

9

Why Did We Do This, and What Did We Learn? Reflections From Lead Partners

David Parker with Anna Cutler, James Lingwood
and Steve Moffitt

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

**David Parker with Anna Cutler, James Lingwood
and Steve Moffitt**

Why Did We Do This, and What Did We Learn? Reflections From Lead Partners

June

2021

EDITED BY

Naraneeruthra-Rajan

COPY EDITED BY

Marina Lewis-King

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 of Year 3 as Y3.

David Parker

David is a freelance researcher and evaluator with an interest in arts and creativity programmes for young people. Recent evaluations have focused on work for the British Council, Arts Council England and Sorrell Foundation. Formerly, he was Director of Research for Creative and Cultural Skills, *Creative Partnerships* and the British Film Institute.

Anna Cutler

**Director of Learning and latterly
Director of Learning & Research
at Tate (2010 - 2021)**

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.

James Lingwood Artangel

James is Co-director of Artangel. Artangel commissions, produces and presents new projects by contemporary artists, writers, musicians, theatre-makers, and film-makers in a wide range of different sites throughout the UK and across the world. As a curator and writer, Lingwood has realised numerous exhibitions in galleries and museums across the world over the past three decades.

Steve Moffitt A New Direction

Steve is CEO at A New Direction. He is responsible for the strategic leadership, vision and financial viability of the organisation. He is passionately committed to developing innovative creative change programmes for young Londoners, with over 38 years' experience of work in the arts, creative educational and community settings.

Why Did We Do This, and What Did We Learn? Reflections From Lead Partners

The Tate Year 3 Project, partly because it was a large-scale project and partly due to the nature of the artwork being created, was reliant on effective partnership working. Particularly key were the interactions between Tate, Artangel and A New Direction, each collaborating with the other to bring Steve McQueen's vision to fruition.

In this essay key figures from each organisation, Anna Cutler (former Director of Learning and Research, Tate), James Lingwood (Co-Director, Artangel) and Steve Moffitt (CEO, A New Direction) look back on their motivations to make Year 3 happen, the reflections they have had on the process over the months since the exhibition came to a close, and key learning they are likely to carry to future projects and which they feel the sector at large may also find useful to consider.

David Parker with Anna Cutler, James Lingwood and Steve Moffitt

Why do the Tate Year 3 Project?

For many years the moral imperative has been clear. The United Kingdom is a signatory to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states in Article 31 that every child 'has the right... to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'.¹ Connections with museum and gallery venues should therefore be a normal, familiar, and everyday experience for all young people.

Ideas for large scale projects are an obvious way to reach significant numbers of young people and, alongside other initiatives, may be an important component in building cultural capital. It is no surprise then that ideas to find a vehicle to work with many young people had circulated for some time, and versions of Year 3 as a concept stretch back to the pre-Olympic period (2010-12), when in London there was a good deal of interest in place-based art projects, designed to showcase the creativity and potential of the capital's youth within the context of Olympic ideals. James Lingwood explains:

"Steve McQueen first shared the idea of Year 3 with me in 2010. I was clear at the time that Artangel couldn't take a lead role but agreed to write up a brief proposal to share with Ruth Mackenzie who was heading up the programme for the Cultural Olympiad. The Cultural Olympiad didn't pick up on the idea, and we didn't push very hard. Year 3 presented logistical and financial challenges way beyond what Artangel could take on. However, the idea stayed with me, and Steve and I would occasionally talk about it."

While Year 3 did not emerge at that time, once it did, the conversations between A New Direction, Artangel and Tate focused on working at scale and provoked an ambition to find the right opportunity to work in a pan-London way.

1. UNICEF, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', UNICEF, What we do, What is the UN Convention on Child Rights? www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/, accessed 27 May 2021

Why did the ambition to work in this way persist?

First, and perhaps as a legacy of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, there was a renewed appreciation for the power and effect of working at scale, and how such work might be **an important affirmative statement for the young people of London**. Particularly in a period which had seen the effects of austerity and the start of many future political and economic challenges of Brexit hit their generation with disproportionate force. Steve Moffitt explained the motivation from A New Direction's perspective:

"I was excited about the focus on London and its children. I liked the idea. It was simple bold and ambitious. It resonated with our values and our sense of purpose. The notion of the city seeing its community of 7- and 8-year-olds in a prestigious gallery and visible on over 600 billboards felt brave. The project had an irresistibly simple concept of capturing a moment in the lives of the Y3 children of the city through a Year 3 class photograph with the assumption that a) it was possible logistically and b) schools would be able and want to participate."

In addition, and as is often the case with conceptually rich artworks, after the cultural upheaval in the US throughout 2020, Year 3 took on further significance as a sea of multi-cultural young faces stared back at a city which was struggling to find its own moral response to the death of George Floyd, a point noted by Anna Cutler:

"Given the summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd and events led in response by the Black Lives Matter movement, the project developed an even more significant place in people's minds relative to race and the 'culture war'. I think this is very complex territory that will need (and will have) far more to be said as the cultural landscape and cultural climate changes. It's clear that context matters. Had the exhibition taken place in 2012 the interpretations would have been different."

What did we learn?

Building a clear sense of **collective creative endeavour** everyone could buy into was vital. Essential ingredients to that included Steve McQueen's status as a Turner Prize and Oscar winning artist, but also the expertise of Tate, A New Direction and Artangel which could be fused in ways that played equally to the strengths of each.

This meant planning discussions were key. The vision for the work was clear; the idea to communicate with schools had a surface simplicity but conceptual depth, and this combination of factors boosted the project's credibility. James Lingwood explains:

"Any project with this scale of ambition, and especially one involving such large-scale participation, needs a micro-climate of credibility to be built around it. All the key players in Year 3 really believed in the importance of the idea, and its transformative potential for the participating schools and school children but also for the collaborating cultural organisation. Everyone was clear it was only worth doing if they pulled out all the stops to get as many school children as possible involved not only in getting the class photo taken, but also visiting the exhibition at Tate Britain."

The fact that the project was multi-faceted meant that there were a number of ways schools could engage, and also multiple depths they could explore as part of their engagement. The concept of the class photograph was instantly relatable, but also lent itself to many sorts of application and interpretation; it was a rich stimulus for learning. While the work was managed by cultural sector partners, there was no set formula every school had to follow completely in order to participate. There was a base level of engagement, common-to-all, but aside from that, a multiplicity of **choices that schools were encouraged to make for themselves**. Steve Moffitt explains why this was important:

"Year 3 was unusual. It was an art piece and a learning project. As a learning project the ask of schools was manageable and scaleable. The minimum engagement was to participate in an hour-long workshop where a Y3 class would be photographed after a series of games and introductory exercises. How the school could then use this starting point was up to them. A set of learning resources and tools could be utilised to scaffold and develop wider and deeper learning. The beauty of the project handed the leadership of the learning over to the schools. I would like to see more national large-scale institutions working in this way. Offering starting points for partnership – providing a catalyst for work to be generated and trusting schools to do what they do best, teaching their children and preparing them for life."

There was something deeply integrated about this work, too, particularly when it came to the learning component. Often, with headline exhibitions from high profile artists there is a tendency for learning elements to be a bolt-on. With Year 3 **learning was intrinsic to the work** and this instantly boosted the value and visibility on the schools side, encouraging the high levels of take-up and the value they took away from participating. Anna Cutler noted this from Tate's perspective:

"The importance of all aspects being of value and part of the whole. Often learning programmes are partial to an idea, here they were fully connected and spoke across all parts. This doesn't happen as often as one may wish for. It created a sense of value and shared endeavour that pushed people to go further and do better."

Working with children at such scale and taking on board the feedback from the many teachers and headteachers involved pointing to important lessons about what to aim for with these projects with regard to balancing outcomes. **Year 3 managed to be both monumental – the Duveen Galleries, the Billboards – and highly personal** – the individual faces and peer group stories behind each photograph. James Lingwood reflected on this:

"The excitement of being involved in something so big, something that was a national event, a massive social media happening, but which always remained theirs. The thrill of seeing themselves taking over Tate Britain, of feeling the place had become theirs. The opportunity to think about their own world (based on family, faith, neighbourhood, school etc.) in relation to a much bigger world, and to see themselves alongside so many others. Perhaps to raise consciousness about the extraordinary diversity of London schoolchildren, as well as underlying issues of class, faith and ability. Overall, it seems to have been a very affirmative experience for everyone involved. Everyone was valued, no-one felt used."

The sheer scale and ambition of Year 3 exercised a powerful magnetic pull on a huge community of participants – children, teachers, parents, carers; at least 200,000 individuals, probably more. Everyone was treated equally; everyone knew this ethos underpinned the entire project. In a society distorted by privilege and discrimination, this commitment to equality was welcomed by teachers, parents, and carers.

To each participant, Year 3 felt personal. It also involved a community of communities, each Y3 class being its own small community. It worked on both an immediate, local level, and on a more general, London-wide level."

What will A New Direction, Artangel and Tate do differently as a result of Year 3?

Big lessons were learned about what is possible around equity, agency and working at scale, and the importance of framing concepts in ways that speak powerfully and directly to the communities you hope to engage. James Lingwood elaborates on this:

"It is certainly feeding into our thinking about equity and inclusion – in the choices we make as an organisation, the way we allocate resources to projects, the work we are doing to diversify our audiences. It has reinforced our determination to think through our projects from the perspective – and the lived experience – of different communities."

It also made Artangel determined to push ahead with plans to realise Oscar Murillo's Frequencies, another hugely ambitious project based on a collaboration with children and young people in schools. Plans to present an exhibition in a 'found' space in Peckham were put on hold at the onset of the pandemic in April 2020. We then decided that it would be more meaningful and more energising to present the project in a school environment, in collaboration with students in the school. A vast installation of Frequencies will be presented in the Sports Hall at Cardinal Pole School, Hackney over the 2021 summer holidays."

Anna Cutler reflected that for Tate there were important lessons about what could be achieved when the learning element of a work was given the same parity as curatorial considerations:

"New ways of working with our curatorial colleagues were made possible. Clarrie Wallis as the lead curator should be named as a key person in this as she went several extra miles to ensure that everything was consistent and well thought through for Steve, and the exhibition at Tate, as well as for the children."

The role of the artist and their involvement can be significant to a learning programme if they have interest and investment themselves. Steve was very generous with his time and the long line of teachers wanting to speak with him at the teachers' events, and their feelings of being represented and championed

by him, was moving and felt important."

For A New Direction, whose input had been so crucial in engaging schools and making workshops a plausible undertaking for the teachers taking part, Steve Moffitt thinks that their future work must not only take better account of schools' own capacities and start points, and to trust their sense of their own start points, but also embrace broader horizons Year 3 proved it was possible to work across. That included not being put off by the most challenging logistical/legal elements.

"As an organisation we are less fearful of scale. We have grown bolder and clearer around our vision and being part of making Year 3 happen has affirmed our commitment to inclusion and equality. We are already in discussion with several organisations around how to best support them to work at scale. We are also clearer about our methodology and approach to working in partnership.

At the launch of the project the question many of the journalists in the room kept coming back to was safeguarding. Although a huge issue and a massive challenge for the cultural sector and for schools, safeguarding is part of the deal of working with children. It was a significant part of the project and at times it was scary – but with good advice, training, a coherent strategy, and clear support systems in place it is possible to create a safe and secure environment to make projects like this happen."

The key take-aways

Steve, James and Anna's reflections point to their own interest in reflecting on their practice and the strategies their respective organisations pursue. When considered side-by-side what do their thoughts tell us, overall, to keep in mind about future work?

The clarity, quality and scale of the idea matters

Schools are looking for an engaging idea, but a manageable one, so ensure that there is purpose and value for them at the centre of the work, even when the project stretches beyond their comfort zones. At the same time, think big. Embrace the concept of scale, ambition and fearlessness and do not be afraid of unknowns. Trust a great idea and believe in its potential.

Embrace challenge and the ideas of others

Partnerships that are most effective are not guaranteed to be punctuated by milestone moments of unalloyed consensus – expect disagreement and work through challenges by hearing and respecting one another's views.

Take risk assessment seriously but do not be overawed by it

Working with young people in such a way that their participation is also a form of representation means that safeguarding becomes hugely important with expert input from organisations like the NSPCC invaluable. Risks of identifying young people are logistically and legally complex and for Year 3 were significant but not insuperable hurdles.

Identity and community are vital

Year 3 worked because it was about the 7- and 8-year-olds of London today, but it carried within it, teachers' and parents' own memories of their schooling; it was an authentically connective concept that drew all participants in, but placed children right at the centre.

Equality is important; participants were co-creators of Year 3.

Visibility is important; the artwork was revelatory; a re-evaluation of who we are.

Agency is important; participants were in control of their own journeys as part of the project.

The commitment and visibility of the artist are crucial

The role of the artist in Year 3 was essential. Steve McQueen's voice and energy were present in all aspects of the project. He was visible, and the children, staff and parents had an extraordinary connection with him. His ambition and aspiration for the piece was inspiring and energising to all involved.

Trust schools and teachers to locate themselves within large-scale work

Year 3 framed and conceptualised an idea; it provided stepping on points for schools in the form of workshops and follow-up resources, but it did not over prescribe, and a school's own agency was therefore privileged. As a result, schools' and children's enjoyment as well as the benefits they felt, were more profound. Schools valued being invited to collaborate rather than be told what to do. ■

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.

www.anewdirection.org.uk
@A_New_Direction

Image: Steve McQueen Year 3 ©Tate