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Year 3: Achieving Scale and Quality in a Cultural Endeavour

Pauline Tambling

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

Pauline Tambling

Pauline recently retired following a career working in the arts, most recently as Chief Executive of Creative & Cultural Skills, a charity supporting young people into careers in the creative industries. Previous roles include as Director of Development at Arts Council England and Director of Education for the Royal Opera House. She is currently a trustee of Roundhouse London, Masterclass TRH and Voluntary Arts.

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June

2021

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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.

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*As a working-class child living in a very rural community, arts experiences outside the school itself were very rare but my English class was once taken to London for the Royal Shakespeare Company's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the famous one directed by Peter Brook and designed by Sally Jacobs). It was just before the O-level examination, and suddenly the play made sense and sowed the seeds for a new and long-term interest in the arts. Arguably children in London are within easy reach of professional arts projects but nevertheless I have always believed that the **quality** of the engagement with arts organisations is more important than the **quantity** of visits. Even as a teenager I was aware of the extraordinary effort it took to organise a class visit to the theatre and that investment, by teachers, children, and parents, needed to be justified. Too often art galleries and theatres think they are doing schools a favour by engaging with them at all.*

Pauline Tambling

This raises the question, what is the best way for national cultural organisations to engage with schools? More pressingly what makes sense in the current context reflecting the stresses schools are under following Covid-19? The arts in schools had already been 'squeezed' long before the pandemic following a number of curriculum 'reforms' over many years. Some schools offer only the minimum of what the National Curriculum requires whilst other governors and headteachers do all they can to fund the staff and resources to make their schools 'arts rich'. As well as curriculum and examination demands, all schools need to comply

with safeguarding, data protection and general health and safety making the administration of anything extra-curricular, out-of-school or with third-party organisations challenging. It's not a 'level playing field'. It was hard for many schools to engage with external partners before Covid-19, but in the current climate, where so many children have missed months of education time in school, it can only get harder. How can cultural organisations respond?

The *Tate Year 3 Project*, led by Tate, A New Direction and Artangel presents one potential model. It began as the idea of the award-winning artist Steve McQueen to capture the

images of a generation of 7-year-olds across London as a collection of traditional school photographs presented together as a single artwork. Drawing on memories of his own school photograph at Little Ealing Primary School in 1977, McQueen wanted to explore the idea of 'the future in the present' within a 'portrait of citizenship' which would reflect contemporary London by literally placing a generation of 7- and 8-year-olds on gallery walls and in an outdoor exhibition across the city. The idea was to invite all 115,000 7- and 8-year-olds in London to take part and to present their photographs together as a single massive artwork in Tate Britain preceded by an outdoor exhibition

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on advertising hoardings across all the London boroughs. Without the schools' co-operation and enthusiasm, the idea would have been a non-starter.

By the time the exhibition opened in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain on 12 November 2019, 76,146 children were involved from 1,504 London schools across all the London Boroughs. Until Covid-19 restrictions came in in March 2020, Tate Britain hosted 600 young visitors per day to see the work, an epic portrait made up of 3,128 individual class photographs. Over 7 million people saw huge versions of 50 of the images in the outdoor exhibition across London including on streets, station platforms and underground stations, and a 'takeover' of the platforms at Oxford Circus and Pimlico.

The credits for the final project read more like those of a feature film than a typical gallery education project and show the complexity of the enterprise. Like a feature film, the project started with a seemingly simple concept followed by a feasibility stage with fundraising and detailed scoping moving to assembling a team, production of the work, the indoor and outdoor exhibitions, and public engagement with the work. And like a feature film, a partnership came together specifically to deliver the project. The project extended over three years for which planning systems were built to achieve one unified artistic enterprise. Over the course of the project the partners were joined by curatorial teams, producers, administrators, photographers, editors,

designers, printers, media partners, framers and installers. There was an impressive list of funding partners including foundations, trusts, philanthropists, and public bodies. This was a project that in some ways defied classification: it was both a learning project and an artwork.

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Gallery education projects often respond to an artist, an exhibition or individual work of art but Year 3 placed a learning programme at the heart of a major contemporary art commission. In commissioning the work with Steve McQueen, Tate and Artangel were also commissioning the contributions of the schools which in turn needed expert brokerage from A New Direction's team led by Steve Moffitt and Rebecca Branch. Curatorial staff would normally be involved in creating an exhibition and a learning and participation team would provide the interface with young people visiting the gallery. Here all the gallery's staff, from curators to security, were involved in almost every aspect of both the commission and the learning project. The children were the work's subject and were

partners in its making. It was inconceivable that the children would not have the opportunity to see the finished installations. Ensuring that as many children as possible could see the work meant refocusing Tate Britain's visitor-facing services to accommodate 600 young visitors per day to the point of erecting a special marquee in the grounds as an education centre.

The lead partners in the project with producers, ArtsMediaPeople, had long experience of running projects from their different perspectives. Together, the three organisations brought expertise in commissioning and presenting contemporary arts practice along with a deep engagement with schools and young learners across the capital. None of the individual elements of Year 3 was particularly unusual or especially challenging. The component parts were tried and tested. The challenge was in the size, reach and complexity of the enterprise within a fixed timescale, its artistic ambition and the number of schools involved. The experience had to be something the schools and children would be proud to be part of, and something the children would always remember. Like any complex enterprise, the project was full of risk.

The interface with schools managed by A New Direction and the producers included everything from building the website, to safeguarding procedures, booking arrangements, photography workshops, training sessions, resource development, and ongoing school liaison.

Most importantly, A New Direction acted as guardians of the children's interests. With deadlines to meet, a project of this scale could easily privilege the end result over an inclusive process for the young people. Careful planning was critical: without an overarching time-plan the project could have easily 'run out of road' if, for example, all the photography sessions across London could not be organised within a single school year. Year 3s from Year 4 wouldn't be the same thing at all.

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Schools signed up to the project in large numbers because it was both an irresistible idea and 'manageable' in terms of time commitment and effort. There was a minimum requirement of one workshop with a photographer in the school, with the option to visit Tate Britain to see the finished work in the following school year. Teachers had access to excellent classroom resources covering many curriculum areas. They liked the website and online booking systems. The workshop sessions elicited positive responses from the schools and the photographers, and

were rated as quality experiences. Teachers found their workshop days well-organised and inspirational: many said that they would use the ideas and resources again or recommend them to colleagues. There was enthusiasm for being able to take time out from normal curriculum activity to do something different, and a 'wow factor' following both the day in school with the photographers and the gallery visit. The gallery visit was a highlight for most of the schools.

Reviews and press coverage of Year 3 were extremely positive. This was never assured: there have been many debates about how to review and judge arts projects involving children. In this case, the role of schools and students was validated by the positivity around the artwork itself. Half of the schools had not engaged with an art gallery before, so this project managed to reach schools who don't normally take up external arts opportunities. This does not necessarily mean that they are not 'arts-rich' schools, as some school leaders feel that their school-based arts provision is strong enough without involving professionals, but it does suggest that the partners made the case for a collaboration with a professional gallery.

If projects like Year 3 are to be replicated there are some lessons to learn. Ambition and scale are important: the project has to be worth doing. The children were part of a project that included not just a cluster of other schools but **most schools** in their year in London. It was important to the schools

that Steve McQueen was an award-winning artist associated with a world-famous gallery and that the artwork would be viewed by millions of people. It was essential to the reputations of Tate and Artangel that the artwork was curated to the very highest of standards. The quality of the individual photographs, the extent to which they met the brief and how they were presented were all important.

Year 3 started with an irresistible idea that worked for the particular age group and caught teachers' and parents' imaginations. If schools are to sign up in numbers, then the proposition has to be exactly right. Teachers were able to incorporate the themes of the project across several curriculum areas including PSHE (personal, social, health, and economic education). It was relevant. Training was organised for the photographers and they were given check-sheets for how each session could run and how to work with the teachers and support staff during the sessions. Artists often resent such 'strait jackets' but here they embraced the brief whilst making daily adjustments to suit particular settings. The aim to engage all London's Year 3 (Y3) students meant that the project was automatically inclusive with adjustments made to ensure the involvement of all the young people including those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) and this followed through to the gallery visits.

At a time when schools find it more difficult to engage with professional arts

organisations, projects like Year 3 offer an interesting model. Could we imagine that all young people in a city like London could be involved with arts organisations in a series of ambitious 'at scale' projects over the course of their school careers brokered by organisations like A New Direction (an Arts Council of England Bridge organisation) with a range of professional arts partners? Young people could experience a series of relevant special projects across different artforms working with galleries, theatres, libraries and arts centres. Such projects need not necessarily need the involvement of well-known artists (but why not?) but they must be special, tailored to the young people themselves, beyond what is possible in the classroom or within the curriculum, to justify the time spent in organising them, and the commitment of the young people and their teachers. As in Year 3 this might involve feasibility work with 'ambassador schools' to test propositions, session content and systems. In another example 14-18 NOW, the *World War 1 Centenary Art Commissions*, with ArtsMediaPeople worked with Creative & Cultural Skills who brokered a relationship with Further Education Colleges across the UK in response to the artist Bob and Roberta Smith's provocation, 'What does Peace mean to you?' Younger artists across the country worked with post-16 students, resources endorsed by the Awarding Body, UAL, were produced, and parallel work took place as part of the Extended Project Qualification

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(EPQ) in sixth forms. The project reached 213 Further Education Colleges and 44,000 students and was repeated the following year. Arts organisations in England have engaged with schools for over forty years, but the context of this work has changed dramatically. Opportunities to visit venues or attend performances are still important but increasing demands on schools make longer-term projects harder to justify or get taken up by only the most enthusiastic schools, leaving many out. It would be good to add an option for most schools to be able to take part in occasional significant projects of the scale of Year 3. Adding 'projects at scale' to our arts education repertoire would be an important response to the practical challenges our schools are facing post-Covid-19. Such projects are more challenging to organise and require brokerage beyond what a typical 'Learning and Participation team' can provide in an individual arts organisation, as demonstrated by the contribution of A New Direction in the case of Year 3. Projects of this scale offer teachers and young people something special beyond the school curriculum: a chance to take

part in something shared, thought-provoking, creative, big and qualifying as a 'once in a lifetime' experience.

A challenge for arts organisations and funders is how to put young people at the heart of programming. Year 3 started with the idea of young people as both the subject and the co-creators of an artwork. The result was a piece that reflected and spoke to all young Londoners, without concessions, or explanations, or indeed careful labelling. We have seen years of gallery education where the artworks are the focus, how can we turn things round to put young visitors at the centre as co-creators and co-curators? ■

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

*A New Direction's Year 3 team:
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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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Image: Steve McQueen Year 3 ©Tate