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Year 3: Elements of Risk

Anna Cutler

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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With 30 years' experience working in education and cultural settings at a local, national, and international level, Anna's central purpose throughout her career has been to explore and improve educational interventions in a range of cultural and cross-disciplinary arts environments. In September 2016 she initiated Tate Exchange, a civic space aimed at building dialogue around art, society, and the urgent and complex issues facing us today.

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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.

Year 3: Elements of Risk

Risk is generally not a welcome guest, particularly when children are involved. However, within the arts and creativity risk is often a necessary feature for pushing at boundaries and towards new ideas. Holding and shaping risk is part of the practice for artists and organisations that work with them. The Tate Year 3 Project had this in abundance, from risks if you did something to risks if you didn't, organisational risks, safeguarding risks, logistical risks and financial risks; whichever way you turned in this project risk was a constant companion.

Anna Cutler

As happens more often than is probably acknowledged by those working within complex arts projects, some of the best things can come from embracing the risk that accompanies the unplanned and the unforeseen. Of course, no-one wants too much of it in their professional lives because it could be chaotic, impossible to timetable and quite frankly a nightmare to manage. It's also unlikely that funders would jump at the idea of supporting organisations to 'see what pops up,' but the opportunistic and the unexpected can make for some inspiring outcomes - **if** the conditions are right.

This essay looks at these conditions and how they underpinned the educational and wider schools dimension of the *Steve McQueen: Year 3* exhibitions at Tate Britain in November 2019, and on billboards throughout London. It aims to explore aspects of the project and the organisational environments in which the project 'popped -up,' as well as making visible the high level of risk involved.

The beginnings of this project reach back as early as 2010 with Steve McQueen and Artangel. In late 2016, A New Direction was commissioned to produce a feasibility study to look at the requirements of organising photographs of as many London Year 3 (Y3) pupils as possible to create one of the most ambitious visual portraits of citizenship ever undertaken, in one of the world's largest and most diverse cities, explored through the vehicle of the traditional school class photograph. The feasibility study was undertaken by Jen Crook and accounted for the scale, school requirements, and extent of staffing

that would be needed to achieve this, though the detail did not at first find its way into the new partnership plans between Tate, where the gallery exhibition would take place, and Artangel, who were managing the organisation of the exhibition in the public realm.

Following discussion with the Schools and Teachers team at Tate, it was accepted that the scale of the project simply wasn't feasible in its entirety for them to manage in terms of their staffing capacity or existing work commitments. Connected, were risks around time, logistics, and cost as well as the fact that the remit for a photograph to be taken was different from their usual approach (outlined in *We Are Here! Observations and Analysis of the Year 3 Class Visits*) in which participation would normally be rooted within the practice of creative learning bringing 'an audience into conversation **with** artworks and usually alongside an artist as well as their teachers.' The suggestion was, therefore, that we either kept to the original plan with the logistics and arrangements of photographing pupils, or that we rethought the proposal to create optimum conditions for taking photographs in schools in which we also created a bespoke educational dimension to the project enabling arts - learning experiences with, through and about the project for all the pupils. In either case, additional external expertise was required, but the latter would offer an unprecedented opportunity for the project to reach thousands of students with deep engagement, inspired by the ideas that the project so richly invited and with the children's voices writ large.

The stakeholders (Steve McQueen, Tate and Artangel) agreed to the expanded programme of learning as well as the need for an additional partner organisation to meet many, if not most of the schools-centred aspects of the brief. It was also understood that further funding would need to be sought to make this ambitious and complex educational plan possible. A New Direction, as a cultural and creative 'bridge' with schools in London, was contracted as a partner owing to their unique and specific existing relationship with schools, their strategic role within London and their skills and ethos. Gemma Clarke and Erin Barnes from ArtsMediaPeople were also contracted as producers who had the complicated task of working to three organisations (Tate, Artangel and A New Direction) in order to create a seamless whole.

Those involved knew some of the risks and what these might mean: that they were up against time and school timetables, that once embarked upon failure was not an option, that no partner wished to compromise quality or integrity, and that this new learning aspect had to be authentic to the artist's concept and of significant value to the schools if they were to invest. The common features were that each party had years of experience, expert staff in their separate areas of specialism, trust within their sector, and an approach that supported risk-taking with a confidence to meet this head on as part of the process. In addition, although the budget was underwritten, funding needed to be raised along the way. These conditions represented the organisational environments into which the learning dimension landed – or perhaps one might say from which it grew – but underpinned the ability to attend to the necessary risks, and the ways in which these were navigated. It is probably fair to say that they also grew from an ambition and appetite that might be more difficult for smaller or any single organisation to achieve. In this instance the partners enabled a whole that was far more than the sum of its parts which also extended to the artist's gallery ([Thomas Dane Gallery](#)), the media partners (BBC and Into Film), the curatorial leads at Tate, and many other departments or teams across the organisations with some specialists beyond. A forensic review of the scoping study was completed with all needs re-set. The result of which was the queen of all Gantt charts in its scrupulous detail. Once signed up to, there was no looking back, and structures and systems were developed to bring things together across all partners, in which the commitment to the artistic idea and the values that sat behind it did much of the invisible stitching.

So, what of risk, if this was known from the outset and the scrupulous detail was in place? Were mitigations not put into action? The answer to this is yes, of course they were, but outlined below are areas of risk that never go away, whatever scale or timeframe one is working to with young people. Bigger can (and did) make the project riskier, simply owing to numbers and reach (more people, partners and pupils equals more room for error) but the aim in this essay is to begin to reach under the surface of the project's skin to make the tacit explicit, the invisible – visible, what have we to learn?

Aligning the artistic and learning programme

Steve McQueen had a very clear vision and image of the exhibitions (at Tate and on the billboards). The artwork spoke of the present and the future, of hope and aspiration as well as to the uncertainty and contingency that this potential invokes. Given the newly agreed educational initiative, the learning teams, with A New Direction at centre-stage, needed to develop a programme and key themes for the pupils' exploration that were true to the artist's vision. It is always a possibility that in the discussion and enthusiasm of 'other parties' (those other than Steve McQueen), ideas might stretch beyond the scope or focus of the project, leaning into schools' or organisations' own concerns and interests. Sometimes this is helpful to a project as it brings with it the experience and knowledge of the participants, sometimes it is not and becomes something else altogether – another project. So being clear and authentic to the idea was vital, especially at such scale and with so many involved where confusion **could** get in the way of the clarity of design.

This might sound like a relatively small risk but the potential for mismatch between different elements of a complex project is real and a fundamental issue. It has derailed more projects than I care to mention; either with the artistic programme being pulled into an odd shape or with learning as an awkward add-on clanking behind the wedding car. Getting alignment established at the outset was the undercurrent of everything involved with respect to the learning programme and the schools' experience. It formed the to-and-fro of much conversation with the curators, artist, gallery, and organisational partners. From this

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many judgements and decisions were made relative to the schools' needs and this generated not just authenticity and integrity to the idea, exhibition look and feel, but appropriately maintained the artistic stakes, whilst keeping risk in the right kind of check. Getting this wrong has the potential to diminish 'the whole' and one really does need to understand this as a risk in order to maximise the bits you want and minimise the bits you **all** do not.

Three themes were agreed with the artist: Identity, Community, and Future. All elements, resources and content were shaped by these as well as the way in which the project was approached: the schools and Y3 cohorts were communities in themselves, with multiple identities and infinite futures. These themes generated new conditions that created a tight framework for decision making and the development of educational (schools based) content. All three themes were consistent with the project's design but also rich ground for learning and could be given a light or deep dive by teachers and pupils, which a wide range of online and in-gallery resources and activities sought to generate. This was the endeavour, to invite ways of approaching these issues that reflected back into the project developing the children's understanding and insight and drawing on their wide range of lived experience. In this they became active participants, able to be creative in their own right, as well as the subject of the idea. It's a powerful and unusual combination.

This was one of the most aligned projects I have ever encountered, which is credit to the artist, who also invested a lot of personal time in meeting the teachers and students involved. It is also of credit to the extended partners and the time that was taken to attend to the risk; to ask good, if sometimes difficult, questions of each other and revisit this when needed. Steve McQueen always had the final artistic say but was hugely generous and very invested in the power of arts education, which meant that the project had cohesion and punched at even greater weight. The risk, obviously, was that the project failed to achieve this integration of ethos, activity, and idea, in which case the individual parts might be effective, but the expanded learning programme may have been separated

from the artistic programme and lacking in value as a contribution and continuum of the idea. The engagement and investment when achieved was high and when the children of Year 3 visited the exhibition they saw not only themselves but had a contextual and conceptual understanding of the work, which takes us to the second element of risk to be considered.

Safeguarding and collaborating to manage risk

It is a feature of creative learning that it encourages critical thinking and asking questions: 'Why this?', 'What's going on in this idea?', 'Who is it for?' etc. These are questions that look beyond individual and internal worlds to the ways in which, in this instance, artistic work is made manifest - and where. This seemed especially important given that the children and schools were the subject of the artwork and were therefore at the centre of any meaning generation. Some of this is well articulated in the companion essays of Colin Grant, Ego Ahaive Sowinski, Christine Lai, James Broadley and Aoife O'Doherty that highlight race, power and

privilege within traditional art histories, the museum, and the public domain. At a time when Brexit was still in process and within a culture that may be hostile to difference this created risk for many of the participants.

Safeguarding the children involved in this project was a huge and very serious undertaking. There were multiple and various risks in the process of taking the photographs, in showing them in public and on social media platforms.

There are also strict rules

concerning digital images of children and their storage as well as for visits and workshops, with naming and identification not permitted. The first response to this risk within the overarching risk was presenting the idea to a small number of schools to test the water: several thought it was fantastic, a few said it was too risky and that they would not take part, others that unless they could have some guarantees, they didn't feel that parents or carers would sign up to the project, and each and every one of them involved would have to do so if a child was to take part. In all honesty, with social media so prevalent, the project partners could not guarantee that images would not be shared either from the billboards or the gallery and they therefore made explicit the risks and the duty of care

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and mitigation that was being put in place. The project invited on board legal expertise from [Farrer and Co](#) and [NSPCC](#), as well as an experienced high-profile individual, Tanya Joseph, who had been involved with a similar scale public-facing event [This Girl Can](#). Many systems were put in place and training was built into the project with each risk reviewed at every point for every aspect. It was extensive and thorough work for which ArtsMediaPeople deserve particular recognition. The social context meant that there could be risk around negative responses to race and gender as well as for those with particular needs, given trolling and the lack of control possible over aggressive social media posting. But as schools and parents began to sign up to the project, understanding and accepting the risks, the confidence grew and it was clear that it was felt that the bigger risk would be **not** to undertake this project, to evade the complex issues and debates that the public brought to it (not necessarily intended through the idea). Indeed, some schools actively promoted their difference, pleased to have their students visible and included. For example, one headteacher of a special school that helped test the waters described the project “as a platform to showcase our wonderful children; it is so important to us that SEND children are not invisible, that they are recognised as part of the community and are visible in a range of public venues and society as a whole.”

Managing the risks and the numbers of schools on billboards or how to communicate to schools and parents (but not the general public) on where their child was within the mass of faces in the exhibition was also complex and indeed the layout of the exhibition itself took this

into account (amongst the myriad of other exceptional contributions the curator, Clarrie Wallis, made). Every attention to detail in the work around the exhibitions was taken, in the outdoor placements of the billboard images to the workshops at schools and within the gallery to where the children ate their lunch. It was apparent in the Visitor Experience support, in the marketing and finance teams, in HR and estates. In fact, this particular risk for safeguarding children brought with it the creation of teams that never existed and new and collaborative ways of working to great effect. A huge wave of energy, support and endeavour was generated from almost every corner of staff at Tate who saw the children as their ‘charge’, they celebrated their presence and endorsed the leaps and shouts within the building: “WE ARE HERE!”

Risk is not always a positive story and certainly there are challenges en route, but what all partners brought to this project was the ability to positively challenge one another, to push for quality and for the best possible experience of the participants, able to hear the better argument and have integrity to the idea. Its clarity enabled the risks to be taken, not just for the sake of pragmatism, but because they were authentic to the project, to the needs of the exhibitions and to the children involved. Knowing and shaping risk is a key part of creativity, in art, in an exhibition, in learning. It turned out that it belonged to all those involved and was central to *Steve McQueen Year 3*. ■

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