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Participation Begins With Me: Reflections From Tate and School Headteachers on Year 3

David Parker with Kate Atkins, Maria Balshaw, Jackie Benjamin and 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

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.

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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.

In Conversation with...

Kate Atkins

Headteacher at Rosendale
Primary School, Lambeth

Dr Maria Balshaw CBE

Director of Tate

Jackie Benjamin,

Head teacher at Tyssen
Community School, Hackney

Anna Cutler

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

Kate Atkins
Headteacher at Rosendale
Primary School, Lambeth

Kate has been teaching in Lambeth for over 20 years. She began her teaching career in Early Years, which is still an ongoing passion. In addition to being a Headteacher she is CEO of the Great North Wood Education Trust, a Multi Academy Trust with a local secondary school and 3 children's centres. Kate led *ReflectED*, one of the first school-led research projects in the country as well as leading *Connecting Knowledge*, a London based research project which resulted in Rosendale being an Excellence Hub for lesson study. Rosendale is an EEF Specialist Partner for Research, supporting schools in London and beyond to use evidence-based practice in the classroom to improve outcomes for all children.

Dr Maria Balshaw CBE
Director of Tate

Maria has held the role of Director of Tate since June 2017. As Director, Maria is also the Accounting Officer appointed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Previously, Maria was Director of the Whitworth, University of Manchester; Director of Manchester City Galleries; and Director of Culture for Manchester City Council. Maria is Chair of the National Museum Directors' Council and is a Trustee of the Clore Leadership Programme and Manchester International Festival's Boards. In 2015, she was awarded a CBE for services to the arts.

Jackie Benjamin,
Head teacher at Tyssen
Community School, Hackney

Jackie has been teaching for over 20 years in schools in Tottenham and Hackney, becoming a head teacher 6 years ago. After leaving school with no qualifications, Jackie started working as a hairdresser and later a chef. She has always had a passion for working with children and at 30-years-old, she graduated as a fully qualified teacher. She strongly believes that there is a real need for children to see teachers who represent the community they live in and see that, no matter where you start, there are no limits.

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.

Participation Begins With Me: Reflections From Tate and School Headteachers on Year 3

Why did schools engage with the Tate Year 3 Project in such numbers? What were their motivations for participating? And what did Tate learn as part of that process?

David Parker with Kate Atkins, Maria Balshaw, Jackie Benjamin and Anna Cutler

Fundamentally Year 3 must be attributed to the artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen whose vision for the project and the artwork it became contains a beguiling surface simplicity, allowing inner complexities to slowly emerge over time. Yet the warmth of feeling and personal engagement felt by so many who experienced the *Steve McQueen Year 3* exhibition at Tate – along with the eye-catching billboards spread across London in 2019 – is also due in no small part to the schools and children that participated. They were the stars of this particular show.

But what motivated them to join in? On the face of it this was a simple idea with somewhat controlled content, a mass participation project with rigid logistics and timescales which were for the most part entirely inflexible: everything needed to happen with a particular year group within London boroughs within a single academic year. Yet, at the same time, it had a choral quality, ceding elements of individual control in order to enjoy the overall impact of many young people joining together in a shared endeavour. This was in essence a work of aggregation; an example of how the whole really can be greater than the sum of the parts.

To explore some of the dynamics underpinning the process, A New Direction organised two online discussions between key participants from Tate and from schools, the key themes of which are set out below. Maria Balshaw, Director of Tate, explained that Year 3 had helped the

venue explore ways of revaluing exhibition space and democratising the gallery.

“When I looked at the photographs as a collection, I saw several different ‘Londons’, filled with a huge mix of limitations and opportunities. And I was aware that not everyone portrayed would consider Tate as their space. Year 3 was a chance to challenge that. By placing the images of those young people up on the walls, hopefully, it began a process of them feeling that the Tate might be for them and their families in the future.”

Responding to this idea, Jackie Benjamin, concurred.

“We probably had several motivations as a school but overall, it was very much about the children being represented and valued. And about them being involved in the process, making the artwork happen. It wasn’t just a visit in that sense. The children were partners, and they were really invested in the idea; they felt involved.”

It was interesting to hear these interrelated expectations articulated from quite different vantage points. The ideas set out by Maria and Jackie speak directly to what we know to be important principles about participatory practice. Participatory projects aren’t just about empowering visitors. Every project has to address three constituencies – the institution, participants and the audience and Year 3 did this very well. A theme that was also picked up in the conversation between Anna Cutler and Kate Atkins. As Anna explained:

Maria Balshaw and Anna Cutler from Tate spoke with two headteachers from participating schools, Kate Atkins and Jackie Benjamin, to explore possible reasons behind Year 3’s success.

“I think a lot of value came through the fact that for Year 3 the whole concept cut through directly to the cohort themselves. They are the piece. They are the relevance. The entire concept was about the participants.”

Kate Atkins also saw a large part of the value in Year 3 generated by this sense of young people inhabiting the project.

“It was absolutely clear this was a ‘school’s project’ as opposed to a project to which schools were invited... the project simply didn’t exist without the participants.”

The concept of participation was a deep feature within this work. It was also multi-layered. Participation began with the individual, seeing themselves within the context of their classmates and the timeless nature of the school photo which is so relatable for us all. But each class photo was set in the wider context of year group cohorts, which in turn were scaled to include many other Year 3 (Y3) children from the same borough. Finally, as this process multiplied, a whole generation of 7- and 8-year-olds were situated within the sweep of an entire city. Effectively, this amounted to a window onto London in 2019, as if the youth of an entire city had a ‘photo booth’ snapshot simultaneously. Teachers embraced this concept with enthusiasm. Kate reflected:

“You can’t overlook the nature of the ‘event’. It was a spectacle that happened at scale. Also, it was communicated as such so our expectations were clear up front and set early on. That was important and helped us connect with the ‘big idea’. But the nature of the project and its processes also connected with us – we’re interested in where we are and who we are. Schools are always interested in that, because education starts with the children’s realities. And Steve McQueen just got that – the idea of the ‘school photograph’; they are part of all our histories. It’s timeless.”

There is something profound about the way Year 3 articulated this notion of participation. Schools often think of such projects as being heavily hands-on, yet in

the case of the core photography element, while there were spin off activities to help the children understand how that day’s photo would form part of an artwork at Tate and follow up work teachers could engage with, the creation of each class image was a traditional interaction between professional photographers and children and teachers who were subjects.

So far, so orthodox. Yet, as Anna pointed out, ‘they are the piece’. The children occupied the halls and walls of Tate Britain and therefore participation not only took the form of hands-on activities, it was also an aspect of each child’s identity, the affirmation of their place within their city and the possibilities their collective generational representation suggested. That schools embraced this concept so enthusiastically, potentially broadens what engagement with art museums can mean, transforming mass participation with young people as a core element of high-profile conceptual works. This extended to the role of Steve McQueen working as a partner with schools via Tate, Artangel, A New Direction and ArtsMediaPeople. Anna remarked on this aspect:

“Steve’s presence was a big part of the concept and probably drew people toward the idea, but he also did personal things, face to face moments with teachers and talks to camera which directly valued the work of educators.”

This invokes an instructive lesson about working at scale. Large scale projects still involve treating people as individuals. Providing partnership-spirited ways to enter and access the arts experience, Year 3 was in its entirety rested on the building blocks of relationship building and showing awareness of and respect toward key constituencies. Tate and A New Direction placed a great deal of emphasis on this, ensuring that timings, spaces and instructions were designed with the culture of schools in mind.

A New Direction’s outreach work was the entry experience for most schools that participated and as such framed the first contact in ways that made the settings feel

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valued. Communications to schools were clear and understood the beat to which most schools march. Kate remarked on the importance of this:

“There’s something hugely important about the pragmatics of projects like this; the timings, in fact the entire process, need to be structured in ways that fit with the three terms and seasonal rhythms of schools. Year 3 did this really well – so much thought was put into that aspect and that must have contributed to the high levels of engagement.”

Relating to constituencies in this way helps cement connections which have the potential to build cultural capital over time, something Maria returned to in her conversation.

“Ultimately Year 3 reminds us it’s our job to let families know we are for them. Tate is free to enter, they will be warmly welcomed, and they will find content that relates to them and their lives. We have to keep holding ourselves account to those ideas and Year 3 helped hugely with that.”

This challenge and goal is certainly applicable to Tate but also has relevance for other cultural venues too. Designing arts experiences with education components that get better the more people interact with them is not simply a matter of providing experiences well suited to crowds. Successful ‘me-to-we’ experiences are ones which enable cultural institutions to toggle between personal and social engagement by choosing concepts which lend themselves to individual and collective meaning. Year 3 managed this by conceiving a project which worked effectively with intermediary organisations, coordinating schools’ actions and preferences to create a more powerful overall result in the final exhibition. Jackie felt Year 3 took time to understand school needs in this regard.

“Year 3 made engaging easier for us. Every step was clear and well organised. We need that balance of expression and artistic freedom which came from the final event and the huge attention it got – something we felt part of. But it also came from

the way logistics were taken care of. We always knew what was needed and what the expectations were. Schools need that balance.”

Both Kate and Jackie reflected on the important alternative learning spaces and contexts cultural venues provide schools, but also pointed to some of the challenges too. They spoke of a curriculum which is nominally broad and open to interpretation, but also driven by pressures to secure results in summative exams which favour knowledge transfer and memorisation. From the perspective of teachers, the arts – particularly when they are at their best - can generate work which feels transgressive and pushed to the margins by other modes of learning. While Year 3 creates some counterbalance to that, it was not what might be considered a standard curriculum experience and so questions remain about longer term legacy and ongoing impact.

How can schools be helped to build on the undoubted energy and enthusiasm this large-scale art project gave rise to? Year 3 offers some clues.

- Start from where schools already are – Year 3 showed that huge engagement was possible if the central artistic concept related to schools’ own start points.
- What is needed must be clear – whether it is a large collaborative production such as Year 3, an artist in residence programme or arts learning that is CPD driven – schools really need to see the shape of the activity and grasp it early on if they are to sustain their engagement. Clear communication and conceptual clarity are key.
- Degrees of commitment which are scalable – not all schools can do everything, or be engaged with every element of a programme, but if the core offer is strong and simple, they can and will engage in large numbers. Some schools will want to go further and engage more deeply, so additional activities or tiered levels of connection can be advantageous.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the impact Year 3 had and may continue to have.

The impact on Tate is tangible and the commitment from Maria and Anna to listen to feedback and take points of learning back to relevant Tate teams is commendable. Year 3 would be difficult to replicate, but other large-scale work that operates with similar principles is now more realistic from Tate's perspective – the project definitely set a precedent for working in this way.

The impact of large projects such as this is difficult to pin down. They are transitory in their delivery, but last long in the memory and have sustained experiential impacts. Elements that came through from Kate and Jackie's testimony spoke to the scale of impact a project of this size can have. Jackie reflected on the impact of seeing all the photographs together in the Duveen Galleries.

"A lot of the children were struck by the lack of diversity or different forms of diversity in some schools; they noticed things that were dissimilar to their own experience, from the ethnicities of children to the different backgrounds in the photos, and that made them reflect on identity and place."

Kate reflected on why she made the decision to engage, and again, it was a determination based on the scale of impact and its potential to work on many levels while retaining focus and sharpness.

"I liked that it was about a whole year group. That seemed very important, because it was contained and limited in some respects, but also very inclusive. Everyone in that year group was part of it, and every school, potentially, could join in. The feedback from the kids when they came back was palpable. It was 'There's me!' But also, there's thousands of other mes."

Other impacts the headteachers suggested included:

- Higher levels of parental interest in, and value for, the arts
- Improved self-esteem and individuality among young people
- Greater awareness of place and connectedness to others among young people
- Greater awareness of schools as organisations from the vantage point of cultural venues
- Reinforcement of the importance of art for school and school for art – that high quality artwork can emerge from large scale participatory endeavours involving children

Over 1,500 London schools participated in Year 3. And almost 80,000 young people featured in the final artwork in the Duveen galleries of Tate Britain. This is a scale and spectacle not usually associated with school arts projects, but there is good reason to believe that the emotional uplift such work can offer is replicable. The Covid-19 lockdown that finally encroached on visitor numbers to Tate Britain in March 2020 also reminded us of how much we need the energy projects of this size and ambition can foster.

Year 3 wasn't just a spectacle. It was not only a 'wow' moment for the children who took part. It was a talking point and a means of reflecting on London as it is today and how it might be tomorrow. Steve McQueen's own take on the exhibition sums this up well:

'It's a telescope and microscope situation. You're looking through a telescope and seeing all these people, but it's also reflecting back on you, making you think: 'Who am I in all of this?'¹

The legacy for Year 3 could be far reaching. It invites us to think about participation in a deep way. What counts as participatory art? How does taking part change the way we see ourselves and relate to others? How can art and the art museum become an open invitation to everyone to locate themselves within their cultural histories and futures? When the art is the children, and their participation becomes the work, we are all – families, community, schools - better placed to reflect on their potential and the ways we might improve to help them fulfil it. ■

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1. G.Younge, "Childhood is a whirlwind": Steve McQueen on his mesmerising school photo project,' *The Guardian*, 4 Nov 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/nov/04/childhood-is-a-whirlwind-steve-mcqueen-on-his-mesmerising-school-photo-project>, accessed 22 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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Image: Steve McQueen Year 3 ©Tate