particular space or artwork might have developed an inclination to witness it first hand. From that point I soon arrived at a gallery space ready and willing to engage with art. A curiosity had quickly transformed itself into a physical actuality through effecting my own choices. This felt liberating.

As a visitor, navigating such gallery spaces also promised something different. At the time I had grown accustomed to engaging within certain familiar environments such as offices, pubs or sports centres. These places seemed to define me through my everyday interaction with them. The locale of a gallery on the other hand presented something new. By challenging my familiar interaction with space, the gallery seemed to open up fresh avenues of self-perception. My own social reality could be left outside, leaving me unrestricted to interpret the space and my consequent position within it, with a certain freedom of expression that was attractive.

I also became a spectator, viewing works of art that were completely new to me. I had very little knowledge of art history that could help provide a meaningful context to what I saw. This, however, appeared to enhance my experience rather than detract from it. I felt unburdened with having such few academic hoops to channel processes of making meaning through. Instead, I had the freedom to rely on my own visuality to make sense of what was in front of

me. This was enhanced by an awareness of how displays of works within a gallery space seemed to emphasise the importance of looking. For example, coming across Tracy Emin's *My Bed* during the *Ant Noises* show made me consider how the changed context of a gallery space could produce different representations of an everyday object. The bed's domestic function had become replaced by that of an object to be consumed visually. This opened up the possibility of drawing up alternative meanings beyond established representations.

The role of spectator also brought an enhanced awareness of myself in connection to the artwork. A symbiotic relationship was in play. My spectatorship of art seemed to also bring about a spectatorship of myself. A sharpened consciousness of my physical and intellectual presence. One that stood, watched, examined and admired. In this respect Richard Wilson's *20:50* at the Saatchi Gallery was arguably the artwork that resonated with me the most, possibly because the work relied so much on such a sharpened consciousness of self. Edging forward along a tapered walkway that offered nothing below but an empty void, I became only aware of my disorientated and undefined presence. The relationship between myself and what I was walking into made no sense to me. Eventually looking down and seeing my reflection staring back at me triggered the realisation that this perceived void was actually a pool of almost solid black oil. In an instance, an awareness of my own defined physicality within the space returned. Similarly mental confusion became clarified understanding. It was not just my perception of space nor my appreciation of the work that had become enhanced, but also the nature of my own presence within it.

Whilst on the one hand it could be said that my visits to the various galleries were prompted simply by an opportunity to engage in an alternative pursuit, to examine my own motivations more fully, greater attention must be paid to the cultural context of the time. Ten years ago, UK arts, culture and fashion were riding off the back of the perceived "Cool Britannia" brand. The visual arts in particular had reached the popular consciousness, with the recent opening of Tate Modern and the rise of the YBA's. There was definite cultural and social capital to be had in engaging with art exhibitions during this period. Whilst not consciously aware at the time, I can now understand how a desire to acquire such capital may have played some part in this experience. The decision to start reviewing the art pages of Time Out and the choice of exhibitions that featured many of the popular artists of the age, was in no doubt influenced in some way by a desire to tap into this fashionable climate. The simultaneous spectatorship of myself as well as the art in front of me was also perhaps a conscious awareness of my own image within such a context. A desire not just to see, but also to be seen.

Yet whilst responding to this climate of 'cool' clearly held an influence, so did a strong desire to creatively express myself. At the time I had felt chained to an over-identification with peer groups and a reliance on familiarity. There was a desire to break out and express myself. I was becoming self aware, I was engaging in new experiences and most importantly I was starting a self dialogue that has continued up to this very paper. Whilst my decision to take a sabbatical to go travelling formed a key part of this response, adopting new roles as a visitor

and spectator of art similarly promised the opportunity to effect a change. An ability to create new experiences through enabling personal agency was realised. Perhaps not the same as producing a work of art from a flash of inspiration, but for me this still represented a creative expression. If notions of cultural capital drove me to this encounter with art, it was my desire to creatively mould something out of it that provides a more pertinent reflection.

A second encounter with art emerged from a diversion in established career path almost two years ago. This continues today through undertaking an MA in Culture, Policy and Management and the exploration of possible career options within this field. My involvement with Tate Encounters has charted the span of this period through the three phases of engagement with the project that was described earlier. Within the process of career change, each phase has proved beneficial in different ways: by providing a forum within which to define reasons for seeking a new career path, by providing a practical context upon which to base a decision to pursue a career in Arts Management and finally as a point of reference to relate my subsequent developing knowledge of the sector.

There is therefore a temptation to classify this encounter as simply servicing a professional need, namely providing the informational context with which to change careers. But such an interpretation feels too simplistic, especially as the drivers for something as personally significant as a career change are wrapped up so closely with notions of individual identity and motivation. My previous career in the City had begun to reveal an increasing personal confusion I was feeling about my relationship to wider society and the contribution I was making to it. I looked at myself and saw certain values and needs which had begun to look wholly inconsistent with investing my energies and efforts towards supporting the sole interests of a large corporation. Seeing the mass of City workers streaming over London Bridge every morning made me further question what individual impact I was making or indeed could make. I felt confident in the person I had become yet increasingly bemused about how little connection I could see between my personal self and my professional self. I had begun to realise the importance of aligning the two, driven by developing a greater understanding of how my personal values, strengths and characteristics could be put to better use. Therefore changing career became less about pursuing a professional need and more about engaging in a process of self-purpose and fulfillment through looking outwards.

After embarking on my career change, I discovered the Tate Encounters project. I wanted to find out more and explore the possibilities of getting involved on a voluntary basis. I contacted Andrew Dewdney and summarised my situation and interest in an email. We agreed to meet during which time he also referred me to Victoria Walsh to explore the possibility of getting involved in the series of project interviews and discussions. Whilst in one sense this was a simple process of introduction to express my interest in the project, it also represented the first opportunity to articulate my thinking at the time.

Looking back now it is clear that these thoughts were not fully formed, but in attempting to articulate these I was relying on my instincts. These instincts drew me to key project themes of accessibility and participation and their connection with art institutions. This seemed to make sense in the context of exploring new career options that better reflected my interests, and myself, particularly as these themes incorporated certain personal experiences with art as have already been described. However, I can see now how these instincts were operating within a wider context. They reflected my desire to undertake a process of self-understanding by looking outwards and examining my relationship to the wider world. Engaging with the key themes explored by Tate Encounters felt like a way for this to happen.

My subsequent involvement in the series of Tate Encounters interviews and debates was both as an informal volunteer, assisting with administrative formalities, and as an observer attending the majority of events. Adopting this position enabled reflection on the range of perspectives and practices that were being explored during these events and the role of art within this. For me the subject of art that was debated within this context seemed broader than just a consideration of the quality of Tate's collection or a discussion of its professional practice. It alluded to a way of looking at the world and the possibility of effecting change within it. So, a review of gallery education practices was also a reference to the educative function of art in engaging the wider community in key debates; a discussion about the increasing role of digital media in art was also symbolic of art's potential democratic quality; an exploration of visual culture within a gallery environment also emphasised the possibility of drawing a wider social and cultural narrative of meaning from art; whilst debates about arts policy also stressed art's political relevance. This experience developed my perception of the role art could play in my current circumstances. More than just providing a vocational solution, art offered a lens through which my process of looking outwards could take place. I was curious to explore how such an interpretation of art could help me to continue to look.

Extending my relationship with this project through an academic turn represents a response to this curiosity. It has further evolved my own encounter with art. Whilst continuing to acknowledge art's ability to shine a light on society, I recognise that it also represents a separate discourse that requires its own rigorous examination. Through connecting my own experiences to the debates contained within the project, I am beginning to adopt a greater position of critical analysis. Is the arts institution really a space where people are free to engage with art on their own terms, or an important player that continues to retain power over meaning making? Do arts education strategies represent a genuine desire to make art more accessible or are they merely useful methods of generating funding? Do arts organisations truly consider digital media to represent an opportunity to widen the dialogue and participation in art or as just an alternative marketing tool? Has cultural diversity policy actually hindered rather than helped notions of contemporary diversity?

With a capacity to look around comes an obligation to look back in. Art offers itself up both as an instrument for developing a critical position of enquiry and as a site for critical analysis in

itself. Rather than providing a solution to a question of career change, my encounter with art through the course of this project has advanced my ability to ask yet more questions. I am aware of the irony! Yet my confused instinct to question, that prompted such a career change in the first place, now appears to have developed into a more assured capacity to critically analyse. Self-questioning no longer leads to self-doubt, but instead to a more confident self-criticality upon which to affect change. There is greater personal reward in such an outcome.

Reflecting on both encounters with art have revealed separate personal quests for self-meaning. The first emanating from a desire to identify my own individuality, the second from making sense of my relationship with wider society. Yet in one respect both quests have ended in failure. Through engaging in both encounters, I still cannot say who I am, nor what is my place in the overall scheme of things. The outcomes of each feel unfulfilled. Arguably, confusion still reigns.

Yet it is not these outcomes but the approaches adopted that are illuminating. Both encounters developed rich personal experiences with art in its institutional, aesthetic and knowledge creating forms. In pursuance of a greater understanding of self-identity, both encounters promoted particular articulations of self-expression. Viewing art works as a visitor and spectator within gallery spaces promoted a creative self-expression, whilst engaging with Tate Encounters in a multiplicity of roles promoted a critical self-expression.

When the quest for understanding identity only appears to end in confusion, perhaps there is greater personal discovery in instead exploring such self-expressions of identity, wherever they may lead. The recognition of myself not defined simply by cultural heritage, social class, professional status or even value system, but explored through creative and critical expressions of all these attributes, represents a preferable way forward.

My encounter with Tate Encounters has given me the opportunity to explore from a position of fluid perspective. More importantly, it has encouraged the conditions to simply try things out, whilst providing the space to reflect back. This has enabled the recognition of self-expressions with which to interpret personal experience. Perhaps as a reflection on the project overall, this approach might also inform its exploration of the relationship between art museum and cultural identity. If museums can similarly create circumstances to enable all their audiences to creatively and critically engage with themselves, then notions of cultural identity and Britishness become a fluid product of personal expression and exchange, rather than just the fixed construction of a historical institution.