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Across the Imaginative Threshold of the Future of Cultural Equity

Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski

Reflections on the Year 3 Project

This essay is one of nine commissioned by A New Direction to reflect on the Tate Year 3 Project and provoke thinking about future projects. For the full set go to www.anewdirection.org.uk/year-3-reflections

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The term *Tate Year 3 Project* in the first instance and *Year 3* thereafter refers to the whole project including planning and production stages.

Steve McQueen Year 3 refers to the artwork and exhibition.

For clarity, we have referred to the school year group of Year 3 as Y3.



Me and my sister, Year 3 (Y3)

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A society that does not value imagination is one that has ensured its future will be a clone of its present traumas. This is why the global shift in the pitch of our generational frequency is so wondrous. If you have not heard, we are embracing a discourse of dreams and dignity versus one solely of struggle.¹

- Mark Gonzales

Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski

There was something powerful and quite exhilarating, experiencing the sound of intermittent (joyful) shouts of “WE ARE HERE!” from the children visiting Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries, last year (pre-Covid-19), as they spotted their photo in the *Steve McQueen Year 3* exhibition. It felt like young people were being encouraged to take up space in the gallery unapologetically, which didn’t feel like the norm in such places. The *Tate Year 3 Project* created quite the buzz, and excitement. I remember it got people talking about it, engaging with it. It captured something that felt like a contagious energy, and the familiarity of the photographic format of the school class photo seemed to allow everybody and anybody to engage in this ambitious art project which prompted conversations about the future, the future of this generation of children and the kind of world they would inherit. There was an inbuilt equity, diversity, inclusivity: this could be you or somebody that you knew. Turner Prize-winning artist and Oscar-winning filmmaker Steve McQueen’s own unassuming Year 3 (Y3) class photo, shared in press coverage and during the launch in 2018, attached a level of inspiration and aspiration for the possible futures of the 76,146 young people who participated.

During the *Year 3* school and family visits, teachers and parents would often mention that it was their first time to visit Tate

Britain. I started to ask myself when was the first time I visited an art gallery? I had taken my art GCSE whilst in Sixth Form. I loved painting and pursued an art foundation. Art became both a way of channeling and managing grief and a pathway to gain further independence. As a teenager I would have described it in terms of a passport to freedom. And yet, I calculated I was 18 years old the first time that I went to an art gallery, this calculation created a wonder of ‘why?’ I asked those secondary school friends I am still in touch with if they remember us ever visiting an art gallery during our school years? They responded with a resounding no. Not that that meant we’d never engaged in the arts and culture, but that our relationship to these nationally funded institutions was possibly as limited as the *Year 3* participants were describing now.

In reflecting on *Year 3* and cultural equity for this essay, I turned to Steve McQueen’s description of the project as capturing the future in a milestone year:

‘There’s an urgency to reflect on who we are and our future [...] to have a visual reflection on the people who make this city work. I think it’s important and, in some ways, urgent.’²

I thought back to what the world looked like in my milestone year, 1980/81. I was attending Houndsfield Primary School, which backed onto Jubilee Park with its

1. M. Gonzales, In *Times of Terror, Wage Beauty* (*Wage Beauty x Think Disrupt*, 2014), 51

2. Tate, ‘Turner Prize-winning artist and Oscar-winning filmmaker Steve McQueen unveils his epic portrait of London’s Year 3 pupils’, www.tate.org.uk/exhibitions-and-events/at-tate-britain/steve-mcqueen-year-3, accessed 26 April 2021.

youth club called 'The Hut', with after school and summer youth provision and Houndsfield Library, across the street from the primary school. I wish I knew the name of the librarians; it was such a welcoming space. In musical terms the landscape was full – Adam and the Ants were introducing *Prince Charming* and George Benson was all about *Giving Me the Night*, Irene Cara's *Fame* was giving me a new found love for scissor jumps off of tables, and The Gang were in *Celebration* mode, Bucks Fizz were *Making Your Mind Up*; Thatcher was in power and the 1981 uprisings happened in London (Brixton), Birmingham (Handsworth), Liverpool (Toxteth), Manchester (Moss Side), and Leeds (Chapelton). A burgeoning Black Arts Movement was visibly on the horizon and making its mark.

Around this time, I was introduced to a P.E. teacher called Mr. Johnson, who brought dynamic, new things like 'pop mobility', a form of aerobics, to our school. He introduced me to gymnastics, taking that extra step of convincing my mother to let me attend Saturday gymnastics class in Enfield, part of the British Amateur Gymnastics Association (BAGA). I now frame this moment as someone who took an interest in supporting the expansion of my immediate world and space encouraging independence. An opportunity to do something I would probably never have considered. I can also recognise on reflection that Mr. Johnson was maybe one of the first times I encountered a person in educational terms that wanted the best for all his students, a clear system of equity, though not with a one-size fits all approach, always providing variations so whatever your ability you could participate.

My first experience of a gallery was the National Gallery, London. The reason why I remember this memory so vividly was because it was the first time I saw a Van Gogh painting in the 'flesh'. My older sister had a Vincent van Gogh book by Hans Bronkhorst (I still have her copy). I had fingered through this book a lot, alongside others on our family's much-loved rickety bookshelf. What I remember from this visit to see the real thing was the surprise of seeing the texture, the paint raised and poking off of the canvas. There was no comparison to the 2D version in the book, though the book is beautifully illustrated. We were given an assignment to reimagine/recreate one of the paintings and I produced a poor rendition based on

a Van Gogh using chicken wire and some black, yellow and green synthetic wool. In hindsight, this college visit took me across an artistic threshold of a perceived exclusion. The invitation to go into a space and building in a city where such institutional buildings can often appear intimidating and not necessarily appear to be inviting.

It would be 20 years later, through the world of archives, that I would be exposed to collections of Black British art from the interwar period to contemporary times. Through the work of historian Dr. Gemma Romain and geographer Dr. Caroline Bressey's work at the [Equiano Centre](#), UCL Geography Department and their historically curated exhibitions such as *Spaces of Black Modernism*. Or, at the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths in residency exploring the [Women of Colour Index artist files](#), with arts and archives research collective *X Marks The Spot*. Or visits of respite to visit Lubaina Himid's [Making Histories Visible Archive](#) in Preston. However, I have sometimes wondered what my art education experience would have been like if I had seen exhibitions like [No Colour Bar](#) (2015), [Soul of a Nation](#) (2017), and [Get Up Stand Up Now](#) (2019) alongside exhibitions like *Sensation: Young British Artists* (1990).

For a period, I worked in Tulse Hill, South London as a youth worker. Year 3 reminded me of when I was working at Hightrees Community Development Trust, facilitating a group on a Wednesday and Friday called *Choices Young Women's Group*. The group was invited to produce artwork as part of a public arts commission by Inclusion Arts and Jason Gibilaro in 2003. The commission was for a mural on Brixton's railway bridge part of Destination Brixton's *International Trade Expo*.³ *Choices Young Women's Group* provided the artwork for the letter 'T', in a mural that would read 'B Our Guest'. I remember the sense of pride the young women expressed, when they got to see what they had been a part of, making the place where they lived just that bit brighter. There had been something really powerful in the transformation from the moment of working together on an A4 sheet of paper and then seeing that activity translated into something larger than life for all their community to experience. I learnt how important it was to create those opportunities for young people to see themselves as part of something bigger.

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Mr. Johnson was maybe one of the first times I encountered a person in educational terms that wanted the best for all his students, a clear system of equity, though not with a one-size fits all approach

3. M.Urban, 'Design competition launched to replace Brixton's 'B Our Guest' bridge artwork', *Brixton Buzz*, 26 Sept 2017, <https://www.brixtonbuzz.com/2017/09/design-competition-launched-to-replace-brixtons-b-our-guest-bridge-artwork>, accessed 27 April 2021.

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The principle of looking back at the past in order to understand the present and make positive progress.

Which brings me back to Year 3 where considerable effort was made by the project partners to make sure the young people involved were able to see themselves as part of something bigger. The project received considerable investment in financial terms with a significant amount going towards staff time to ensure that young people understood what they were part of when they had their photo taken at school and that all the new visitors to Tate Britain felt welcomed. There is no getting away from the difference resources make to the often intangible but essential back-end work that is often required with such projects to ensure its success, particularly in relation to a positive experience for all involved. However this tends to be in relation to the artwork itself, which raises the question of what more long lasting and wide-ranging changes are needed for us to think more readily of cultural institutions as equitable spaces.

For me, I think of the importance of outreach, equitable partnerships that nurture, healthy reflective relationships, shared and equal powers, and the need to carve space and trust to do things differently; something that is done so well through community spaces which our nation's cultural institutions could learn from and support. Lamenting over community spaces that no longer exist, I have found myself wondering how those still standing in this current climate are being supported or invested in; spaces like the [Karibu Education Centre](#), formally the Abeng, in Brixton, a crucial longstanding community space and resource, that functions as the alternative to the world wide web system of 'just Google it'. Here notice boards still reign supreme and so do discussions, groups, workshops, training and meetings, all ways in which you can access information about what's going on in local and wider community. These spaces can be like springboards and stepping-stones to intimate access to cultural institutions and they often play the role of creating a bridge to trust and access.

The role these community space ecosystems have, should never be undervalued, neither should what it has taken to still be standing in this moment. It can't just be about the end game of 'bums on seats', or numbers, or box ticking. Instead I think the urgency is how we reflect on the events of summer 2020 and use this as a basis to forge authentic,

long term engagement, building trust and relationships to encourage access for all, and a role in decision making. Maybe adopting an approach that reflects the 'Sankofa' philosophy, a Twi word from the Akan people of Ghana which literally translated means 'go back and get it', and refers to the search for knowledge being based on constant examination and thoughtful methodical investigation of the past. The principle of looking back at the past in order to understand the present and make positive progress.

Cultural Institutions are the custodians of past and future cultural knowledge, so it seems fitting that they would think about how they are best positioned to inform positive change. There is something to be said for how we audit progress, beyond the end of the session evaluation sheet, but over a longer timeline period. How do we measure the change taking place, or how do we measure the static energy of things that don't seem to ever change? It requires a mindful monitoring that reflects a diverse value system and holds cultural institutions accountable to all its constituents, alongside the need to acknowledge the burnout and fatigue that exists around what to some feels like a never-ending conversation around audience development and equity without much evidence of change. The reality is these conversations have been going on for decades.

Organisations like the Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA), formed in 1991, to work in the realms of education, museums and libraries to foster research on Black and Asian people in Britain; the 2005 Mayor's Commission on African and Asian Heritage, *Delivering Shared Heritage* was about developing a strategy and a series of recommendations, through exploration, with the aim of reinforcing a commitment to promote heritage and history within the capital, in response to the marginalisation of African and Asian heritage. Or the 2016, *Black Arts and Modernism* (BAM) project, which investigates how artists of African and Asian descent feature in the British art narrative. And the National Collection's audit of artworks by Black, Caribbean and Asian artists in over 30 major national and regional public collections of art across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, which culminated in a searchable database.

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...opportunities shape services with a 'by us, for us and our community' philosophy has proved invaluable in addressing actual identified need

The question remains however, how could projects and queries like these enrich and inform the discourse around the curation of permanent collections, educational programmes and the design of how visitors experience cultural institutional spaces and artworks? Moving beyond aspirational statements towards palatable, grounded change. Aye Ikomi and Eibhlin Jones's, [spreadsheet](#), created in June 2020 and platformed by the White Pube, documented Black Lives Matter statements and responses by art, cultural and heritage entities. It is maybe one example or tool in how we measure and chart the journey to move beyond what researcher Hassan Vawda said in his speculative essay: 'a history of maintaining a cultural supremacy that speaks to the very foundations of the violence that they are showing solidarity for'.⁴ How can we reflect on the events of summer 2020 and use these reflections as a basis to forge authentic, long term engagement, and an embedded cultural change, particularly in regard to the role of decision making and agenda setting?

The importance of informal opportunities for lifelong learning alongside community spaces, have continued to be essential spaces in personal terms. They have created alternative pathways to build community wealth, networks, knowledge and autonomy. And opportunities to

shape services with a 'by us, for us and our community' philosophy has proved invaluable in addressing actual identified need. It was in these spaces that I was fortunate to access the wealth of knowledge and expertise that is often lurking in plain sight throughout the community we work and live. In my experience the experts are often around us, sitting around our tables, at meetings, attending consultations, events, developing programs that bring wider diverse audiences in, working/ volunteering with cultural institutions, or working independently or adjacent to develop new production, knowledge and ways to disseminate, often filling the chasm left by and in cultural institutions. For me, reaching out and working in authentic partnerships may be where the future of cultural institutions lies if they are to become places of equity. ■

4. H. Vawda, 'A statement from a 'national public cultural institution': BLACK LIVES MATTER', Medium, 6 Jun 2020, hassanevawda.medium.com/a-statement-from-a-national-public-cultural-institution-black-lives-matter-893d76d3b133, accessed 27 April 2021

www.anewdirection.org.uk/year-3-reflections

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A New Direction is an award-winning non-profit organisation working to enhance the capacity and agency of children and young people in London to own their creativity, shape culture, and achieve their creative potential.

We do this by working with a diverse range of partners, making connections, sharing practice, influencing change, improving the ecology that surrounds children and young people, and by providing real and transformative opportunities - from childhood, through school years and into employment.

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