

My part in the development and work of Tate Education Department

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I am afraid most of what follows will seem excessively self-centred, but it is twenty-one years since I retired and, while I retain a clear memory of our aims and most of our members of staff, as well as an admiration for almost as many, I can not remember what each may have contributed or initiated and I can not recall many dates

Before I came to the Tate I had been Director of the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull where I had started both a Friends and an education dept comprising half a person as well as about a tenth of myself. This was described on my application to the TG and so, when I became Assistant Keeper I in the modern department in 1965, I was asked to look after 'education'. It was customary for each assistant keeper to do something on the side and I inherited this responsibility from, I think, Mary Chamot, my predecessor, as well as the Library.

The system in place comprised a small number of guide lecturers who were paid per lecture or school party and I would ring around a month or two in advance and book a programme of probably two a week. Some very distinguished individuals had been on our books including Lawrence Alloway and Alan Bowness. The National Gallery had a similar scheme. Among the members of our little team was one, Laurence Bradbury, who preferred to do his stuff in the lecture theatre on Saturdays and he had a small enthusiastic audience of groupies as well as casual attendance.

I think the V&A, founded and financed as an educational museum, was the only one to have a full time educational department. I talked to Madeline Mainstone, who ran it, and advised the director that we should do likewise in view of the supposed fact that the public could not understand modern art. And so we appointed our first in-house lecturer, Simon, who took over the scheme described above. My view was that the focus of educational effort should be on the works of art in the galleries and, on the basis of my experience doing this in Hull, that a speaker should always be able to indicate something in each work using words that were easily comprehensible and immediately verifiable, so: "The patch of colour on the floor in the left-hand bottom corner is the same as that on the woman's blouse". I retained this view throughout my time at the Tate, ending in 1987, and periodically spoke about it and wrote little memos accordingly.

In about 1970-71 I discussed the working of the Tate with Lawrence Gowing, the Deputy Director and Keeper of British Art, who had undertaken to write a policy for the TG [this must in fact have been 1965-7 when Gowing was in that post - he left in 1967 just before I arrived in Nov - SW]. We both thought that the other Keepers and Assistant Keepers of the curatorial departments were properly scholars (as I had found I was not) and that they did not much like the ancillary work that they were required to do. We knew also that the Arts Council, which had generally staged its larger exhibitions at the Tate, would be taking over its own gallery at the Hayward. We thought we could and should mount a full program of shows ourselves. The few exhibitions that we had put on before had been organised by Judith Jeffreys but she was in the process of becoming effectively Assistant Director, undertaking most of the Administration, and had not the time. These shows had been generally celebrations of the work of historic British artists. [The remarkable programme of exhibitions of British, international modern, and contemporary art that Michael instigated, began resoundingly in 1968 with the Roy Lichtenstein retrospective and was heralded, one might now say, by the last major Arts Council created show at Tate, the great Marcel Duchamp retrospective of 1966 - SW]

Lawrence agreed a new staff structure and allocation of responsibilities with the Director. These were adopted by the Trustees and as a result a post was created for me as Keeper of Exhibitions and Education in 1970. I formulated and had approved a strategy such that the exhibitions should always be considered as temporary amplifications of the Tate's permanent collections, and mirror its scope, comprising in addition modern to British masters, foreign and contemporary art. That is the exhibitions, with their catalogues which I commissioned and edited, would have an educational or propagandist function as well as those of celebration, show case etc. Norman supported this idea and it remained in force for some twenty years. Of course Serota has had a very different notion of the function of a museum.

My department was to be staffed by two Assistant Keepers one for Exhibitions and the other for Education. Rightly or wrongly, I thought that administration of the latter would be a waste of Simon's talents and Terry Measham got the newly created job. In the winter of '67-8 I had been given a State Department Grant to tour the USA and I took the opportunity to visit several of the most active museum departments of education. Madeline Mainstone of the V&A had been against the use of volunteer lecturers (docents), but I was impressed by their work especially on the West Coast and found that 'ladies of leisure' were very willing to offer regular work in the museum in exchange for training in art history/appreciation, and lecturing technique.

When Terry arrived I soon found that he was an enthusiastic proponent of the idea (then little accepted in Europe), and he and Simon devised a scheme and got it going quickly and with great success.

After this I intervened very little in the working of the Department and readily backed most of the enterprises put forward by its members, including the Chenies Street studio project with children, even though it took place outside the Tate proper. I certainly had little or no part in the gradual extension of the service by film, lecture series, poetry readings, debates etc., apart from getting the estimates passed annually.

In about 1979 I was renamed Keeper of Museum Services and was given back the Library and The Archive of British Art which I had started some years before. It came to be agreed that these should form the basis of a Study Centre with proper public access, again as an educational resource.

I had some projects that did not materialise: for example a repeated attempt to get our work more closely integrated with school teaching programs. Beginning before my time, we had always booked in school parties on demand, using originally the same part time lecturers. Later, we began to run short courses for teachers who were to bring parties to exhibitions, but I was told by the ILEA inspectors that our contribution in terms of 'outreach' would have to be limited to the fields of race relations and gender roles, which I thought to be outside our remit. I also tried to set up systematic collaboration with teachers in art schools, but, as I remember, they thought we would have nothing to offer. At this time there was very strong feeling by most art students against art history or appreciation and they were said not to want to know or learn anything about the art of the past. My impression was that lecturers who were proponents of the 'New Art History' and especially of so called 'Theory' seemed to want to keep their students away from us.

My only significant role in the Education Department's work was in the periodic creation of new posts and the appointment of staff. I think I did seriously bias the selection in that I was generally against those candidates whose thought was dominated by late Marxist, Structuralist and other predominantly socio-political ideologies. I felt that, unless they showed clearly at interview that they wanted to, and could, talk clearly about the works as immediately perceived, they would not be right for museum work. This was of course against the overwhelming trend exemplified in 'The New Art History' and its successors. However the

curatorial staff became more and more dominated by these tendencies and I was dismayed to see the arrangements and especially the labelling of the collection based on political theories.

For what it is worth I should point out that, at the Courtauld Institute, where I had been a student, one had to begin by reading Burkhardt's social and cultural history of the Renaissance as well as Berenson's connoisseurship classics and several of Vasari's biographies. I have always thought this a very good paradigm. In this context I should mention my marginal intervention in the display of the collections, which I thought of in the same sort of terms. The core work of the department being almost completely delegated, I continued to take some part in the didactic role of the museum as a whole. For some reason I (rather than the Keeper of Modern Art) had been asked to devise a general lay out of the collections with Gowing. I think it was as a result of this that I began to take an interest in the project for completing the Tate that had been set deferred in 1939 (30 years earlier). I worked for a while on a brief for architects before finding that Judith was already doing it and I am afraid I intervened and came to work with her as a sort of advisory committee to the director. The reason I mention this here is that I felt that we should understand the heuristic function of the Tate in order to write a much more detailed brief. The one that Judith had been working on was not much more than a schedule of accommodation.

Accordingly, I proposed a study of the behaviour and response or uptake of our public. This got as far as a pilot study in which we tracked visitors in the galleries, plotting the routes they took and timing the attention that they gave to individual works. The idea was to try to find out how the arrangement of the collections could be made to enhance the role of the Tate as a heuristic resource, and so its educational impact in its widest sense. However one of the researchers that I had employed left the entire set of data on a bus and it disappeared. All that was left was a two page digest that I had prepared for the director. I did try to use these preliminary findings to influence the way the collections were hung with some effect and this lasted several years until the Bowness regime. As a foot note to this I mention that when Serota was discussing the brief for the Tate Modern, one that he knew we had been developing on a much more modest scale for twenty years, and knowing also that I was writing a book (never published) on museum design, he invited me, among others to address the Trustees. I talked mostly on the subject of the circulation of the galleries as a heuristic device (not using this term) and put forward, as a practical suggestion, a layout comprising three parallel sequences of galleries that would make possible synchronic and diachronic displays. I don't know whether this notion was incorporated in the brief, but in the event it was what the architects designed. However I have come to think that it was not such a good idea, even though its prototype in the fourth quarter galleries at Millbank, for which I had written the eventual brief, have worked well on a smaller scale.

At some earlier point, ?1969, I had been asked to edit the concise handbook to the collections and to rewrite the half that covered twentieth century art. While I was doing this, I happened to stand behind two young people in the cafeteria queue who were picking each other up and who had begun to discuss the previous edition of the handbook. It became clear from their complaints that they had very little understanding of even the most basic terms we had been using, whether historical or specific. For example they agreed that the word 'composition' was too long and incomprehensible. I tried to strip my own efforts of any vocabulary specific to the art world unless it was defined either explicitly or by context. However I remained quite unsure as to whether I was making any more sense than other curators and so added to the study mentioned above some attempt to find out what words, names and concepts would be generally accessible. This was done by recording unstructured discussion among visitors on the fairly newly available videotape. But I was unable to find any one to analyse in ways that could be useful. The psychologist and the sociologist that I contacted would only consider the material in terms habitual in their professions such as class or income level. As far as I can remember, since we had not wanted to ask direct questions about educational level, they would not be able to deal with this factor, evidently related to the visitors' vocabulary and

introjected conceptual contexts. The only result was to exhibit the, to me, amazing poverty of the intellectual or emotional frameworks within which most of the public could experience the art.

We did find however, by questionnaires, that the literature provided by the Tate was in more or less inverse proportion to what the viewers said they wanted. They did want the life and ideas of the artist but not the full catalogue raisonnee that was rightly the glory of the curatorial departments. They wanted labels with dates and titles or subjects, but, they said, not lists of star works although these were the most widely distributed. They did not want political economic or even cultural context. However, soon after I left, a new and much more professional and intensive study was undertaken which showed a clear upward trend in the demand for these last. I also got the Arts Council to do a more focused study of one of their exhibitions in which I was involved, which found inter alia and against our expectations, that those visitors who started with more knowledge absorbed, from the display and explanations, less than those who started with less. Both the Tate and Arts Council staff refused to accept the results and these projects had no discernable effect.

Almost the only public success I had as an author was a small book for children in which the idea, mentioned at the beginning of this piece, of making sure that for each work there would be one or two verifiable points was deployed using a different type of point in each case, whether of artist's technique, costume, composition, gesture, narrative device and so on. This was intended specifically as an educational vehicle and was the only thing I have written that received critical acclaim and ran into several reprints.

Wandering, now, even further afield: I had been involved in organising one or two public debates that followed public concerns, one for example soon after I arrived on the lack of abstract art at the Gallery. Perhaps as a result of this, at the time of the student occupations and demonstrations etc? 1969-70, I was asked to represent the Tate to the would be occupiers. I arranged two debates (I seem to remember) between myself and the leaders, including I think Gustav Metzger, David Medalla and John Dugger, in order to elucidate the legal and traditional functions of the museum, something that had concerned me since the early 1950's. The educational outcome of these was that the young people agreed that it was all too complicated and that they might come back if they could work out what to do, which they never did. I was not sure whether this was a positive or negative achievement on my part.

The only other thing I can remember doing for the Education Department. or in parallel to it was to get in on the brief for the Clore Gallery so that it would have dedicated facilities for the reception of school parties, a projection room and auditorium capable of exhibiting films or of staging public lectures and debates at times when the museum was otherwise closed, as well as when it was open. I think I put before the Director a much more expansive role for the Department or at least backed it up, but the then Director, Alan Bowness, was himself much more directly concerned with all these things. From this time, I contributed few or no ideas to our programmes, beyond making what I hoped was an occasional encouraging remark.

Notes

All inserts in square brackets are edited comments provided by Simon Wilson to whom this document was originally sent by Michael Compton in response to a discussion about Tate Encounters' interest in the history of education practice at Tate