

Do art galleries need to take action to activate learning in visitors?

How this question emerged through the Practice Based Inquiry and Research (PBI/R) process.

When deciding on the question to address in our PBI/R we were aware of the move in gallery education from historical instruction, concerned with the transmission of knowledge, to a more learner-centred approach concerned with creating opportunities for audiences to actively engage with art. (Pringle and DeWitt 2014). Scholarship for its own sake had been criticized for being elitist and excluding, and models of engaging with the public have moved to more inclusive less didactic models of education (Pringle 2021) which “foreground critical thinking as opposed to art appreciation or practical art making” (Sayers 2014 pg:356) that was historically foregrounded with informative signage and curatorial juxtaposition and arrangement (Serota 1996)

Having looked at the various learning activities taking place in the Tate galleries (Tate 2021a) We identified that, although the programmes, activities, and opportunities often strove to be inclusive and provide opportunity to all, they could be exclusionary simply by their defined intention to encourage participation through “exploring”, “building and sharing knowledge”, and “reaching audiences” (Tate 2021a). These are all *actions* to be undertaken, an engagement that had to be active and intentional. We wondered what these actions actually meant, what would be gained from them? And how else could an individual gain from visiting an art space or gallery?

The phrase *active engagement* seems to suggest that an inactive or passive engagement, and an active disengagement, are both possible and undesirable. That there is a *correct* or *most beneficial* way to act, behave, or respond to a gallery or art space visit. Or that at least an informal understanding of behaviours that would not be accepted within galleries or art spaces exist. Even those working in gallery learning report that there are understood codes of practice that do not reveal themselves until they are breached and vetting processes that can block ideas for participation extending

beyond a certain acceptable point (Mathews 2018). Even our informal reflection on our own experiences noted that there are invigilators in each room, what is their role if not to ensure compliance with rules; formal or informal? The tut and glare still hold sway in a gallery and will be deployed, if not by staff, then other visitors, if those understood codes of practice are broken or boundaries stretched.

The aim of our activities was to challenge the idea of there being a right or correct way to respond to a gallery or art space visit, or more accurately, the perception there is a correct way to respond. We wanted to be open and celebratory of all responses to encourage attendance and participation from those in the vicinity of the gallery who may never have ventured inside for worrying that they may not do or think the *right* thing.

We asked participants to consider and / or use materials that they use in their everyday lives (bricks for builders, paper for teachers). We were not looking at art as something that required a technical skill, but simply as a process where manipulation of materials conveyed ideas to an audience. For the exercise it was important that we referenced materials that anyone, and specifically the participant, could easily access. Something that they were comfortable with, so that they would have the stability generated by familiarity while we undertook “a process that challenges the learner out of complacency, a comfort zone” (Atkinson 2012 pg:15). This was also supported by the activity being online and physically taking place in the participants own space as opposed to the gallery. We wanted to promote to participants the idea that art, and even just gallery attendance, was not just for those with a talent or knowledge, but for anyone. In both activities we referred to the material once they had been manipulated by the participants as “objects”(although not yet “art objects”) to promote the idea that it now had an additional meaning or importance, and that this had been created by the participants simply through their actions. Establishing the idea that art was achievable through simple actions.

The summative reflective questioning about the objects in both activities was intended to highlight to the participants that they had the ability to interrogate and interpret the objects. That if those objects were now art objects, then they now had the tools to

interrogate art objects. Therefore, they were now capable of investigating the objects in the gallery, no more or less worthy of investigation than their own objects. That they now had a new model of inquiry available to them, one with a greater focus on analysis and reflection (Pringle and DeWitt 2014). A state that Atkinson (2016) refers to as “activated.

An individual's activation in an art context can lead to wider activation.

If from the PBR/I we established that activation is possible, then the question raised in the title of this essay suggests two possibilities: do galleries have to act to achieve activation in participants, would it happen if there was no action taken? and secondly, is this desirable: Do we, as a society, need them to take this action?

Atkinson (2016) says that to be activated a learner needs to have not only the ability to interpret, but also the ability to be critical of what they can newly interpret. Due to time limitations our PBR and PBI activities did not explore this critically as much as the interpretation. However, it is this criticality that extends activation beyond being important and relevant to culture, into supporting or enabling political and societal activation of the interpretive and critical.

Very much like a child learning to walk on a soft surface or to chop wooden vegetables with a wooden knife, activation in an arts context can be a practice, or trial run for the real thing. Interpreting and critiquing an idea or concept contained within a gallery can have very many less consequences than interpreting and critiquing a governmental policy, or a political ideal. When” the learner becomes aware of what they do not know, or of the unfamiliar nature of something they have encountered.this space of unfamiliarity can induce anxiety and a retreat into the familiar” (Pringle and Dewitt 2014 pg:6) Practicing interpretation and criticality in an art context allows individuals to “engage with this unpredictable event and allow themselves to confront the new perspectives brought about through this encounter”(Pringle and Dewitt 2014 pg:6) This activation in an art context can be a trial or practice for activation in a wider societal sense as “this vital force of art with its ambits and morphologies of practice, can be parallel with the possess of

real learning” (Atkinson 2016 pg:9) and build the confidence needed to challenge the status quo identified through interpretation and critique. (Ranciere 2004)

But why would this process of activation be particularly linked to arts learning and experiences in galleries and arts spaces, as opposed to the process of learning and education institutions in general? Would a general education not better prepare the individual for the very general matter of societal interpretation and critique?

Perhaps because art offers a space for antagonism (Mouffe 2016) and rupture (Pringle and DeWitt 2016) that disrupt the flow of normal experience and encounter with new or unfamiliar ideas. Kester (in Pringle and DeWitt 2016 pg:6) identifies art as having a “unique power to disrupt, destabilize and otherwise confound the viewers conventional perceptions of the world”. In addition, as the boundaries between gallery and non-gallery become more blurred, contemporary art is often politically or socially active, and the correlation between the ideas in both art and the world more obviously aligned than in other academic subjects.

The problems with activation

If activation is to be desired for learners to unlock / practice their interpretation and critique skills before unleashing them on the world. Why would it not be promoted at all opportunities? Atkinson himself has identified problems with the intentional promotion of activation. He identifies two states of learning: Transcendence, learning with a set of criteria to meet, and Immanence, learning without agenda (2016 pg:11). He believes that the interpretation and criticality of activation can only really be achieved through Immanence, and any intention for the learning or activation taking place will undermine the process itself. In addition, Birrel (2008) questions whether a curriculum for activation is even possible when the subject of the learning is art. Art, as opposed to making, is not visible or tangible and inherently open to interpretation and un-policeable. How can this be *taught* by one individual to another in any intentional way?

An intended activation also risks reverting back to the curriculum model, there being a correct set of information available to know, not in this instance a curriculum of names

and dates, but a *correct* way of thinking about art work. This can occur as many of those working in arts learning roles in galleries and art spaces are unaware of their own cultivated status and it not being a natural disposition but a learnt set of values (Sayers 2014). Their exposure to culture and arts learning opportunities have played an important role in the subjective construction of a “common sense” (Mouffe 2016 pg2). If any engagement with art enables an activation of sorts, in that it encourages interpretation and critically, does this necessarily require, and indeed might even benefit from, not being affected by intentional interventions by the institutions hosting or housing the art itself? Ranciere states that “to explain something to someone is to first of all show him he cannot understand it by himself” (Ranciere in Birrell pg 2) and this assertion of ignorance could impact on any activation that may be intended.

An example:

Raw Canvas was “an initiative run at Tate Modern by young adults for young adults, giving everyone the opportunity to reach their own conclusions about art.” Where “Participants are invited to draw on their personal experience and knowledge when thinking about and interpreting works of art” (Tate 2021b). In her reflection on this project Sayers (2014) describes a potential conflict between a benevolent desire by those who value art and want other people to do the same, and the potential this has to patronise the newcomer and create a divide between those who have been “acculturated” and those new to the gallery visiting experience. The wider societal benefits of activation are considered in the assertion that “gallery education programmes should be nurturing young people in order that they can think for themselves rather than becoming too preoccupied with young people’s ability to think only about the art objects that are contained within houses of high culture” (Sayers 2014) However, Ranciere (2004) believes that emancipation is about self-emancipation, and that therefore an emancipatory school (or gallery learning department) is not possible For an emancipatory experience of interpretation and critique is to be encouraged then “strategies are employed to initiate learning, to challenge learners, but [where] there is no predetermined outcome”(Atkinson 2012 pg:12)

However, this suggestion of strategies contradicts the rejection of an emancipatory school, as how would a strategy be employed if not within a planned education / learning experience? But any such planned learning experiences need to consider “How to reveal an intelligence to itself, not to impose upon it pre-existing forms of intelligence.” or “unmalleable institutional frameworks” (Kraus 2006 pg257) and the pedagogic strategies that can actively put off learners from engaging with experiences (Sayers 2016). Tate learning staff report that their aims are to “open up art and ideas to disenfranchised people ” but also recognize that “absolute equality in terms of knowledge and power sharing” are very difficult to achieve while still providing facilitation and support for the activity (Pringle and DeWitt 2014)

In the Raw Canvas project pedagogic strategies were used, even the strategy was to be as participant led as possible. For example: referring to *participants*, not *learners*, which might infer a lack of knowledge. However, participants were *asked* to select their own work to talk about, prompt questions were *provided*. Even with a peer process and lack of defined or required structure Sayers identifies that:

“Greg excuses his choice of language by indicating that he thinks that ‘strange isn’t a very good word’. Even though he ‘doesn’t really know anything [about art]’, he is conscious of the need to use special language when talking about it. He expresses his feeling that nonspecific words like ‘strange’ that are used in normal talk are inappropriate here.” he has imposed his own pre-existing understanding on to the activity.”

“Where is Greg’s opportunity to disagree with this or to explore the fundamental idea that an artwork does contain meaning? Perhaps it would be more productive for him to consider the contrasting notion that the effect of art is to generate meaning.”

Even this consideration suggests an unmalleable institutional framework where *exploration* and being *productive* are the aims. This may be “common sense” to the facilitators (Mouffe 2016 pg2), but perhaps Gregg was just fine with what was happening? Even the arts learning events with the most redistributed sensible and emancipated participants still seem to ask those involved to think for themselves..... but not that way.

What if activation is needed, but action to activate is not always necessary?

If we understand that engaging with art, interpreting, and critiquing it can inform, support and encourage societal critique and interpretation, and that that is a positive thing (and by no means is this university agreed), but that doing this intentionally or in a structured way can impact on the effectiveness or impartiality of the process, what are alternative ways of increasing learning in art spaces without enforcing a prescribed form of activation? What might be alternative ways of disrupting habitual or normalising modes of practice, ways of speaking and acting that affect new distributions of the sensible, new modes of speaking and acting? (Atkinson 2016 pg:11)

With the closure of galleries and art spaces caused by the Covid19 pandemic in 2020 action and response by galleries was essential (Pringle 2020) in order to continue the disruption of the normal art provides to society, and a number of new and alternative methods emerged through the essential curtailments placed on normal practice. A prime example being the Brooklyn Museum opening its lobby and toilets to the Black Lives Matter protests taking place outside their site during the pandemic. This required specific action on the part of the organisation for it to take place, but then enabled participants in the march to utilise the arts space on their terms. (Charr 2020) Taking what was needed (toilet access) without any obligation to interact with artwork. In this new situation any interaction that took place could be entirely on the terms of the participant. Equally the surge in access to the Tate Kids online resources was recognised to be more about keeping children at home entertained, but still increased traffic to the Tate website and interaction with the art works hosted.

Is action to activate needed because it is measured?

Tate's Gallery policy has evolved to meet government requirements for measuring the number and demographic profile of visitors; to engage with diversity agendas; and to

respond to a general increase in internationalisation and changes in economic circumstances (Sayers 2016) that all impact on the galleries funding, and ultimately continued existence. The recruitment of new audiences is so highly prized it can determine the nature of activities on offer and can constrain programmes (Sayers 2016) and many gallery programmes often have in-built objectives for increased and widened participation.

However, without a structured curriculum how can this participation be quantified to secure this funding? If it is accepted that a gallery or arts space is available to anyone to do anything in (within reason, we still have the tutters and invigilators to keep it in line) then can simply attendance be counted as participation? Is simply being in the vicinity of artwork enough to benefit from it? If the benefit cannot be measured does it even exist? Atkinson identifies that “The ontology of this force is not located within the art objects in whatever form, but in the process of the relational ontogenesis” (Atkinson 2016 pg:9) Like the bricks and paper in the PBI/R, the discussion of the object is the *thing*, not the object. (Pringle 2018) so how can we account for knowledge generated through the experience of engaging with art?

The public galleries in the UK for the most part continue to be free at the point of access and funded by government to provide an opportunity to participation for everyone in art, away from the big A art of the commercial market (Shimon 2019) where the singular physical art product exists, to the new “quantum field of little a art that's inextricably linked with everything else” (pg3) and an interpretation and critique of the art can easily be applied to that “everything else”. In order to ensure access to this for everyone who wants it, and to secure the funding to enable this, publicly funded galleries have to juggle the prioritising of visitor activation, visitor numbers, new visitor numbers, visitor satisfaction and any number of other issues. While many gallery learning departments seek to have a singular statement of intention it seems it is perhaps best to have a range of participation options available and measurable. Including the simple attendance of a space, to use the toilets or to look at nice pictures, for those who may find unfamiliarity and challenge would result in a retreat into the familiar (Pringle and DeWitt pg6) but also providing a “open framework” (pg10) in which the rupture and antagonism can occur for those open to and able to cope with the challenge.

In conclusion, do art spaces need to take action to activate learning in visitors? It seems action is not necessary, and that activation can happen independently of any external prompt or structure. However, for any measurement of activation to take place an action must be taken to compare the levels of activation with and without that action. To remain funded, galleries need to be able to evidence increased levels of engagement, (activation or simply attendance) and the only real way to show meaningful data is to take action and show its impact on those levels.

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