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Young Londoners' Perspectives on Steve McQueen Year 3

Christine Lai, James Broadley and Aoife O'Doherty

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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Christine Lai, James Broadley and Aoife O'Doherty

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Christine Lai

Tate Collective Producer

Christine is a British-born Chinese curator/cultural producer. She began her training at 17 in the museum industry as a Tate Collective Producer which inspired her to take up degrees in History of Art and Museum Studies. Her practice is founded upon interrogating the processes within knowledge production and exploring socio-cultural histories within photography. Christine has worked with a wide range of organisations including Tate, National Galleries of Scotland, Procreate Project and curated exhibitions across the UK and The Netherlands. Recently, she curated *Late at Tate Britain: From Tomorrow* (Feb 2020) and currently works for Troy House Art Foundation under international artist Yuan Gong.

James Broadley

A New Direction's Young Challenge Group

James has been a member of A New Direction's Young Challenge Group for almost two years. James graduated from drama school in 2018 and now works at Amnesty International. James co-founded and facilitates *Make a Film in a Weekend*, a course designed for people aged 16 - 25 to develop their artistic voice and build creative communities through visual storytelling. James is based in East London, loves to climb and is currently writing a play about Londoners' connections with nature.

Aoife O'Doherty

A New Direction's Young Challenge Group

Aoife is a South London based graphic designer and producer driven by empathy, purpose, and people power. Alongside her work as a designer, she facilitates workshops and is currently developing cyanotype print workshops focused on climate change. Aoife joined the Young Challenge Group in 2019 with an interest in participatory design and inclusive decision making. As a creative teacher and facilitator, she advocates for equal creative access and use of design for the public good.

Edited by

Jack Redfern

A New Direction

Jack is Partnerships Officer at A New Direction and coordinates the Young Challenge Group, A New Direction's youth consultancy initiative. He works with place-based partnerships across London's cultural education landscape to support the development of its local creative and cultural ecologies.

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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.

Young Londoners' Perspectives on Steve McQueen Year 3

The reflections on the following pages are the thoughts of three young Londoners drawn from the Tate Collective Producers, a group of 15 to 25-year-olds who work with the galleries to curate youth-centred work, and A New Direction's Young Challenge Group, a panel of young creatives who advise on the city's cultural educational landscape. In their essay, the authors approach the Steve McQueen Year 3 exhibition through their own identities as 'young Londoners': tracing their personal journeys from primary school to maturity, they contrast the democratisation of the outdoor (billboards) and gallery exhibitions, examine whether the exhibition reflects the truth of their London, and ask whether Steve McQueen Year 3 ultimately succeeds as 'a hopeful portrait of a generation to come'.

Christine Lai

Tate Collective Producer

Responding to art is always a difficult thing for me. I dislike that imposing feeling that you're supposed to be articulate, smart and profound with your response; that you have to 'feel' something about the art. With this in mind, it almost seems counterintuitive to be writing this essay on how it feels to be a young Londoner looking at *Steve McQueen Year 3*. That's why I think it's really interesting how the public placing of this project – on busy roads, underground tunnels, pavements – works in removing that layer of pretence for me.

I remember my first encounter with this project: standing on the platform at Angel, idly waiting for the train to come and catching sight of the merry band of Year 3 (Y3) students smiling at me. My initial thought was: "Oh cool! What a nice gesture to see these children plastered all over London, rather than another advert trying to

sell another product I don't need."

The more I looked at it, the more I found myself remembering what it felt like to be that age; how my biggest problems were which friend I had on which day, what the Vikings wore, where my hymn book was. All these strange menial problems that now seem like nothing, but at the time were definitely the most difficult problems ever to be faced by a 7-year-old. I wondered what these children must think when they see themselves blown up to giant size on the platform's billboards. Do they feel proud? Do they have the same feeling we get as adults of whether or not they look good in that camera angle? I forget when that begins to happen: becoming consciously critical of how you look in pictures.

From tube stations to Tate Britain. It's one thing to be on a billboard, quite another to feature in a gallery

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dedicated to representing 'Britishness' in art. I don't remember caring about galleries, the meaning of art, or being British at that age: in fact, I distinctly remember kicking up such a fuss when my mother took me there to see John Singer Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. When I see the same photograph from Angel station installed at Tate Britain, that imposing feeling returns. This time when I look at the piece as part of its whole entity, those personal reflections on my time at school seem to simmer away and a sense of voyeurism and duty to these children now pervades. I suspect that this sense has been amplified by the Late Victorian grandeur of Tate Britain itself, the kind of architecture that reminds you of civics and morality; reminds you that museums are a way for one to be educated. Which only leaves me wondering, how much can we learn from this? And who should?

In an interview in *Elephant* with some children featured in the project, some were rather dismayed at their presence in the gallery. 'Normal, normal, normal,' one of them recalled; another mentioned that 'there were lots and lots and lots of other classes. I was just one out of a million. I was really small, and no one would notice me. They only look at it all together.'¹ I guess in-gallery it's all about strength in numbers; when they're scattered around on the billboards of London, then we really get to see these individuals as they are. And to me, that's what makes it really special: to see the real personalities in these photographs, the ones with the crooked smile, the unkempt hair, the wonky school tie. That's how I think McQueen gets us to care, by showing us that there are real children affected by our choices and consequences. ■

James Broadley Young Challenge Group

Walking into *Steve McQueen Year 3* I was struck by the enormity of the project. Thousands of faces settled into shimmering colours, and each person had their own space to shine on the epic walls. Zooming in gave pink cushions, inspiring quotes, and walls with pictures of role models like Mo Farah. My heart glowed seeing a pupil and a Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) teacher as they both smiled, beaming with glee. For me, *Steve McQueen Year 3* is an exciting showcase of how far adults have come in the way we hold space for young people.

During my visit, I saw a young boy take a photo of his school and excitedly share it with family. This interaction is a testament to the immersive quality of the work and how it develops an authentic connection with artist, subject, and audience, empowering all three simultaneously in the live moment. Seeing this got me thinking back to my own school days, and I realised that it is the adults I respected who left positive impressions on me that have helped me the most in life so far: like after losing a school rugby match, our coach would give the team an uplifting speech. These interactions are the foundations of self-esteem in a growing person. The *Tate Year 3 Project* photographers' workshops in schools when they took the photos demonstrates the restorative power of being seen, accepted, and celebrated for the simple fact of being alive. For example, an image in a photograph that caught my eye was a child standing behind their teacher proudly forming the 'Wakanda Forever' salute across their chest. The defiant expression on their face moved me: a reminder to never underestimate the power of a good story told well.

Steve McQueen Year 3 also got me thinking about my own nan's mantelpiece and the collection of school photos she has of herself, her children, and grandchildren: each generation has been collated to be celebrated. Reflecting on the

normality of school photographs since my nan's post-war portrait did, however, leave me questioning the notion that *Steve McQueen Year 3* is intrinsically a 'hopeful portrait of a generation to come'. World events that could test Londoners to the core of our humanity lie ahead, with or without powerful exhibitions: we should remain vigilant when galleries attach positive notions to art, as it could leave audiences content with the surface picture, rather than provoke us to uncover the underlying problems. Hope is an imaginative exercise and a cognitive function intrinsic to our survival as a species. Perhaps, therefore, it is not the finished product of *Year 3* that is the hopeful element: maybe hope is found more in the logistical ambition and execution of the project.

To hope is to believe a solution will be discovered. I stood in the gallery and considered the UK's current solutions and the problems now rising: nationalism, air pollution, sea levels, and infection rates and looked at the 76,146 children and did feel anxious. Yet, there is a paradigm shift occurring among younger generations. They are empowered by the internet and a realisation that power structures may not necessarily be serving them: take the *Fridays for Future* climate strikes, for example, self-organised by youth activists and led by teenagers like Greta Thunberg. A world movement organised by children is a phenomenal 21st-century development, but this dynamism could be in danger of being trapped behind the glass of Tate's photo frames unless genuine avenues of communication are created between current decision-makers and London's future leaders. The events of 2020 have shown that art will serve only as an escape unless systemic change is installed to ensure that everyone can fit into the picture. ■

1. L. Benson, "'Boring!' The Kids Reflect on Steve McQueen's Year 3 Project', *Elephant*, 26 Feb 2020, <https://elephant.art/boring-the-kids-reflect-on-steve-mcqueens-year-3-project-tate-britain-children-london-26022020>, accessed 28 April 2021

Aoife O'Doherty

Young Challenge Group

Creative institutions can be catalysts, igniting imagination and cultivating knowledge. The exhibition *Steve McQueen Year 3* documented future London, opened new understandings of art, and engaged with people who had not been to Tate before. Often it is proclaimed that art is for all, but not everyone has access and knowledge or feels welcome into places in which art exists. There is a proven desire in the energy and audiences behind exhibitions like *Steve McQueen Year 3* that needs to be matched with meaningful change from within institutions. Creative hubs must become more accessible and representative now. We need diversity in people and thought, from storytellers to board members, to transform institutions into places where people are comfortable to look at art, engage with art and become artists themselves.

I was struck by the joy and animated hope at the *Steve McQueen Year 3* exhibition, bringing to life the formal curated grids of photographs. Those visiting the exhibition were perhaps not 'visitors' in the expected sense, but could be described as active engagers, participants, learners or listeners: the exhibition was not just on the walls, it was also about the surrounding space that held a constant buzz. Walking around, I heard stories being exchanged, laughs, shouts and memories recalled. *Steve McQueen Year 3* created a lasting sense of belonging, both belonging in the space and to the city.

Going to school in London had a grounding positive impact on my life. I took diversity completely for granted. Sitting in classes with people from different backgrounds and places across London wasn't something I contemplated or even valued at the time, but as I continue navigating life, I can see that the embedded diversity from my education is a reflection of the everyday. I am a more considerate and aware person from being surrounded by friends and peers

who are different to me. *Steve McQueen Year 3* captures young students at a powerful stage in their life where they are beginning 'to understand more about their place in a changing world and to think about the future'. The exhibition urges us, the viewers, to consider what we want this generation to inherit and what they could become: not the possibilities of an individual but of a collective.

We tend to think that young children have an innocent approach to life, full of kindness and trust. They are friends with whoever they want to be friends with and at 7- or 8- years old are only starting to have wider awareness of class, gender, race, privileges, and social differences. *Steve McQueen Year 3* reflects this with the absence of labels for each photograph, which aside from providing privacy, I think creates positive uniformity. Seeing the entirety of future London framed on the walls of Tate as a shared front proposes and liberates possibilities. There is no need for explanations and no room for assumptions about why a school class is a certain way: this is simply London. Assumptions keep many from being a voice in this world, and this exhibition extends the ability for all to be recognised and seen.

As the young children of *The Tate Year 3 Project* grow up and continue to learn, I hope creative tools and spaces can help them recognise the power they hold to be storytellers. Art helps us to make sense of the world we live in and now, more than ever, this creativity needs to be activated, not squeezed out of the education system. Art education develops self-expression and cultivates new ways of thinking. It enriches our understanding of who we are and teaches us how to solve problems. This needs to be cherished in a climate of increasing global challenges. The display of *Steve McQueen Year 3* presents eager-eyed young children who could be future creative thinkers, leaders, and makers. ■

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

*A New Direction's Year 3 team:
Steve Moffitt, Rebecca Branch,
Naraneeruthra-Rajan, Marina
Lewis-King, Steve Woodward
and Jim Beck.*

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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