

**Interpretation in the Art Museum:
authority and access**

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Declaration of originality:

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pahav". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial letter.

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(exclusive of appendices, list of reference and bibliography)

Dedication

For my family and for Nick, who allowed me the time and space to continue with my studies and to follow my passion and to the many colleagues and friends with whom I have been able to engage in an ongoing conversation.

Abstract

The thesis investigates the rise of wall texts and display captions positioned alongside paintings in Tate Britain between 1987 and 2007 and considers possible reasons for this increase: the return of philanthropic attitudes of 19th century social reformers; changes in the national curriculum for art and design; partial devolution of financial responsibility from government to museum bodies; income generation, funding and sponsorship; increasing inclusion and access policy and internet use. All of these factors have changed the manner in which museums see themselves and address the needs of their visiting public.

However, the principle focus of the thesis is the text itself and asks what it means to write words intended to inform, explain and interpret artworks.

Using filmed interviews the research investigates differences in the manner in which people describe a painting in the gallery after they have read accompanying text with descriptions they give from memory i.e. seeing a painting in their mind's eye.

Archive research tracks the authoring and institutional positioning of interpretative text from its original home in the publications department, to the curatorial team, as part of education and currently provided by a dedicated team. It asks whether the function and nature of such text is best described as literature, marketing, promotional or a tool of access and asks whether it would help its development if it had a dedicated theory to govern and structure it.

Throughout, the issues raised are complex and cross many disciplines. To acknowledge this, I organised an international conference at Tate Britain with speakers who approached the subject from literary, philosophical and sociological perspectives.

I conclude that the phenomena of text based interpretation in museums needs to be re-examined, that text should be repositioned away from art works and that visitors should be given more opportunity to bring their own personal, corporeal experience to looking at art.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates the way in which written text in the art museum changed in both name and character: initially providing basic information i.e. facts about the painting and the artist, medium, dates and provenance etc., then later as it became known as interpretation, used as a description for *all* text: wall panels, display captions, labels etc., with greater emphasis on context, meaning and artistic/curatorial interpretation.

The thesis explores the possible reasons for the expanded use and specific nature of this form of text and begins with a proposition, that during the period 1987-2007, particular social, political and cultural triggers may have contributed to its development in UK museums of art. After looking at the context and background of the chosen period, the thesis considers the main interested parties: the chosen institution, Tate Britain and the museum visitor. The research examines how those who write wall text in the art museum, that is text written for, and positioned alongside works of art, (specifically for my thesis, paintings) make decisions about what form this text should take and how it should be structured, what information, explanation, interpretation it should include and the expectations visitors have of museum text.

Throughout my museum career, I have become aware of the dual focus of text. It has a responsibility to serve the museum visitor: to reveal, to clarify, to facilitate access and aid understanding, but it must also show its allegiance to the inanimate object to which it is inextricably connected and without which it would have no reference point: the work of art. As such, text must be servant to image/artifact and servant to viewer. It must successfully elucidate, explain and expand upon the visual but also allow space for the work of art to have a life of its own.

A thesis such as this, which necessitates reference to many other disciplines: history, philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, art history and sociology, presents the researcher with a challenge: needing to acknowledge the complexity of the subject and raise the level of debate, but also accepting that constraints of time and knowledge may mean that many of the more expansive ideas are only briefly touched upon.

In order to acknowledge the different focus of each chapter, I have used a range of different methodologies. In chapter two, which provides the context and background for the chosen period and a history of the changing nature of Tate interpretation, I have taken an ethnographic approach and referenced Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). This chapter has also used text and content analysis as a structure for looking at wall panels and display captions. Chapter three, which first considers the expectations visitors have from interpretative text, draws on literary theory and then, with reference to the filmed interviews, takes a phenomenological approach. In the final chapter, I revisit the original research questions, summarise my findings and consider possibilities for further exploration and collaboration. Throughout the thesis I refer to the conference I organised at Tate Britain and consider whether it is possible to use the theoretical material presented as a means for informing and consolidating museum practice.

The thesis begins with a rationale and explains why I have chosen written text in the art museum as my research topic, why the specific time frame of 1987-2007, why Tate Britain as my venue and why I chose to organise an international conference.

1.1 Rationale for the thesis

The choice of subject for any PhD thesis is bound to have strong personal motivation: this one is no exception. It comes out of many years working in museums of art and observing how changes in education and display, access and inclusion policy and an emphasis on audience development have impacted on the way in which visitors use the gallery space, as well as how they are influenced and affected by the increasingly large and diverse type of interpretative material available to them.

Over the two decades covered by the research period, I observed the outcome and impact of such changes: in particular I became aware that there were often large groups of visitors gathering at the entrance of an exhibition reading the written material or standing in front of the extended wall panel of a collection display reading the text. This in turn led me to wonder whether they were actually spending more time reading (written) text than looking at the works of art. It was questions like these, which prompted my initial interest and fuelled my ambition to begin a debate around what 'interpretation' in the art museum actually *is* and what it might be doing. In this respect my close involvement with the institution and my personal observations have been extremely valuable. However, from time to time, it has also been suggested that I may have prematurely decided the outcome. I admit that the original question was born out of a deep concern, but I have made every effort to conduct the empirical part of my work with objectivity and to contextualise the research period solidly within social, political and museum history (Bennett, 1995, pp. 99-102).

Neither the place nor the chosen period is arbitrary. I joined the education department of the Tate Gallery in 1987 and for the next sixteen years worked with children and students in formal education. In 1993, I was appointed to the role of curator of adult programmes and adult learning and subsequently took a similar role in the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum. My decision to use the specific time frame of 1987 – 2007 relates therefore to my own career and covers a period that has been particularly significant in museum and gallery education: a period in which there was a dramatic increase in visitor numbers, radical changes in cultural policy, and a growing emphasis on the responsibility museums have to provide physical, cultural and intellectual access. In February 2007 visitor numbers at Tate were said to be up 20 percent to almost five million, by 2009 they had exceeded this number.

While I would agree with those who warn against generalisations about museum visitor statistics pointing out that it is still only the larger London national museums

that are recording this kind of increase in visitor numbers, there is, I would suggest, a general phenomena to be examined

(<http://newcurator.com/2009/03/uk-museum-visitor-numbers-up>).

1.2 Why this place?

The focus of my research is Tate Britain: it was certainly my Tate years that have been most significant for this thesis. The arrival of Nicholas Serota in 1988 as new director prompted major changes within the institution: new methods of display and new ideas and strategies for education and learning. Most particularly, there was an increase in the production of all types of interpretative materials, wall captions, room panels, extended wall texts, worksheets, leaflets, booklets, pamphlets, room guides, exhibition catalogues, audio guides, audio benches and hand-held devices. Although initially, it was not the education department that was responsible for providing written text in galleries and exhibition spaces, as time went on, and certainly by the middle to end of the research period, this was predominantly the case.

1.3 Education by any other name.

The expansion and changing remit of the department was reflected in its restructuring and renaming: first *Education*, then *Education and Interpretation*, *Interpretation and Learning*, and currently in 2010, simply *Learning*.

I now learn, in 2011, that the V&A have recently decided to change the title of their Learning Department back to *Education*.

Mindful of my privileged access to archive material (including some personal archive material), the liberal permission I have been given to film and interview in the galleries and the continuing institutional support and encouragement I have received, it has seemed logical to choose Tate as my research site, my 'laboratory'. I should add however that many of the observations I make, would also apply to other museums and galleries.

1.4 Why me?

Before joining Tate, I had taught in schools, attended Art College, and studied for a BA with the Open University and an MA at Birkbeck College. It was my strong interest in the image (painting in particular) that had prompted my decision to move into museum education but even then, I had noticed a conflict of interest between theory and practice. My art school training had stressed the importance of the visual image but the A351 Open University course, which I hoped would further my interest in *looking* at paintings, had in some respects, taken me further away, with its overarching emphasis on the importance of the social history of art. Working with an education department in an art museum would, I had hoped, give me the opportunity I needed to look carefully at paintings and learn also how to communicate my interest to others.

I first became aware of the shift in nature and character of text and the emergence of the word, 'interpretation' when I joined Tate in the late 1980s. This is a memory also shared by former head of education, Simon Wilson who, in response to my question asking when he remembers the word first being used, replies:

Interpretation came into use, I don't remember exactly when but in the 80s as a museological term, covering the whole business of lectures, gallery talks, guided tours, exhibition leaflets, exhibition guides, audio guides all that stuff, came under the heading of interpretation. (interview one, appendix A)

I now think that it was a combination of changes in the manner in which museums and galleries of art thought about, and displayed works of art and their access and inclusion policy that was responsible for the growth in production of written material. At the time, however, it appeared to emerge quietly and as far as I recall, there were no grand meetings to discuss what interpretation of this form might entail. Toby Jackson goes as far as saying that 'they wanted someone to take on interpretation but they didn't know what it was ... they hadn't worked it through' (interview two, appendix A).

Nevertheless, it was soon apparent that 'interpretation' was considered an important strand of the services the museum offered and although a range of resource materials in the shape of worksheets, plans, guides and teachers' notes had always been available from the beginning of the 1980s, it was the expansion of gallery wall text and display captions next to paintings that made the greatest impact: 'the whole business of captions and wall texts ... [began when] Nick Serota arrived in 1988' (interview one, appendix A).

When I made the decision to leave Tate, a couple of years after the opening of Tate Modern, it was largely because I wanted time to reflect on the changes I had witnessed and to consider what it meant to place 'interpretation' at the heart of the gallery's education mission. This thesis is the result on that journey of exploration: an attempt to look at the role of interpretation and what it might mean in the context of an art museum, to ask questions about who is chosen to interpret, on behalf of whom and how decisions regarding the nature and content of that interpretation are taken. My rationale for embarking on the thesis comes therefore, directly out of my own experience at Tate as well as other major galleries. However as Donald Preziosi commented at the Tate conference, theories around interpretation are among, '*the most enduringly intractable social, cultural, ethical, philosophical, and religious problems to have ensnared thinkers in many traditions for millennia*' (Tate conference). Inevitably, although my own research area has had a more contained focus, that of written interpretation in museums of art, the breadth and complexity of the concept of interpretation has always been uppermost in my thoughts and it is precisely the complex and wide ranging nature of the topic, which has also proved problematic in choosing a suitable methodology.

1.5 Thinking about a methodology

Ethnography had not, at first, been a consideration. Ethnography or ethnographic fieldwork had appeared to me to be exactly that, *fieldwork* undertaken in remote places, the study of distant peoples, languages and cultures. The field of study upon which I was about to embark, on the other hand, was one I knew well, one in which I

had worked for almost twenty years. I didn't need to travel great distances to get to the institutions in which I was interested, they spoke my language and by and large conducted themselves in a way I recognised. I did not consider the behaviour of those who visited Tate, to be particularly unusual or demonstrably 'site-specific', although as time passed it was precisely *that* which absorbed my interest. Even at a very early stage, I knew enough about research methodology to be aware that objectivity was desirable, yet here I was, having worked in museums and galleries of art for almost two decades, trying to imagine myself an *outsider* when I was intimately and passionately involved. I felt sure that my intimacy would be considered a handicap and that it would be impossible to achieve the kind of objectivity and distance necessary to effectively 'remove' myself from within and place myself outside of the institution. As I read more, however, I realised that my decision to use an ethnographic methodology, structured on ethno-theory and an acknowledgment of the insider view, was not only entirely possible, but a perfect match for my own experience and interest: 'all ethno-graphy is connected to (auto)bio-graphy' (Fabian, 2001b, p. 12). Such a methodology would allow me to acknowledge and celebrate my subjectivity, my perspective, my involvement, experience, memory and the personal bank of information I have amassed during those Tate years:

Knowledge that is worth working for must be mediated by experience (even if this is the case vicariously and indirectly when we "use" someone else's ethnography) ... critically understood, autobiography is a *condition* of ethnographic objectivity.

(Fabian, 2001b, p. 12)

If choosing an ethnographic methodology suited my career path, it also suited my decision to use the micro, (examples of wall text and display captions; interviews; changes in Tate management, departmental structuring and specific interpretative strategies), to index the macro, (the structure and power of the institution; the effect of government and cultural policy; shifts in authority; the destruction of one 'voice' and the emergence of another and a growing emphasis on access and plurality).

It is my contention that the growth of museum text may be seen as a small, but highly significant phenomena: one of many that have contributed to changes in the way Tate has chosen to project itself. Throughout the thesis, I suggest that it is possible to use small changes as a way of understanding larger shifts: seeing the world as a system in which each element has a relationship with, and is affected by, others and as such, text might be understood as an indicator of larger more significant changes in cultural practice.

Acknowledging my personal interest both in the topic and the institution and accepting that all research is interpretative has allowed me to approach the field and the focus of the study with fresh eyes and avoid becoming a researcher 'who call[s] a tract of land their own, but they never set eyes on it and never take a stroll on it' (Shklovsky, 1917). It has also allowed me to use a style of writing which Sue Starfield and Louise Ravelli have described as, 'Introducing the Self':

we have allowed ourselves a postmodernist word play in the title of this section in which we give consideration to the presentation of self and relate this to the thesis macrostructure.

(Ravelli, 2006, p.222-243).

The work of Bourdieu has particular relevance here. Bourdieu argued that there is at play in complex societies, a 'theory effect', by which he meant that authoritative, i.e. legitimately authorised, knowledge intervenes in the social conditions, which are simultaneously its subject and its object (Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper, 1990). There is, therefore, no such thing as 'disinterested' academic work (Jenkins, 1992, p. xi).

1.6 The Tate conference

Interpretation, Theory & the Encounter

I had decided quite early on in the research period to use the structure of an international conference as a method of investigation. Conference organisation had been central to my work and I was used to thinking about interrogating complex issues in this way. It was my intention to invite a group of philosophers, social

historians, writers and art historians who had approached the issue of interpretation in their own research area, to present papers at an international conference which addressed the practice of writing museum interpretation in the art gallery.

I hoped that speakers might focus their papers on the question of whether (and how) words can help visitors see, and experience paintings. I hoped they would consider how museum theory might inform practice and also address some of the less tangible qualities of the artistic encounter: aesthetic, spiritual or religious (or any other).

The conference was described in Tate's diary of events as follows:-

As interpretation becomes an increasingly conflicted site of meaning and representation within curatorial and museological practice this conference brings together key international speakers to consider the theoretical and philosophical issues which frame textual interpretation. Speakers include Tony Bennett, Donald Preziosi, Griselda Pollock, and James Elkins.

The paper I gave to introduce the conference, *There will be no miracles here* is presented in appendix B of this thesis and abstracts of papers and a web cast version of the event may be accessed at

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/symposia/21395.htm>.

In retrospect, I feel that the conference left many questions unanswered. Although each of the papers did extend the discussion to other disciplines, I and many of my colleagues, were left feeling that not enough was said about how these other disciplines might address the specificity of the art museum experience and the needs and expectations of the art gallery visitor. It was certainly the case that those presenting academic papers made scant references to the problems involved in museum interpretation and those involved in writing interpretative text showed frustration that the conference was too theoretical and provided little in the way of concrete help for the advancement of their task.

With these problems in mind, I wrote a follow up email to James Elkins after the conference in which I asked him whether he agreed with me that a dialogue between theory and museum professionals might never properly occur, he replied,

I'm so glad you asked this. There are, I think, two underlying (overarching?) problems. First, some people, such as Donald Preziosi, are more interested in bringing out the complexities of meaning than in proposing sets of meanings. So there is what he would call a "parallax" issue: his interests are to do with revealing complexities in other people's positions, which can in theory be of use in actual real-world interpretations, but really runs in a different direction.

James Elkins email to author

Elkins observation that 'some people ... are more interested in bringing out the complexities of meaning than in proposing sets of meaning' is certainly in accordance with my own feelings. While it was always one of my prime concerns to raise the level of debate around the writing of museum text beyond those provided by institutional guidelines, I was also hopeful that my speakers would use language that avoided the kind of 'complexities of meaning' to which Elkins refers and possibly even offer a new 'set of meanings'.

Following the conference, the response from Tate has been extremely positive. The head of collection research devoted an issue of Tate papers to three of the conference papers and the head of Tate policy and research has expressed an interest in follow up seminars and focus groups exploring the issues raised. Overall I feel that the conference *was* successful in raising the level of debate around museum interpretation (which was my main aim) but it also left many questions unresolved and some not even considered. This has left me wondering whether it is possible (or even desirable) to find a shared language between museum professionals, writers, philosophers, linguists, sociologists and artists.

I was interested to see that Andrew Dewdney's paper *Lost in Translation: Interpretation, Theory and the Encounter with the Art Museum* published in Tate Encounters [E]dition 6 came to a similar conclusion:

The agency of the museum, in respect of the process of interpretation, as well as the practice of theory, was directly invoked by this museum conference ... the aim [of this paper] is not to undermine the importance of theory, nor academic conferences focused upon theory ... but to explore the somewhat troubled territory of theory enlisted in the service of practice. The current unsettled state of the relationship between theory and practice is not, it is argued, a localised effect of one conference, but symptomatic of a wider set of problems surrounding the production and use of 'critical' theory in relationship to the reproduction of the public realm. The current moment of this difficulty in the conference was located in a discussion of the relationship between academic theories of the interpretation of art and art museum practices of interpretation in exhibition and display.

(http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/tate-encounters/edition-6/pdf/papers-andrew_dewdney-lost_in_translation.pdf)

1.7 In defence of the thesis

Many of the colleagues with whom I have had informal conversations have prematurely and erroneously decided that the debate around interpretative text can be reduced to an argument that is either elitist or populist in character. They assume that any criticism I make of text in art galleries indicates that I want to abolish information/explanation altogether. They are fiercely critical of any attempt to propose as viable, a Greenbergian situation, in which museums of art stand free of any intervention and are wholly reliant on sensibility. In an interview, which took place on 20 November 1983 with Trish Evans and Charles Harrison co-founder of Art and Language, American art critic, Clement Greenberg refers to sensibility:

CH: You accord a disinterested and involuntary status to the immediate aesthetic response?

CG: I do indeed.

CH: The aesthetic response is what informs you that you have the logic right?

CG: True.

TE: So what is the "instrument" for measuring aesthetic quality?

CG: Sensibility, which is all we have when it comes to art.

(Greenberg and Morgan, 2003, pp. 179-181)

Others, including head of public programmes at Tate Modern, Andrew Brighton, are of the opinion that too much emphasis on access-led policy (and here I would include provision of text) has transformed museums and galleries into didactic

information-led institutions shaped by political agendas of access and participation (http://www.battleofideas.org.uk/index.php/site/speaker_detail/661/).

From my perspective, any distillation of the debate into a social historical view on one side or an aesthetic/visual/sensible Kantian approach on the other is a simplification of a more complex issue and aligning myself exclusively with either position, either philosophically or institutionally, has never been my aim. Neither has it been my intention to offer this research as a simple critique of the ways in which text alongside paintings may succeed or fail. What I *have* been trying to achieve is an elevation of the debate and an extension of the boundaries to include philosophical, phenomenological, aesthetic and linguistic considerations. In other words, to examine the phenomena of interpretation for what it is, and what it is not, and above all insist that it is held 'responsible for its actions' (Mitchell, 1995, p. 421).

1.8 The research question.

How far is it possible to attribute an increase in the production of written text to changes in political, social and educational policy?

The main research question is further divided into the following sub-questions:-

- I. To what extent is it possible to link an increase in museum text, that is wall panels, display captions, room guides etc., to changes in government, cultural, social and educational policy and how closely are these changes reflected in institutional aims and objectives?
- II. To what extent has the issue of access impacted on a rise of text in museums of art?
- III. To what extent has Tate's new display strategy, the thematic hang and a decision to move away from a traditional chronological arrangement of the collection resulted in the production of more text in order to explain these new ideas?

- IV. How have changes in departmental structuring at Tate impacted on the type of text produced, the manner in which it is conceived and the audience for whom it is written?
- V. Is it possible to summarise the type of expectations visitors have from text as mainly concerned with context, meaning and artistic intention?
- VI. To what extent is it possible to link changes in the provision of interpretation in the art museum as motivated by a political agenda?
- VII. Tate has a number of guideline documents for writing wall text and display captions but so far no dedicated theory. Would it help for such a theory to be developed?
- VIII. Do visitors describe paintings differently when they rely on their memory or after they have read accompanying text?
- IX. How does the positioning of text alongside a painting change the manner in which visitors approach a painting?
- X. Was the Tate conference successful in pushing the boundaries of the discussion around writing interpretative text for the art museum?

The thesis begins with an observation that during the chosen period, there was a noticeable increase in all types of interpretation but specifically in written information/interpretation, captions, labels, extended labels and wall panels. As well as investigating changes in educational, political, social and cultural policy that may have contributed to an increase in the production of art museum text, the thesis examines institutional aims and objectives and the current level of research in the field of interpretation in art museums.

1.9 Venue and art form

The research is focused on a twenty-year period (1987-2007). Although Tate Britain is used as the specific research site, the guidelines and related documentation are generic to all Tate galleries and similar guidelines are used by other museums and galleries. Although it would undoubtedly have been interesting to look at a wide range of different artistic medium (sculpture, video, film installation etc.), for the

sake of clarity and restriction of time, I have taken the decision to limit the field of study to one specific art form, painting.

The thesis has four chapters.

1.10 Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter outlines the area of interest and my personal reasons for embarking on the research. As it is my own personal journey that has shaped the choice of research topic, the place in which the investigation takes place, the period of time under consideration and the specific issues I have chosen to explore, chapter one offers a detailed explanation of my own background, my experience of working in the education department of Tate, how the department changed during this period, how interpretation came to occupy such a central role and how an increase in museum text appeared to change the way visitors were using the gallery space.

This chapter also outlines my methodology, which may be classified as predominantly ethnographic. I have treated Tate as the 'field' for my study and used its managerial and political structure as indicative of specific circumstances and conditions that have shaped the period under review. This chapter also introduces the conference, which I organised to take place in Tate Britain in July 2011. As this conference was devised, structured and curated by me, with the specific aim of pushing the boundaries of my thesis, I analyse its success and failure and how it was (or was not) able to engage with the critical issue of interpretation in the art museum.

1.11 Chapter Two: An investigation into the history of Tate education and interpretation: history, policy, aims and objectives.

This chapter is presented in two parts, the first of which provides background for the research period. Here, the proposition is made that particular political, educational and institutional changes were influential on the way in which decisions were made regarding interpretation and the rise of text based interpretation. These changes are considered under the following headings: the continuing debate regarding free entry for museums; changes in the national curriculum for art and design; a new

director and new displays; funding and income generation; visitor audits; evaluation; media and branding.

The second part of the chapter offers a history of Tate education and interpretation with specific reference to wall texts and display captions and questions the way in which decisions are taken in relation to intellectual access as well as how (and why) readability tests are used. Using Tate guidelines, I have used display captions and wall texts that accompanied the paintings chosen by interviewees in the filmed interviews, as the basis for an evaluation of the 'successful' nature of these texts. Finally I consider whether museum interpretation should be structured around a specific theory with a dedicated methodology.

Supporting data in chapter two is drawn from Tate archive material, biennial reports, national curriculum documents and transcripts of audio interviews with former members of Tate staff: Simon Wilson, former head of education Tate, 1980 – 1999 and first curator of interpretation (interview one, appendix A), Toby Jackson, former head of interpretation and education at Tate Modern 1999 – 2005, (interview two, appendix A) and Damien Whitmore, head of communications 1991 – 2001 (no transcript but audio tape available), with lecturer and writer, Karen Raney, editor of *Engage* journal (interview four, appendix A) and a telephone interview with the Rt. Hon. Chris Smith Secretary of State for the Department of Media Culture and Sport 1997 – 2001, now Lord Smith of Finsbury (no transcript available but notes from the interview in appendix A). Although these interviews are only semi-structured (there are no 'set questions') I hope that their investigative character will become apparent. In each case the researcher has asked interviewees to consider the development of museum interpretation. In part two, reference is made to Tate captions and wall texts, guidelines documents for writing interpretative text, the Fry readability text and relevant conference papers.

Some of the presented material is taken from my own personal archive and some from research conducted in Tate archives. Inevitably there is also a good deal of emphasis on personal memory, 'knowledge that is worth working for must be mediated by experience' (Fabian, 2001b, p. 12). Until a comprehensive history of

museum education is written, I consider my own experience and recollection of the chosen period, a valid contribution to a broader collective knowledge.

A full transcript of my own and other colleague's reflections and memories of Tate education has been published as part of the Tate Encounters research project:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/talks/17860.html>.

References are made to *The Love of Art* (Bourdieu, 1990) and *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Bourdieu, 1984); *Art rules: Bourdieu and the visual arts* (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007); *The object stares back: on the nature of seeing* (Elkins, 1996) and *The New Art History: a critical introduction* (Harris, 2001).

Part two focuses on the development of Tate's interpretation strategy including its history, policy, aims and objectives and offers an analysis of specific Tate display captions and wall panels. The 'success' of each text is considered using Tate guidelines and Tate's stated aims and objectives. This chapter also makes reference to readability tests and a captions diagnostics chart and considers methods of analysing text written exclusively to support, explain and elaborate upon works of art. References are made to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000); *The Language of Displayed Art* (O'Toole, 1994); *Explorations in Language Study* (Halliday, 1973); *Museum texts: communication frameworks* (Ravelli, 2006) and *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2007). Also included is the research of Helen Coxall, museum language consultant; Paulette McManus, museum consultant; Gail Lord, Lord Cultural Resources; Simon Wilson and Sarah Hyde, former curators of interpretation at Tate Britain; Jane Burton former head of interpretation at Tate Modern and Gina Koutsina, former head of interpretation at Tate Britain (currently head of interpretation at the National History Museum).

Where I make reference to unpublished papers, the full papers are included in the appendix. Inevitably as many of these papers are over twenty years old, there has been some deterioration but I feel strongly that they should be included in their original form and I have therefore, made no attempt to absorb or transform them into the body text.

1.12 Chapter Three: Interpretation and access: with and without text

This chapter begins with a discussion around the specific nature and function of words written *for* images: that is words, which have a particular function when they are placed alongside a painting or other work of art. There are two parts to chapter three: part one asks whether an increase in the provision of written interpretation has led to a situation where text, *as word*, is judged by some to be the most effective explanatory tool for understanding visual imagery.

I am aware that the word, text, may be applied to visual as well as written text. For clarity, in this thesis I use text in relation to the written word and visual text or simply painting when I am speaking about visual imagery. Research has shown (Lord, 1993, appendix C) that what visitors *say* they gain from accompanying text is background, context, meaning and artistic intention. The role of text is explored under three headings: the viewer's needs and expectations, the museum's aims and objectives and the role of theory.

Part two describes a set of filmed interviews in which visitors, friends and Tate colleagues are asked to remember and subsequently describe a painting *without* the intervention of text. Here, filmed interviews are presented as documentary evidence of the manner in which these descriptions are delivered. In these films, the use of hand gesture and personal identification with elements in the painting are particularly noticeable. I also make special reference to the important issue of space, and how captions and wall texts might have the effect of changing the visitors' relationship with a painting. Positioning text alongside a painting or other work of art, might, I suggest, lock the visitor into a mode of looking or observing (to use Jonathan Crary's term) which is 'on one plane' (Crary, 1990). Furthermore, it might also render the act of moving forwards and backwards in space to achieve a perfect individual viewing point, difficult, if not impossible. In this section I question how this might affect an individuals' corporeal interaction: a bodily phenomenological experience.

References are made to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson (Bal, 2001) (Bal, 2006); Hans Belting (Belting, 2003b); Stanley Fish (Fish, 1980); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

(Gumbrecht, 2004) and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). At the end of part one there is a discussion around the politics of interpretation structured around WJT Mitchell *The Politics of Interpretation* (Mitchell, 1983) and Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* (Ricoeur, 1976).

I also refer in some detail to *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (Bal, 2001); *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (Panofsky, 1955); *Picture Theory* (Mitchell, 1995) and *Iconology: image, text, ideology* (Mitchell, 1995); *Rethinking Art History: meditations on a coy science* (Preziosi, 1989); *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1934); *The Language of Displayed Art* (O'Toole, 1994); *Explorations in Language Study* (Halliday, 1973); *Museum texts: communication frameworks* (Ravelli, 2006) and *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2007).

And in part two, which takes a different approach, I explore the experience of describing paintings *without* the intervention of institutional text and suggest that the activity of looking at a painting, traditionally thought of as a single sensed, optical exercise, might, without the intervention of accompanying text, become a corporeal multi-sensory experience. The chapter draws on filmed interviews with visitors and colleagues at Tate and recording how they describe their memory of an artwork without access to accompanying text. The film is presented in the form of a CD, and included in the final document.

References are made to *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002); *The Primacy of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty and Edie, 1964); *The visible and the invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort and Lingis, 1968); *The World of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty and Davis, 2004); *Downcast Eyes* (Jay, 1993); *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1972); *Patterns of Intention*, (Baxandall, 1985); *The object stares back: on the nature of seeing* (Elkins, 1996) and *What do pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Mitchell, 2005).

1.13 Chapter Four: Revisiting the research questions and concluding remarks, looks back at the research questions and considers how far the thesis has progressed the debate around written interpretation in the art museum. This chapter also revisits the Tate conference and considers whether theory and practice, as far as museum text is concerned, are able to work together in the museum setting.

In the process of writing the thesis, I have informed and involved Tate in my research process. This has not always been easy. Often my analysis and observations regarding museum interpretation have appeared critical or negative. However, I have always been careful to stress to colleagues that my intention has been to explore new ways of thinking and open up avenues for possible change.

I have devised workshops, lectured and taught sessions around the issue of museum interpretation with students at Goldsmiths, University of London and the University of East London and have presented the following papers at public conferences: 'In the Minds Eye', Queen Mary and Westfield, February 2006, 'Fear of the Unknown' Victoria and Albert Museum, November 2008), 'Word for Image', Association of International Word and Image Studies, University of Belfast, June 2010, 'There Will Be No Miracles Here', Tate Britain, July 2010.

The paper I presented at the V&A conference, *The Seeing "I": the Seeing Eye* has been published in *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* (Fritsch, 2011).

In January 2011 I devised and presented an MA module for students on a joint Goldsmiths/HTC course in creative and cultural entrepreneurship in Abu Dhabi, where I continued to explore the issue of interpretation in the art museum and will teach this course again in 2012. I am currently teaching courses at Kingston University, the University of East London and Goldsmiths College; these courses all take as their focus, interpretation in the art museum.

Chapter 2: An investigation into the context, background and history of Tate education and interpretation.

Part one: Background and context.

Not just having been there, but having been then.

(Fabian, 2001a, p. 219)

Both having been *there* and having been there *then* have significance for this thesis. My museum career, working in Tate from 1987 and subsequently in three other major London art galleries, covered a period of over twenty years and it is these years, 1987-2007, which constitute my research period and inform my observations. During that time, I saw many changes in museum education. The first part of this chapter considers the continuing debate around free entrance for museums, the introduction of a new National Curriculum for Art, changes in cultural policy, a renewed emphasis on access for all, the impact of a new director, new displays, an expansion of Tate on to three new sites, a new focus on evaluation, visitor audits, performance indicators, growing demand for income generation, external funding, the emergence of Tate media and the influence of the New Art History. I investigate the possibility that greater emphasis on access-led museum policy, arising directly from the New Labour agenda of 1997 and its requirement that museums and galleries make more effort to attract visitors from more diverse backgrounds, may have resulted in an increased production of all forms of text. Nothing now seems 'accidental', and the bigger educational, political, philosophical and social changes of that twenty-year period may be considered both symptom and outcome.

A full bibliography is provided at the end of the thesis but particular attention will be given to texts taken from the following books: *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172), researched in 1963-1967¹; *The Rules of Art* (Bourdieu, 1996); *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993) and *The Love of Art: European art museums and their public* (Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper, 1990).

My use of Bourdieu may be questioned. His work was strictly of a scientific, sociological nature and collected data from numerous questionnaires. Mine is a small qualitative study based on empirical data, archive material and personal observation. My proposition is that it is possible to use the structure of Tate Britain as an example of a field in which a specific cultural phenomena, in this case the visual arts, are presented, accessed and negotiated in relation to broader cultural and political forces. Although Bourdieu created working tools specific to his own time and place, this chapter suggests that their application may be used to analyse current changes in museum education, display strategy, interpretation and the visitor experience. The chapter is written as an ethnographic study, is time and place specific and throughout I acknowledge that my personal recollection of the history and background of the research period have shaped my memory and influenced my choice of methodology:

the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structures of the habitus, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences. The habitus, product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history.

(Blommaert, 2005, p. 222)

I also suggest that it is possible to regard museum text as a product of cultural capital.

Bourdieu uses the term cultural capital (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993), in two very different ways. The first of which implies an embodied form that relies on competence and skill and is affected by education and shaped through learning; the second is described as object-based, and functions like any other object, text for example (Fowler, 2000). It is in *this* sense that I am suggesting that museum text might be understood as cultural capital.

The chapter takes the form of a journey. It has a focus and a destination. The destination is a 'needlepoint' and to arrive there, a route must be negotiated:

Your object is a needlepoint in time and space, and it can only gain relevance when it is adequately contextualised in micro and macro-contexts. This contextualisation explains why your object has the features it has and why it lacks others; it also allows you to see, in microscopic events, effects of macroscopic structures, phenomena and processes.

(Blommaert, 2001, pp. 20-21)

The journey begins with a broad contextualisation of the time (the planning of a route) before commencing travel (the actual journey) to the specific institution, Tate Britain and, finally all importantly, to the visitors' experience of looking at paintings with and without interpretative text. In planning the route, consideration will be given to the size, location and nature of the field.

2.1.1 Bourdieu's use of the term 'field'

When Bourdieu refers to field, he is describing the social structures within which individuals exist, the underlying logic ordering them and the manner in which 'an elite' ensures the reproduction of these social structures (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993; Grenfell and Hardy, 2007). In my thesis, I use 'field' to reference *forces in the field*, for example, national political and educational changes that took place within the chosen period and specifically to the institutional framework of Tate.

The structure of Tate has always been hierarchical, (at the time of writing this thesis, there are fifteen directors) and like any hierarchical system it is based on unequal power relations between groups of people. Like Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Bourdieu believed that social structures cannot be disinterested, and that it is only possible for a field to exist when social agents possess the dispositions and perceptual mechanisms necessary to constitute it and imbue it with meaning.

In proposing that at a specific moment in time, Tate Britain might be viewed as my 'field', this chapter also suggests that policy makers acted as powerful social agents, able to constitute, construct and ensure the reproduction of a specific social structure and subsequently imbue it with meaning. A similar analysis by Roger Cook appears in *The mediated manufacture of an 'avant-garde': a Bourdieusian analysis of the field of contemporary art in London, 1997-9* (Fowler, 2000, p. 164).

As well as *field*, Bourdieu introduced the notion of *habitus*. This thesis makes no attempt to analyse 'visitor type', certainly, not in the exhaustive manner in which Bourdieu constructed his surveysⁱⁱ, it will however examine the behaviour of the museum visitor, his or her expectations and experience of the museum, how much time they take to look at individual works, how they remember and describe what they have seen and the manner in which they negotiate the gallery space: in other words, how the visitor experiences and develops the habit of looking at art in a gallery.

Bourdieu described habitus as a form of social construction by which people are made members of society: that is, the systems individuals use to internalise or assimilate the structures of the social order (what Foucault called subjectivisation). He believed that it was only possible for individuals to see within their own habitus, their own system and their own identity. As such, habitus is a pre-disposition, a 'knowing of one's place', a form of socialized subjectivity, revealed through habit, a way of doing things reflective of a particular social life structure, a personal condition, resistant to ideas of neutral knowledge.

Bourdieu made reference to the clear relation between culture, 'as the state of that which is cultivated' and culture as 'the process of cultivating' (Bourdieu, 1984,p.11). He believed in a system that was capable of developing 'in all members of society, without distinction, an aptitude for those cultural practices considered by society as most noble'.

The notion of habitus may be seen as problematic for this thesis, in its assumption that an individual will have a predisposition towards a specific lifestyle and way of doing things. What role, if this were the case, would education and interpretation in museums play? If an individual enters an art gallery or museum with a particular predisposition and manner of doing things, how could another person's view and interpretation (from a different cultural and educational background) be relevant, have an effect or change their experience and how important are museums anyway? Throughout the thesis, references to access and social inclusion in museums and galleries will be made.

If Bourdieu is right that,

Culture is not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become ... the work of art [is] given only to those who have received the means to acquire the means to appropriate it ... only a few have the real possibility of benefiting from the theoretical possibility, generously offered to all, of taking advantage of the works exhibited in museums.

(Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993, p. 234)

Then education in museums will be unlikely to have any real effect on social mobility and access. Hooper-Greenhill goes even further and suggests that:

The only people to whom museums are of central concern are those who work in them. For everyone except museum workers, museums are at a distance, out there, one of a range of social institutions that can be used or avoided at will.

(Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b, p. 11)

Bourdieu has suggested that field and habitus exist in an 'ontological complicity' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007, p. 47). It is the nature of that ontological complicity, (between Tate as field, and habitus as the visitor's behaviour and experience) which is of particular interest for this thesis. Designating Tate as *field* and *habitus* as the behaviour of the museum visitor, it may be possible to consider whether a specific social realm of ideas working within the structured pattern of society, may affect a visitor's experience of the art works they encounter.

Fields cannot exist as organic homogeneous spaces: they are always complex social arenas, in which many different agents and interested parties vie for position. This would certainly apply to art museums where, 'struggles between coalitions of artists, consumers, (patrons of one kind or another and audiences), and professional classifiers (critics in the main, but also academics)' (Jenkins, 1992, p. xiii) regularly took place. In Tate, for example, disagreements between curatorial and education staff, were not uncommon (interviews one and two, appendix A).

I now focus on individual 'triggers' that have contributed to an increase of written text in Tate between the years 1997-2007, beginning with the issue of free entrance

2.1.2 Free Entrance for Museums

Although, the origins of free entrance can be traced back to the eighteenth century, it was in the nineteenth century that policy makers and reformers began to use the rhetoric of self improvement to support their belief that museums of art and science as well as places of religion, parks and open spaces, should remain free and easily accessible, so that people from all walks of life, background and education would be able to visit, and to visit often. Charging, on the other hand, might deter them from visiting at all. To achieve the full impact and beneficial value from the free entrance policy, location was always a prime consideration:

There had been lengthy discussion about the best site for the [National] Gallery, and Trafalgar Square was eventually chosen as it was considered to be at the very centre of London. [It] could be reached by the rich driving in their carriages from the west of London, and on foot by the poor from the East End. It was felt that in this location the paintings could be enjoyed by all classes in society.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history/about-the-building/about-the-building>

Allowing those who were less privileged, free access to beautiful things might, so the thinking went, inspire them, elevate their thinking and encourage them to develop a more sophisticated attitude. It was the aspiration of government and social reformers that 'libraries, public lectures and art galleries [might] present themselves as instruments capable of improving man's inner life' (Bennett, 1995, p. 18).

As well as altruistic reasons, born out of a desire to provide a broader spectrum of the population with art, culture and education, there were other motivations for maintaining free access. Sir Henry Cole (1808-1882) was one of many reformers who stressed the beneficial role museums might have on the *behaviour* of the uneducated masses. It was his belief that if public spaces, libraries and museums were accessible for people of all education and any class, there was a reasonable possibility that those from a working class background might learn decorum and taste, as they observed how those from the upper classes conducted themselves. In addition, Cole reasoned, spending time in spaces and places of educational value might keep them away from public houses and gin palaces:

If you wish to vanquish Drunkenness and the Devil, make God's day of rest elevating and refining to the working man ... show him pictures of beauty ... open all museums of Science and Art after the hours of Divine service; let the working man get his refreshment there in company with his wife and children, rather than leave him to booze away from them in the Public house and Gin Palace.

(Sir Henry Cole quoted in Bennett, 1995, p. 21)

Writing from a Marxist position, Bennett has claimed that social reform was a form of social engineering and gentrification (Bennett, 1995, p. 22). Using Foucault's metaphor of family, he further suggests (Bennett, 1995, p. 101) that by metaphorically taking the role of head of the family, reformers such as Cole were able to position themselves strategically and, using a form of surveillance, exercise control over wayward family members:

It was the family that typically served as the model for a form of government which, in concerning itself with 'the wealth and behaviour of each and all', aspired to subject the population of the state to 'a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods'.

(Bennett, 1995, p. 18)

In 2010, the leader of the conservative party, David Cameron was also promoting family values as a way of repairing a broken society, 'David Cameron, the Conservative leader, has said that the restoration of family values and a new commitment to economic and social responsibility are key to repairing *broken Britain*'

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/5070968/David-Cameron-family-values-the-key-to-responsible-society.html>).

2.1.3 Impact of the debate on Tate 1987-2007

There were many reasons why the issue of free entrance for museums became topical in the latter part of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, money and budgetary considerations took their place at the top of the list ⁱⁱⁱ.

Many of the larger national museums had been in existence for at least one hundred and some more than two hundred years. The British Museum 1753 and the Royal

Academy 1768 fell into the 'over 200 years old' category and the National Gallery 1824, National Portrait Gallery 1856, Science Museum 1857, National History Museum 1881 and Tate Gallery 1897 were the younger members at 100 -150 years old. By the late twentieth century, many of these buildings were beginning to deteriorate and the level of public funding necessary to maintain their good order was considerable. During the 1980s it was the conservative government that began to review the case for retaining free entrance for museums. Looking to Europe and European museums, it was thought that charging was one way of raising the necessary funds^{iv}. Most museum directors were strongly opposed to a reversal of the free entrance policy but Neil Cossons, director of the Natural History Museum and Roy Strong, director of the V&A, were exceptions. They thought that entrance fees might be the only possible way to 'avert the museum's bankruptcy' (Strong, 1985):

The museum is wearing out at a faster rate than it is being renewed and unless this trend is reversed the quality of care we afford our collections and our customers will deteriorate to an unacceptable level. We are planning a fundamental improvement in quality and believe most people are prepared to contribute towards this.

(Cossons, 1988)

There were five elections during the research period: in 1987: after eight years of conservative rule, Margaret Thatcher embarked on a third term of office, followed in 1992 by John Major and then in 1997, a landslide victory for New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair. The election of the Labour party for two subsequent terms of office in 2001 and 2005 was optimistically greeted as the beginning of a cultural renaissance with renewed emphasis on the arts.

If David Randall of *The Independent* was right, this came to an end with Labour's defeat in the 2010 election, 'So farewell, then, the New Labour years ... a new consensus, all tied in to a British cultural renaissance (of sorts)' (*The Independent* May 2 2010). Blair's cultural agenda, in 1987, was focused on giving museums power and confidence. David Anderson in *A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom* described the museum as potentially 'transformative and life enhancing', a space for visitors to 'find their voice' (Anderson, 1997, p. 89).

The renaming of the Department of Heritage as the Department of Culture Media and Sport signalled a change of priorities, repositioning culture in a new world of media and marketing. These moves all came at a price: the inevitable burden of more accountability. Government had more influence and was able to make more demands, and high on their list of priorities was the condition that museums display their commitment to plurality and diversity. Building on a review published in February 2001 and prepared for Arts Council, England, PAT 10: the DCMS report on social inclusion, encouraged arts and cultural organisations to, 'develop and test appropriate methodologies for evaluating arts initiatives with aims relating to social inclusion' (www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/).

Museums were expected to show their 'willingness to embrace diversity' (Anderson, 1997, p. 7) and communicate less exclusively to a traditional white, middle class audience. Above all, they were directed to think more about who *was not*, as well as who *was*, visiting. Access became the antidote to elitism, and elitism became the *bête noir* of politicians and policy makers alike:

The cultural life of any civilised society depends on access to the best being available to all and not just a small and affluent minority. Art is not elitist. What is elitist is a society in which art is hoarded for the few and never experienced by the many. We are concerned about the introduction of admission charges in National Museums. The evidence suggests that high charges can lead to a big decline in attendance. We would like to see these institutions do all they can to balance the books while maximising access.

(Blair, 1997)

Following Labour's victory in 1997, museums gained confidence, believing that their free entrance status was no longer under threat. However the support Blair and his labour government were offering came with certain conditions: that buildings were run in a cost effective manner and books were successfully balanced. Museums and galleries knew that the time had come for them to enter a competitive commercial market and accept that income generation was destined to take a central role with sponsorship, previously focused on supporting major exhibitions, having a much wider remit.

As Frances Spalding observed, 'The issue of funding was fundamental to the dynamism of the Tate and was to be a major cause of change' (Spalding, 1998, p. 210). Tate's development office, in 1987, a department of one person, Edwina Sassoon, the personal assistant of Alan Bowness, (Spalding, 1998, p. 223), was dramatically expanded and by 2007 was employing over 60 people:

The development office is responsible for all the fundraising activities ... [It] works with a wide range of other Tate departments and sites to optimise funds from individuals, companies, trusts and public sector funders in support of Tate programmes, collection and buildings.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/theorganisation/structure>)

Tate changed its name from *The Tate Gallery* to simply *Tate*, subsequently Tate Britain and Tate Modern. It is significant that the word 'Gallery' is not featured in either title and in the many group discussions I attended at the time, it was clear that those responsible for choosing new names for Tate decided that each of the words, *gallery*, *museum* or *contemporary* were problematic. Losing the definite article was also carefully planned. Although the dictionary definition for a definite article like *the*, is a 'word which designates a noun as being specific and identifiable', its withdrawal from Tate's full name actually had the opposite effect. Changing the name of 'The Tate' to 'Tate' appeared to give it more importance, making the brand highly specific, in the manner in which large corporate companies like 'Unilever', use single name titles as a way of giving themselves strong identifiable images. It was anticipated that the re-branding of Tate with its slogan *Brand. New. Growth* (<http://www.wolffolins.com/tate.php>) would create a new young, trendy image for each of the new galleries as well as ensuring success in the commercial market. Tate was a willing and cooperative partner in the process, which gave the transformation drive, clarity and cohesion: 'The Tate case study on Wolff Olin's website is formidable and only conceivable with a client that is a willing partner in every aspect of identity management' (The Art Newspaper 6 May 2010, issue 213). The enthusiasm with which Tate adopted a new identity, affected all areas of management and policy, (Lahav, (2002) 'Falling Apart at the Themes: Mourning the Particular', paper presented at the Art Historians conference in April 2002)'.⁹

It is my contention that a combination of retaining free entrance in accordance with government guidelines and establishing a new identity and attracting new visitors, changed the way in which Tate communicated with its audience, enabling it to appear more inclusive, more welcoming and more visitor-orientated, while at the same time, fulfilling the requirements of its funding agreements.

2.1.4 The new National Curriculum

A new syllabus for the National Curriculum of Art and Design^{vi} was introduced in 1987. It encouraged students to use their local and national museums for personal studies, see 'real objects', use primary source material, pursue independent study, and 'discuss critically and question the role and function of the museum and/or gallery site'^{vii}. The recommendations were meant to encourage schools to frequent their *local* as well as national museums and galleries (interview one, appendix A), and some schools *did* make local visits. There were many others, however, who decided that it was only the national galleries who would be able to provide them with the range and level of educational materials they thought they would need^{viii}. Education departments (and particularly Tate) were among the first to feel the impact. There was a dramatic increase in school visits^{ix}, which resulted in an expansion of staff to cope with the demand and the expectations teachers had for written materials, worksheets, information and study packs as well as regular gallery talks. Head of Education, Wilson felt that there was not enough forward planning or consultation for this substantial increase in demand of their services and that inadequate consultation between government, as architects of the new syllabus^x, and the service providers (museums and galleries) (interview one, appendix A) had taken place. In response to my question, *what kind of consultation took place between government and museum education departments preceding changes in the National curriculum?* Wilson replied:

None whatsoever, we were forced by the curriculum changes in the 80s to make this massive provision for school groups that now of course is routine but there was no government consultation with the museums (I complained about this bitterly at the time in fact there will be something about it on paper) because nobody in government ever thought of the unintended consequences

of curriculum changes ... that museums would be swamped with school groups because the curriculum changes called for a lot more course work in the form of practical hands on projects which in art meant going to museums.

(interview one, appendix A)

Nevertheless, Tate enthusiastically took on the challenge of accommodating more school children (1987 statistics for school children show about 100,000^{xi}) and constructed a designated schools entrance in John Islip Street^{xii}. Unfortunately, teachers and students alike hated the idea of a 'back door' entrance; it was cold and noisy and the sheer number of children involved rendered it, almost immediately unsuitable. However, although there were undoubtedly problems to be faced coping with the influx of school children, there were also real benefits. Teachers began to use the collection in a more inclusive manner: looking at paintings as reference, not only for art, but also for history, costume, fashion, architecture, science and philosophy. The emphasis placed by the new national curriculum on critical studies and cross curricula activity encouraged, 'pupils ... to identify the characteristics of art in a variety of genres from different periods, cultures and traditions, showing some knowledge of the related historical background' (1992).

Using paintings to research other subjects and disciplines added to Tate's popularity and resulted in even more demand for gallery talks, worksheets and information packs. Although teachers were aware that they should take on some of the responsibility of teaching in the galleries (interview one, appendix A), many felt they lacked the 'knowledge, confidence and skill [to do so], particularly in public and particularly in the museum setting'

(<http://www.aare.edu.au/conf03nc/ma03010z.pdf>).

Sending teachers worksheets or gallery guides was one way of helping them feel that they were prepared for their visit and museums began to increase their provision of this kind of resource material. This situation, however, presented itself as something of a dilemma: was it the role of galleries to respond to the national curriculum by designing talks, worksheets etc. *around* it, or should it maintain a discreet distance

and level of autonomy? Head of interpretation and education at Tate Modern, Jackson was of the opinion that Tate *should* distance, act independently: that it was not its role to reinforce the school agenda. It was Jackson's belief that the education programme should:

amplify what was in the gallery at the time ... the exhibition programme the displays, the work ... a kind of independent programme to actually look at the relationship between visual culture, and politics ... society, the wider culture ... the key role was for education to have that independence and for it to be as significant and as high quality as an exhibition programme or programme of display.

(interview two, appendix A)

2.1.5 Institutional change: a new director, new sites and new buildings

Field can only exist when social agents possess the dispositions and perceptual mechanisms necessary to constitute that field and imbue it with meaning. While participating in the field, agents absorb into their habitus, the mechanisms that allow them to constitute the field.

The appointment of a new Tate director in 1988 was highly significant. It signalled a period of re-thinking in the way in which Tate projected its image and communicated its ideas. Nicholas Serota came with a well-established reputation and distinguished career behind him: exhibition director at the Arts Council (1970–1973), director of the Oxford Museum of Modern Art (1973- 1976), and director of the Whitechapel Gallery (1976-1988). His directorship was strong, his leadership charismatic and his image powerful and he quickly established himself as a leader with fresh ideas. His arrival coincided with a programme of dramatic expansion, and although the opening of Tate Liverpool in 1988 was down to the efforts of the outgoing director Alan Bowness and achieved 'during the final months of his Directorship' (Spalding, 1998, p. 246), both Liverpool and Tate St Ives, which opened in 1993, were always associated with the new director's reign.

Serota had even grander ambitions: to establish in London a permanent home for a collection of contemporary art. This he did with the opening of Tate Modern in May 2000 and then one year later, the new Tate Britain extension, (the next stage in the

expansion programme will be the £125 million, eleven storey extension to Tate Modern).

This unusual (for a national museum) and very comprehensive twenty-two year building programme was attributed to Serota's dynamic leadership and powers of persuasion. It would, of course, be facile to suggest that Serota was the sole mover and shaker in the Tate phenomenon, (despite, Sacha Cradock's bold Guardian 1990 statement, 'Art's alive again—thanks to Nick Serota'). In any large institution, success is always about team effort, sometimes forgotten in the euphoria but remembered by the editor of the *Architects' Journal*:

I am quite sure that the Tate's new director, Nicholas Serota deserves the great praise that has been heaped upon him, but reading popular reports of the work (New Displays) one could be forgiven for assuming that Serota not only mixed the colours but actually painted the walls himself as well as doubling as electrician and picture hanger.

(Editorial, 1990)

By the time Tate Modern had opened, Serota's name was featuring regularly on lists of the powerful and influential and on 22 April 2000 Nicholas Wroe wrote of him in the Guardian Profile:

He's the man who put the mode in modernism, the Jansenist in a Comme des Garcons suit who made the Turner art prize the controversial annual ritual it is today. Nicholas Serota is the most powerful figure in the history of modern art in Britain, at a time when contemporary art has never been more culturally centre stage.

(Wroe, 2000)

2.1.6 New displays at Tate Britain and a new hang at Tate Modern

There were a number of reasons why Serota introduced a radical new display policy; high on his list was a desire to change the *look* of Tate. This was a dangerous strategy, one which he has described in a 2010 interview as 'almost heretical, a bit like re-jiggling the books in the Bible and not starting with Genesis ... it was exciting seeing the works of art in a new light but it felt very dangerous and even more so with the Tate Modern re-hang later' (<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/lifestyle/article-23827412-sir-nicholas-serota-is-the-tate-moderniser.do>).

Before he arrived, the collection was organised chronologically with the historic collection on one side of the gallery and modern *foreign* (sic) paintings on the other. It now seems strangely incorrect to use the term *foreign* to describe a set of galleries but that is how they were known in 1990:

The new display traces the evolution of British art from the Tudors until Impressionism, and then the interrelationship of British and Foreign art.
(1990 Tate Plan)

Hoping to inject new life and an element of surprise into the visitor experience^{xiii} and strongly influenced by the New Art History (which placed at the heart of its agenda the need to re-establish, 'the coupling of the two words 'art' and 'history' (Rees and Borzello, 1986), Serota initiated, in 1989, an annual change of displays. He hoped that 'New Displays' sponsored by BP, would shake up Tate's image, attract new visitors, 'greatly increase public access to the Tate's collections [and] redefine [not only] the conventions of the "permanent galleries" [but also the kind of] "official art history" that visitors ... expect from a national gallery' (Lord, 1993).

Devising a new system for displaying the collection, which moved away from the chronological hang, had a dramatic effect on the manner in which visitors used the galleries. It also fundamentally changed their understanding of art history in a way not wholly dissimilar to the situation sixty years earlier when MoMA director Alfred H. Barr junior developed his paradigmatic Barr chart

Devised to accompany the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, his chart did more than trace chronology. Barr created a didactic diagram, which charted a stylistic evolution of 'isms', a succession of European avant-garde movements, which suggested progress towards abstraction as point zero...it provided a paradigm for the understanding and display of modern and contemporary art which dominated museum practice until the end of the century.

(Morris, 2000, pp. 31-32)

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RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Barr's intention was for MoMA to become:

an active player in the culture which it was created to curate: in the absence of existing frames of knowledge and narratives for the understanding of what appeared to be a chaotic and indecipherable rejection of the very concepts of culture that the newly founded grand survey museums of the nineteenth century existed to enshrine.

(Pollock and Zemans, 2007, p. 10)

Instead of producing a linear chart, which presented a paradigm for 'the understanding and display of modern contemporary art, [which] had dominated museum practice', Serota and his team used Tate Modern as a giant rhizome-like post-modernist structure, with a light box for its crown, into which they could map out their ideas.

An incredible architectural vocabulary of spaces, ranging from the autonomous purity of the 'white cube', to rooms which suddenly admit exhilarating views across London.

(Morris, 2000, p. 33)

The whole building and its east/west axis provided them with an ideal setting for a display of four parts (known as suites) and four main themes (history, memory, society; nude, body action; landscape, matter, environment and still life, object, real life).

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Back in the mid twentieth century, some art historians were suggesting that, 'Barr was conducting a public course in the history of the modern movement, and his blackboard was the Museum (Council on Museums and Education in the Visual, Newsom and Silver, 1978, p. 57). In a similar fashion, it might be said that Serota used Tate Modern and Tate Britain as the backdrop for his own version of a new art history: an art history, which 'demanded a new approach' (Morris, 2000, p.33).

Deciding to abandon the traditional chronological display, he adopted instead a thematic approach, and transformed the galleries into modern, dynamic and fluid spaces^{xiv}.

It was a hard time for Tate's small art handling staff, who were required to work round the clock to un-hang and re-hang at least two thirds of the collection. Inevitably the public response to this continual re-shuffling of the displays was mixed: the general visitor seemed to appreciate Serota's attempt to inject the galleries with new life (Lord, 1993) but teachers, school children and students, were less than happy with the relentless disruption caused by the closure of large numbers of galleries at fairly regular intervals.

In their attempt to follow the recommendations of the National Curriculum: students should, 'develop ideas and intentions by working from first-hand observation, experience, inspiration, imagination and other sources'

<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/art-and-design/programme-of-study/index.aspx?tab=3>, and use primary source material for

their individual projects, students were left frustrated and disappointed when, as frequently occurred, works were suddenly and inexplicably (as they saw it) un-hung. Overseas visitors also suffered disappointment: 'It's a big disadvantage when people come from far away and can't see important works they expect to see' (Lord, 1993, p. 16). Alerted to these problems, education staff tried to secure the permanent status of specific works, proposing that *some* key paintings and sculptures, those regularly used by students, remain on permanent display, but bitter arguments ensued and curators showed resistance to the idea that any consultation should take place between the education and the curatorial departments. They insisted that the onus was on the visitor to check the availability of particular works before embarking on the planning of a visit, (before website information this was a difficult task).

2.1.7 The hierarchy of Tate's departmental structure

It is worth drawing attention here to the institutional hierarchy of Tate departments. Despite Serota's statement that one of his aims for introducing a new display strategy was, 'to improve understanding and provide better intellectual access', an ambition which was interpreted as signalling support for education and access, the work of the education department was, (and arguably still is), considered less

important than that carried out by the curatorial departments (interview one, appendix A) and although there were, during the research period, many attempts to include members of the education team on curatorial panels and display meetings, this was generally resisted.

2.1.8 Understanding the new hang

Following the re-hang, visitor numbers increased considerably, but transparency and understanding of the philosophy behind the new hang did not. Indeed, questionnaires showed that there was a great deal of confusion about the new arrangement, 'researchers found that visitors did not understand the concept of New Displays ... only one interviewee (a frequent visitor who lives in London) understood, and only three of forty two were able to articulate what New Displays were' (Lord, 1993, p. 15). Muddle and misunderstanding were certainly not the kind of reactions Serota was hoping for, in his attempt to inject 'clarity and life into the collection':

Citing T.S. Eliot's belief that 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past', Nicholas Serota said that he had spent \$1.65 million and several months in an effort to inject clarity order and life into the Tate's vast collection. The new display, titled 'Past, Present, Future', is laid out in chronological order, tracing the development of British art from 1550 to Impressionism and then examining the relationship of British art to American and European art in the 20th century.

(Tribune, 1990)

To address what was clearly a mismatch of intent and actuality, *additional text*, explaining the thinking and structure of the new hang (greater emphasis on a contextual reading of how works fitted into a broader history, not simply a chronological 'art' history), was provided in the form of wall texts, extended labels and room panels:

Wall Texts and Extended Labels. Each room is now given a more closely defined theme, allowing visitors to explore the ideas of particular artists or groups in greater depth. Explanatory texts have been introduced in each gallery, and extended labels have been introduced for many individual works.

(1990 Tate Plan)

Serota's arrival at Tate, the introduction of a new display policy, and the building of Tate Modern have all contributed, I would suggest, not only to the manner in which individuals use Tate but also to changes in museum practice and cultural policy and the proliferation of new methods for distributing meaning. Furthermore Serota's contribution to the way in which audiences think about art history has been considerable and might be thought of, in Bourdieu's terms, as an example of the way in which a powerful individual has been able to re-constitute a field and imbue it with new meaning.

2.1.9 Income generation, marketing, funding and access

Although New Labour was generally in favour of improving the visitor experience, they also wanted evidence of financial stability. Museums were expected to 'balance the books while [also] maximising access' (Blair, 1997), a policy which mirrored the conservative policies which had gone before and prompted Philip Cerney and Mark Evans in an article called , 'Globalisation and Public Policy under New Labour' to remark that, 'New Labour's economic project is noteworthy for its similarities rather than its differences with Thatcherism'

(<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/poli/staff/mge/cerney-evans.pdf>).

The consequence of this increased emphasis on finance, was that all Tate staff, including those who had previously been unaffected by the restraints of income generation, (education staff for example), had to accept that achieving financial success as well as succeeding educationally and socially, was now, not only an important aspect of their work, but critical to Tate's overall fundraising strategy, 'education [was] the golden key ... provid[ing] ... a rationale and an ethical purpose ... open[ing] the door ... to the latent resources of skills, money and facilities' (Anderson, 1997, p. xv). It was clear that Tate, 'an organisation that had won national awards in marketing and public relations excellence in 2001, [was now] ... unashamedly entrepreneurial' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007, p. 92).

At the time, I was responsible for a *free* programme of adult lectures and gallery talks, but when, in 1988, it became evident that income generation had become

essential, I introduced an expanded programme with over fifteen paying courses, which raised revenue of £70,000 (although budgets were department based, all income was centrally located). It may seem now that £70,000 was a relatively small amount but at the time it was considered significant and certainly had the effect of raising the status of the department and transforming it into an attractive income source (which it has continued to be). It is now Tate policy to provide a full programme of paying courses, lectures, workshops and conferences for adults and museum specialists.

Greater provision of activities of all kinds, for *all* audiences in conjunction with creative ways of financially supporting the programme was a difficult balancing act but the government's position was clear: they stood by their pledge to align the country's cultural policy with social inclusion but were adamant that any support given was not, *something for nothing*: 'we want to see measurable outcomes for the investment, which is being made. From now on, there will be real partnership with obligations and responsibilities' (DCMS statement quoted in Selwood and Brown, 2001, p. xlviii).

An increase in the popularity of museum visiting had already begun by the late 1980s when Tate director, Alan Bowness had proudly announced that:

the two years under review have seen enormous changes in the Tate Gallery, most dramatically expressed in the spectacular rise in attendance figures. A little over a million a year was the norm in the early 1980s: in the latter 1980s it seems certain that this figure will have doubled to over two million.

(Bowness, 1986-1988, p. 22)

Ten years later, however, any rise in visitor numbers was overshadowed by mounting pressure from influential bodies such as Arts Council England for arts organisations to meet rigorous funding criteria. Measurable outcomes, performance indicators and constant evaluation became a routine part of the museum's day-to-day management, a development, which prompted John Tusa to remark that:

arts and arts centres ... stand naked ... in a world where what cannot be measured is not valued; where what cannot be predicted will not be risked; where what cannot be controlled will not be permitted; where what cannot deliver a forecast outcome is not undertaken; where what does not belong to all will be allowed to none.

(Tusa, 1999, p. 25)

Although I remain sceptical about some of Tusa's claims (for example that the Barbican's decision to invest a great deal of time, money and creative effort in a year-long American season called 'Inventing America' in 1998, was *primarily an artistic decision*), I feel that his definition of 'why art matters', is important: 'because they are universal ... non-material ... because they work beyond and outside routine categories ... because they encourage the imagination, and attempt the pointless' (Tusa, 1999, p. 22).

By the end of the 1990s, there were suggestions from some critics that cultural experience in the UK had become dangerously entwined with government policy as well as unreasonably burdened with a policy of social cohesion and regeneration:

Since 1998 New Labour has attempted to bring the cultural sector in line with its manifesto commitments – particularly around social inclusion. And the Department for Culture's sponsored bodies are expected to produce evidence of their contributions to that agenda.

(Selwood, 2002)

Staff in Tate's education department realised that as well as innovative programming, income generation was now a significant issue. Although, it was possible for some parts of the programme (adult events, conferences, courses etc.) to remain self-financing, others, for children, students, the disadvantaged or disabled for example, needed support if museums were to demonstrate to government that education programmes were relevant to an increasingly large and diverse audience. Museums and galleries and other publicly funded institutions were forced to re-think their 'Robin Hood' approach to educational activities and take responsibility for their own running costs.

With reference to the marketing philosophy of MoMA director, Alfred Barr in the document, 'Present status and future direction of the Museum of Modern Art', Tate Liverpool director, Christoph Grunenberg advised museums to, 'Consider the museum entirely as a business. If the product is good, its duplication and distribution can be endless' (Grunenberg in Pointon, 1994, p. 198).

Tate embraced the challenges of income generation with enthusiasm and paying courses, conferences and symposia, as well as sponsorship parties and fund raising activities began to proliferate. As well as finding new funding streams, cross sector partnerships were also actively promoted. The government white paper, *Culture and Creativity* published in March 2007, 'encouraged the cultural sector into the marketplace', urging them to 'find private funding, enter into partnerships across sectors, test its work at the box office, and to become 'world class entrepreneurs' (DCMS, 2007).

Inevitably some critics claimed that the attention museums and galleries were paying to marketing, advertising and promotional activity showed a loss of integrity. While they acknowledged that museums had to 'compete with every other experience out there for the time, attention and money of individuals, whether consumers, guests or patrons', (Gilmore, 2007, p. 76), they were also quick to point out that:

More and more marketers and managers are ensuring that these institutions have become outward-facing and driven by public demand, rather than inward-looking and conservation focused. To some, this has represented the 'dumbing down' of our museums and galleries, but for many people, this process has dragged these institutions into the twentieth, if not yet the twenty first, century.

(Martin, 2003)

The appointment of Wolff Olins as Tate's image guru in 1997 was seen as a bold step and he and director of communications Damien Whitmore, created new logos and new names for each of the London galleries.

Above all, they were trying to:

reinvent the idea of a gallery – from a single, institutional museum, with a single, institutional view, to a branded collection of experiences, sharing an attitude but offering many different ways of seeing. The new Tate would become a part of everyday national life, democratising without dumbing down.

(<http://www.wolffolins.com/tate.php>)

There was considerable growth in the area of corporate social responsibility with commercial organisations using the arts as a way of contributing financially to the cultural wealth of the nation as well as taking advantage of generous tax exemptions. According to the web site of Ernst and Young: 'Arts sponsorship, with all its educational and cultural benefits, gives us an opportunity to contribute to the cultural life of the country' (<http://www.ey.com/UK/en/About-us/Corporate-Responsibility/About-EY---Cmt-to-the-Arts>).

In 1988, when Neil Cossons proposed that museums would be better managed as hard-edged business ventures, he was criticised for expressing a reactionary attitude, a 'sell out' of museum philosophy. At the time he suggested that museums adopt:

a business plan designed to increase earned income ... to develop retailing, catering and the letting of its premises, together with the introduction of admission charges, as part of its plan to supplement the Government Grant-In-Aid.

(Cossons, 1988)

Nevertheless, Cossons entrepreneurial 'money-led' approach has been widely adopted by many museums and galleries with Tate's 2000 Forward Plan, unashamedly promising: 'to exploit the value of Tate assets, to exploit the income generating opportunities of the Internet, to develop high quality and profitable business events'.

Tate Modern in particular, is a prime example of a success story:

Tate Modern, which opened ten years ago, is a success by most criteria. It is as close to the unrealisable ideal of the "incontestable" as any new museum building of even approximately comparable ambitions. It has focused popular

and critical attention on the art that it displays, and it has done this with conviction and flair. It has drawn visitors to its environs in vast and unanticipated numbers; in the process it has had the intended catalytic impact on a neglected part of central London; it has given a new life to a vast and intractable building and it has served as a focal point for a broad swathe of social activity, engagement and play.

(*The Art Newspaper* issue 213, May 2010)

Anticipating that visitor numbers over both sites would rise by about one million during the first year of Tate Modern they were thrilled (but also somewhat daunted) when one million visitors came within the first six weeks of its opening. The impact of so many visitors on a 'free' museum was challenging (Lahav, 2002): providing basic services, printed plans, guides, seats, toilet facilities (and toilet paper!) proved almost impossible and resulted in the almost farcical decision to keep guides, leaflets events booklets etc., 'under the desk' in the Turbine Hall, available only *if asked for* (Lahav, 2002). There are currently four shops and a growing number of cafés restaurants and coffee points. These services have all been re-categorised as 'essential' and elevated in status from 'value added' to 'core activity':

Wherever you look, people are thinking in terms of market success. Only thirty years ago, and since the middle of the nineteenth century ... market success was suspect. It was taken as a sign of compromise with the times, with money. Today, on the contrary, the market is accepted more and more as a legitimate means of legitimation. It is very disturbing to see this ... because it jeopardizes works that may not necessarily meet audience expectations but, in time, can create their own audience.

(Bourdieu quoted in Fowler, 2000, p. 164)

The latter half of the twentieth century, has been described as a revolution in the production and dissemination of knowledge (Fukuyama, 1992). By 1994 there had been a tenfold increase in websites and the number of hosts had grown from 3.2 to over 6 million. Knowledge dissemination via the web has been key to Tate's success and popularity and Tate online (by 2009 it was receiving 800,000 hits per day^{xv}), is now known as Tate's fifth site providing valuable resource material, notes on the collection, teaching aids, project packs interactive games, online courses^{xvi}, web casting and audio recordings of conferences symposia and seminar sessions.

2.1.10 Audience surveys and evaluation

Before the 1990s, there was very little available information regarding Tate visitors.

It is the case that we have no scientific knowledge of our visitors nor of our potential audience among the population at large. Is it time for the Tate to undertake some research in this area as the last visitor surveys were carried out in 1975 to 76 by Michael Compton. The Tate's high attendance figures in the past year have been the cause of some complacency. The question we ask is what is the quality of the experience offered to our visitors?

(Wilson archive, appendix D)

The fact that museums and galleries provided free access, was, for many years, considered proof enough that 'access' was a priority and very little thought was given to who was, and more importantly or who was not, visiting. The impact of government policy regarding the diversity of museum visitors, however, forced a surge of visitor surveys and market research, which took:

an unashamedly theoretical approach to understanding visitors [drawing on] sociology, anthropology and behavioural psychology to develop ... practice [translating] this theory into real-world strategies to help museums and galleries develop new and existing audiences.

(<http://www.lateralthinkers.com/insightresearch.html>)

Although smaller organisations were unable to employ people to conduct basic exit surveys, (Selwood and Brown, 2001) larger institutions, like Tate, realised that in order to promote themselves effectively, and be answerable to government directives, more detailed visitor information, in other words quantitative *and* qualitative research, was necessary:

audience evaluation is fundamental to all aspects of museum planning. If changes are to be made in any avenue of institutional endeavor they need to be informed by a comprehensive description of the audience and its likely behaviour.

(<http://audienceresearch.wikispaces.com/file/view/Audience+Research+at+the+Australian+Museum.pdf> (1991:35))

A comprehensive survey, commissioned by Tate in 1993, under the direction of the head of communications was implemented by Gail Lord of Lord Cultural Resources Planning & Management Ltd (Lord, 1993). The Lord report took six months to complete (Initial research May – June and ‘field research July to October 1993) and comprised of interviews with 274 visitors in three focus groups of 28 participants, 90 other individual interviews, 450 visitor observations (appendix C) and consultation with Tate staff. It was the intention of the report that it would:

examine the general visitor’s attitude towards the gallery and [to] assess and make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of all aspects of the gallery’s visitor services with particular focus on the provision of information and interpretation.

(Lord, 1993, appendix C)

Ten years later in 2004, an even more extensive survey carried out by Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre claimed to ‘offer a thorough analysis of the existing audience for Tate’ (<http://www.lateralthinkers.com/tate.html>). Their report identified four ‘main drivers or motivations for visits: social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. It divided visitors into four categories: Social Spacer, Self Improver, Aficionados and Sensualists (confident and cultured visitors wanting to immerse themselves in aesthetic experience)’. Many of the surveys reviewed for this thesis describe groups of visitors using similar categories. For example, Italian researchers, Daniela Petrelli, Elena Not and Massimo Zancanaro in their project, ‘Getting Engaged and Getting Tired: What is in a Museum Experience?’ (Daniella Petrelli, 1999) refer to *Veron and Levasseur’s [13] ethnographic study on people behaviour in artistic exhibitions*. They suggest the following categories for understanding visitor behaviour:

On the bases of paths and movements, time spent in front of a single artwork and total visit span, the study identifies four categories of visitors:

- ant visitors are those who follow the path proposed by the curator, spending quite a long time observing all (or almost all) artworks. Ant visitors usually go close to the artworks.
- fish visitors move preferably in the centre of the room, cruising the exhibition. Fish visitors do not look at details of artwork but prefer a more holistic observation.
- butterfly visitors are used to frequently change direction, without

following the proposed path. The butterfly sees almost all the artworks, stopping frequently. The visit is led by the affordance of the physical space and therefore it is linked to the exhibition layout.

- grasshopper visitors see only artworks they are interested in. Their visit is led (sic) by personal interests and pre-existing knowledge about the contents of the exhibition. The grasshopper crosses empty spaces, stops rarely, and the times (sic) spent to observe single selected artworks is long.

(Daniela Petrelli, p. 5)

These categories are, in my view, unsophisticated and unhelpful and have arguably added little in-depth understanding to the information museums have about their visitors. While it is unsurprising that museums and galleries have responded to government guidelines with attempts to create innovative methods tracking and evaluating the visitor experience, the proliferation of such surveys has also given rise to frustration and anger:

Museums were once places where individuals could go in and be left alone to reflect on something that had nothing to do with their everyday lives. Now, in their every move the public are watched and examined, giving the relationship of museums to their public a predatory aspect - museums feed off the shifting source of public opinion and reaction.

(Appleton, Anderson and Barrie, 2001, p. 25)

Tony Bennett has warned that, 'if sociologists are not careful, the artwork might come close to disappearing altogether, under the confines of the social scientist's toolbox of concepts or be turned into a prop of class domination' (Tate conference). Furthermore Bennett refers to the manner in which museum professionals and managers maintain their role and position in the museum, as showing they are 'complicit in the act of performing and symbolising their social distance from the working classes whose tastes remain mired in the 'unfreedom' of the realm of necessity'.

2.1.11 A question of access

The issue of access in relation to museum and gallery policy is often thought of as a 'modern' preoccupation. However access has always been central to UK museum

and gallery philosophy. Indeed from the late 18th and early 19th century, museums and galleries were committed to making their buildings accessible and it was a requirement that they should be positioned in easy to reach inner city locations with flexible opening hours. The quote below refers to the National Gallery, which included in its mission statement a pledge that its collection would always be:

for the benefit of all with a commitment to free admission on a central and accessible site, with extended opening hours to ensure that [the] collection can be enjoyed by the widest public possible, and not become the exclusive preserve of the privileged ... for the public to visit, and to visit often.

(McGregor, 1996)^{xvii}

More recently, however, cultural organisations have realised that simply having an open door policy is not enough if new audiences from diverse backgrounds are to become repeat visitors. Providing lectures, courses, workshops, talks, accessible captions, labels and extended wall labels are now considered essential. It is an interesting fact, however, that although it has traditionally (and more or less exclusively) been the role of curators to select, devise, theorise and stage displays and exhibitions, it has been the education departments of cultural organisations who have taken responsibility for making sure their collections are socially and intellectually as well as physically accessible; in other words it has been the education department of most museums that have taken responsibility for *communicating with the general public*. In an unpublished document of 1987, Wilson comments, 'Curators ... are utterly remote from the responses of the overwhelming majority of museum visitors' (Wilson, 1987).

In 1999 the UK government commissioned David Anderson to write *A Common Wealth; Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom* (Anderson, 1997), a visionary document which expressed the opinion that interest and participation in the arts could become much more than simply another *school* activity: it could also make a difference in the workplace, be used to promote greater flexibility, be instrumental in the attainment of transferable skills and offer a creative way of approaching new

working conditions and uncertain pension prospects. Policy makers were convinced that promoting creativity in the workplace might be seen as an investment into:

a modern society ... a world of change ... [in which] our competitiveness as a nation and our livelihoods as individuals increasingly depend not only on our ability to manage and respond to change, but also on our ability to secure advantage from the skill, innovation and creativity of all of our people.

(Great Britain. Dept. for Culture, 2001, p. 41)

The term, 'widening participation' ^{xviii} was used as a mantra by politicians keen to suggest that 'access to artistic excellence encourages and supports artistic creativity, preserves our diverse cultural heritage, and makes the arts more widely available in communities throughout the country'

(<http://www.arts.endow.gov/grants/apply/GAP10/ArtistsCommunitiesAAE.html>).

Critic Andrew Brighton, however challenges the notion that mere exposure and access to art might change attitudes and break down barriers:

Art is made by and for people who know or want to know about it. Further, these people tend to have had more formal education than most. Length and level of education is the predominant characteristic of audiences for the arts rather than class origin or wealth. Politicization is seen to be a solution to the problem.

(<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/CultureVultures.pdf>)

Brighton's analysis suggests that education rather than class or privilege is the defining characteristic of museum audiences. However he also implies that 'art is made by and for people who know or want to know about it'. Arguably, it is the role of those who work in museums to make collections accessible, and in so doing encourage visitors to develop their own taste and their own opinion. But developing taste and having an opinion are not simple issues. In the quote below, Clement Greenberg raises the issue of taste, value and good and bad art:

How can you tell the difference between good and bad art. That's what it really depends on. Nobody knows! [It's] an unanswerable question. Everybody has to acquire taste for himself. You don't learn taste from someone else, you don't learn it through communication. You only acquire taste through your own

experience. By the same token, the difference between good and bad in art, in any art, any medium, is not something that can be formularized, that can be defined, that can be pointed to as a rule that can be applied. So your question in the end has to stay up in the air.

(<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/taste.html>)

2.1.12 The New Art History

As well as ensuring greater public access and increasing financial accountability there were fundamental changes in the writing and teaching of art history. Traditional ideas based on an accepted canon of art and artists were challenged and a method of teaching that had traditionally relied on a form of connoisseurship or art appreciation was replaced with a social history of art.

The New Art History (Rees and Borzello, 1986), a compilation of revolutionary essays offering feminist, marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, and social-political perspectives 'on a discipline notorious for its conservative taste in art and its orthodoxy in research' (Rees and Borzello, 1986, p. 2) became a seminal reference book for museum studies. Looking back at the list of contributors, Stephen Bann, Adrian Rifkin, Margaret Iverson, Victor Burgin, Jon Bird, Dawn Ades, Charles Harrison, John Tagg, Lynda Nead and Michael O'Pray, I can see why it attracted such attention and influenced so many.

The 'moment' of a new art history was being celebrated as, 'an art history, which took account of the realities of the social world in which it is produced' (T.J. Clark in *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 1974). In collaboration with Griselda Pollock, Clark launched a new course in the social history of art at Leeds University in 1975 and in 1984 published *The Painting of Modern Life* (Clark, 1984). A new radical magazine, *Block*, was produced by Middlesex University and papers resulting from this publication were presented at their annual conference at Tate Britain. In 1980 the Open University launched the A351, 'Modern Art and Modernism', a course written by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Francis Francina and externally examined by T.J. Clark. The course was described as an exploration of 'both the circumstances under which modern art has been produced, and those under which critical theories and forms of interpretation have themselves been reproduced' (Francina, Harrison and Deirdre, 1982, p. Introduction) and was shaped around the

'fundamental changes ... [which have] occurred in both the institutions and practice of art history in the last thirty years' (Harris, 2001, p. 1; Pointon, 1994).

The New Art history readdressed the 'artistic canon' of mainly white, western male artists, and embraced, 'the rise of the modern women's movement, feminist artists, critics and art historians ... [all of whom were] redress[ing] the neglect of women artists and undermin[ing] the stereotyped views of women's art ... provid[ing] a new theoretical framework for the understanding of the significance of sexual difference in our culture', (Parker and Pollock, 1981). 'No political movement ... other than the Women's movement', claimed Pollock in *Framing Feminism: Art & the Women's Movement 1970-85*, (1987) 'has had a comparable effect on the visual arts' (Pollock, 1987). Central to its philosophy was a desire to replace the traditional canon and fetishization of the art object, with an acknowledgement that, 'art history must be a social history, one that probes into ideologies, power relations, and identity politics' (http://www.queensu.ca/art/pdf/course_outlines/2008-2009/ARTH%20Undergrad%20course%20outlines/ARTH%20435-SYLLABUS08-09.pdf).

There were many liberating aspects to the new discipline. It was,

an area of study ... [that was expected] to respond to developments in those larger disciplines which breathe down its neck, notably history, literature and the social sciences.

(Charles Harrison in Rees and Borzello, 1986, pp. 75-76)

As well as universities and colleges of further education, museums and art galleries also began to engage with the ideas of a new art history. This they did by changing their display strategy and expanding their methods of interpretation. In particular they took care to make, 'connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes and more general historical structures and processes' (Clark, 1973).

2.1.13 Cultural Capital

Having suggested that Bourdieu's concept of *field* might be used as a structure for looking at the impact of external factors on the production of text in Tate, I want to propose that there is a link between interpretative text and cultural capital.

Bourdieu used the word capital when he was referring to *material* wealth and possessions (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993) and also when he described the *means* by which the possession of symbolically valued cultural accoutrements and attitudes might be attained, 'the medium through which the processes of the field operate ... as social, economic and cultural capital' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007, p. 30).

Both forms of capital were potentially highly prized, the former for its material wealth and the latter as a symbol of status and sophistication. Like any other commodity, the value of cultural capital was determined by external factors: if it was a scarce commodity, for example, (i.e. not available to all) and particular groups of people wished to possess it *more* than others, it became more valuable. Cultural capital might be desirable, either as an end in itself, or as a means of achieving an end, providing a passport to specific communities, for example. In this way, cultural capital was able to manifest itself as social capital: as part of an individual's network of personal relations.

Of specific relevance for this thesis, Bourdieu described cultural capital as having more than one form: an embodied and an object based form. In its embodied form, it relied on competence and skill, was affected by education and shaped through learning, in its 'object-based' form, it could be any type of commodity that was highly valued or desired. I want to suggest here, that interpretative text might be understood as capital in Bourdieu's 'object based' description. If the museum is the cultural provider, and the visitor, the consumer, then any rise in the production of text and interpretation, as it is promoted and framed by the cultural institution, might be deemed significant. Furthermore, if cultural capital is 'the means through which the possession of symbolically valued cultural accoutrements and attitudes may be attained', and the role of interpretative text is understood as explicator and interpreter of visual imagery, then the knowledge imparted, might perform a similar

function. *It* might also be the means by which the possession of symbolically valued cultural accoutrements and attitudes might be attained. In other words, if the gallery visitor strives to gain knowledge of museum art (which is symbolically valued) *through text*, then text acts as both mediator between the artwork and the viewer, and text itself becomes a desirable and valuable form of cultural capital.

The argument might be developed in the following way: art that is displayed in museums and galleries has status, it is valuable and valued: developing a 'taste' for art is highly valued as a social activity. Art that is displayed in galleries and museums of art is generally accompanied by explanation and/or interpretation. In accepting as legitimate the explanation/interpretation offered to them, it might be said that visitors also accept the institutional authority of curatorial interpretation. Visitors to museums and galleries of art acquire knowledge through information, which is communicated in the form of written text and this might be seen as an important way of becoming 'rich' in cultural capital. Reading text might enable visitors to feel that they belong to a desirable club within a select community and 'gallery sanctioned knowledge' might itself become a product of cultural capital. This chimes with Jonathan Harris' observation that 'struggles to reform or to transform the definition and significance of the 'visual arts' ... [are] no more or less than a specific embodiment and representation of that wider conflicted culture and society' (Harris in Pointon, 1994, p. 190). Struggles to redefine knowledge in Tate might also be understood, I believe, as a 'representation of that wider conflicted culture and society'.

Summary for Chapter two: part one.

Part one of this chapter has focused on particular social, political and institutional changes that occurred during the research period. It is my contention that it is possible to link the effect of the aforementioned triggers with an increase in the production of text-based interpretation in Tate.

These 'triggers' may be categorised in the following way:

- i. those directly linked to government and a 'value-for-money' policy, the free entry debate, issues of access and widening participation.
- ii. those directly linked to the chosen institution, Tate, the arrival of a new director, expansion of buildings outside of London, the building of Tate Modern, new display strategies, an expansion of visitor numbers, and visitor surveys would fall within this category.
- iii. those linked to theory and academia, the new art history, the emergence of new university courses, including the Open University and its particular brand of art history.
- iv. those linked to specific technological advancements, i.e. web based knowledge production.

If we consider the particularity of twenty-first century museum culture and the political and financial restraints imposed upon it by government and powerful funding bodies such as Arts Council England, the dramatic expansion of internet use, 'knowledge' based communities, and the democratisation and proliferation of visual art, then the rise of interpretation in museums and galleries may be effectively understood as part of a larger process, (in the USA and Australia as well as the UK), which has become manifest, 'in the structural matching of patterns of thought, scholastic thinking and the topography of social classes found in society' (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007, p. 55).

Taking this proposition further, if text *is* 'product', subject to the same forms of marketing as any other product, the success of the institution's marketing strategy, (how attractive, how desirable, how effective and accessible the packaging and selling of it is considered to be), might result in the consumer (the museum visitor) developing a need to possess it. In this way, text becomes cultural capital *produced* by a cultural institution, *sold* to the cultural consumer and *established* as a tool of access:

The dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of power relation,

into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognised.

(Bourdieu, 1984, p.172)

The rise in written interpretation is 'of its time' but it is also part of the legacy of Victorian social policy. Hooper-Greenhill makes the link between the educational intentions of large-scale institutions and the transference of knowledge suggesting that there are parallels to be drawn with recent museum educational policy, and policies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Museums and galleries are particularly interesting in relation to large-scale cultural movements, and this has a direct bearing on their educational intentions. During the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth, education was mainly understood as the delivery of information to learners whose task was to absorb knowledge [which] was understood as objective, external to the knower, and transferable.

(Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b, p. xi)

If education systems operate within a system of knowledge transfer, where text is written by those who possess cultural capital for those who do not, then many questions remain unanswered: what for example, is the success and effectiveness of any such knowledge transfer and is there inherent within the transaction a form of control? Tony Bennett in his Tate conference paper went as far as suggesting that museum professionals and managers were already in danger of 'performing and symbolising their social distance from the working classes whose tastes remain mired in the 'unfreedom' of the realm of necessity' (Tate conference).

Like Bourdieu, Bennett's 'modern' survey^{xix} (*Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* (CCSE) links taste to cultural participation and uses specific criteria to form clusters or groups: the first plots cultural participation—that is things people do or do not, do; the second, taste—likes and dislikes and level of engagement and the third how closely intertwined these two groups are and where they overlap^{xx}.

The survey claims to be:

a systematic assessment of the applicability of Pierre Bourdieu's work in respect of the social determinants of taste and the role played by cultural capital in social differentiation in contemporary Britain.

(Tate conference)

The results indicate that it is predominantly middle class professionals, managers and employers who are associated with and demonstrate higher levels of participation and liking for, the activities characterised within the aesthetic cluster: theatre, art gallery, classical music etc. On the other side of the chart Bennett establishes a category of working class participants. Bennett makes clear that these two 'sets' of people are chosen for their distinction rather than for their similarities:

There is thus a visually 'suppressed middle' comprising those areas of cultural practice – many of them connected with film, television, music, and sport but also some with visual art (landscape paintings, for example) – in which the tastes and preferences of different classes intermingle and overlap.

(Tate conference)

This, I think is a problem.

If we are to assume as many sociologists might suggest, that this middle ground with its eclectic taste, is a growing, if not already dominant population, then how can it remain unaccounted for? Bennett levels a similar criticism towards Bourdieu in

Culture, Class, Distinction:

In a decade, the 1960s, which saw a remarkable increase of cultural and social mobilization around issues of gender, ethnicity and youth ... Bourdieu had little to say regarding these issues. He even appeared dismissive of them.

(Bennett, 2009)

Furthermore, is it still the case that:

the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin.

(Bourdieu, 1984,p.1)

Viewing the current situation within a Bourdieusian perspective and using his concepts of field and cultural capital may alter the perspective on education and interpretation and question whether museums are right to assume that certain audiences (those without a certain level of cultural capital or the advantage of higher education) need help if they are to understand the art on display.

Cultural capital is embodied, and the educated middle classes are physically as well as intellectually socialised into appreciating 'legitimate' culture, that which is institutionalised through being venerated in the educational system and the social apparatus associated with museums and galleries.

(Bennett, 2009, p. 11)

A situation may have been created in which curators, directors and education professionals become the ombudsmen of taste, and museums have become institutions in which the acquisition of cultural capital is a prime objective. On the other hand it might also be argued that the kind of information included in text panels is instrumental in giving audiences a form of access that would otherwise be denied. As Bennett has observed (with reference to his own 'modern' survey^{xxi}):

Bourdieu's thesis identified a correspondence between class position and taste for legitimate culture, which resulted in a dominant class claiming and reproducing social privilege as a concomitant of its superior cultural competence (Silva, Warde, and Wright, 2009).

Cultural Sociology, 3(2), pp. 299–316.

In part two of this chapter I examine the history of Tate education and interpretation.

Chapter Two: Part two

History of Tate education and interpretation.

The interpretation of works of art is contingent upon a range of factors connected to the history, society and culture of both the works and the interpreters.

(Shabout, 2009

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/shabout.shtm>)

Having considered in part one, a range of issues and historical factors which may have contributed to an increase in the production of written text in museums of art, in part two, I look at the way in which a single institution, Tate has developed its interpretation strategy, its methods of distributing meaning and chosen means of communication. I begin with an explanation of the semantic shifts from education to interpretation and a discussion around the organisation of the education department in the research period. This is followed with a comparative analysis and critique of wall text as it appeared during the research period using Tate guidelines for writing interpretative text, i.e. appropriate style, tone and language and the use of readability tests. There will also be a section in this chapter that outlines the difficulties I have encountered finding a suitable method and structure for analysing text in the art museum.

In addition to Tate guideline documents, this chapter also makes reference to papers by Helen Coxall, museum language consultant, Paulette McManus, museum consultant, Gail Lord, Lord Cultural Resources, Simon Wilson and Sarah Hyde, former curators of interpretation at Tate Britain, Jane Burton former head of interpretation at Tate Modern and Gina Koutsina, former head of interpretation, Tate Britain. Papers that are not available on-line are included in the appendix or are available from the author, sylvialahav@btinternet.com.

2.2.1 A semantic shift: from information to interpretation.

Although these expanded social functions of museums involve the traditional roles museums have always played ... the crucial decisions concern what is to be included ... and what meanings are to be attributed ... these activities illuminate the significance of the interpretation of objects and their use by and with the public (i.e. the work of museum education).

(Groys quoted in Hein, 1998, p. 11)

At the beginning of the 1980s, there was very little reference to the word 'interpretation', certainly not in the sense that it is used now. Simon Wilson recalls, 'interpretation came into use, I don't remember exactly when ... but in the 80s as a museological term, covering you know, the whole business of lectures, gallery talks, guided tours ... captions and wall texts [it all] began when Nicholas Serota arrived in 1988' (interview one, appendix A).

Former head of interpretation and education at Tate Modern, Toby Jackson remembers things differently, in answer to my question, 'who was driving that change, was it Alex (Beard) or Nick (Serota), Jackson replies, 'Sandy [Nairne] was probably behind it' (interview two, appendix A). Although this might seem a minor point, it actually has real significance. If it was Alex Beard who was driving the need for more interpretative text, it might be thought of as a financial, marketing decision; if it was Nicholas Serota, it would probably have been a curatorial decision but if it was Sandy Nairne (as Jackson recalls it to have been), it is more likely to have been linked with access and education. Whoever was actually behind the decision to introduce more text, it is generally agreed that it happened in the late 1980s and coincided with the introduction of New Displays, funded by BP, which resulted in a complete re-hang of the collection. It was a change which many visitors found to be rather confusing (Lord, 1993, p. iii); they were puzzled by the re-naming and re-numbering of rooms and the introduction of themes and strands instead of straight chronology. To address this confusion, Tate introduced: 'the systematic use of explanatory texts placed on the walls of the Tate Gallery ... introduced as part of the complete re-display of the collections which opened to the public in January 1991'

(Tate archive). It is worth noting that at this point in 1991 such texts are described as explanatory rather than interpretative.

Having taken the decision that more explanation/information/interpretation was necessary if visitors were to have any grasp of the ideas underpinning the rearrangement of the collection, it followed that someone, or indeed a group of people, would have to take on the responsibility of writing this extra text.

Tate's annual report for 1998 states:

The period was dominated by two factors: the restructuring of the former Tate Gallery education department at Millbank into a new Tate Britain Department of Interpretation and Education, and the concomitant creation of a similar department for Tate Modern. A curator for gallery interpretation was appointed who completed the daunting task of editing all the captions and wall texts ... while also producing an interpretation strategy and conducting a complete overhaul of the production and editing processes.

(1998 Tate Annual Report)

2.2.2 Traditionally who has written museum text?

Until the late 1980s the production of written text had been split between curators who wrote academic captions and labels and the publications department who were responsible for leaflets, room guides, broadsheets and catalogues. At that time, captions were short and contained basic information on the artists' dates, the title of the work, acquisition, provenance, ownership and location. Wilson remembers his experience of walking into the Tate in the late 1970s:

in those days there was just room after room hung with works of art and that was all. The room had a number and the works of art had a label giving you the name of the artist and the title of the work and the date of acquisition and possibly if it had been a gift. There was nothing to tell you what the theme of the room was, what the point of it was, there was nothing to tell you about any of the works. It was a hang for connoisseurs and specialists, people who knew what they were looking at and looking for ... and it was a disgrace.

(interview one, appendix A)

Despite the fact that Wilson found the situation so deplorable, this rather basic level of labelling (which had been in place since the early 1950s) was considered perfectly

adequate and it was not until the end of the 1980s that discussion began to take place regarding the expansion of provision of text.

Simon Wilson's 1987 paper states, 'the present display at the Tate Gallery consists overwhelmingly of numbered sequences of rooms in which works are presented with a standard label giving the artists name and dates, title of the work and its date, the date and method of acquisition and the museum accession number' (appendix D).



46 Installation view of the exhibition *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade 54-64*, held in 1964

(Although the image shown is taken from the 1964 exhibition, *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade 54-64* and is therefore outside the research period, it is a useful example of a Tate exhibition space almost entirely devoid of labels, captions or any other text.

2.2.3 Who *should* write museum text and what should it be called?

As it became clear that more information was necessary and suggestions were made to introduce extended captions and wall texts, discussions took place between curators and education staff. Although it might be assumed that a decision of this kind would have been welcomed, it was, in fact, met with a surprisingly negative reaction from many of the curators, in particular those in the British curatorial team

who, 'vigorously objected to the idea of captions or wall texts, or anything' (interview one, appendix A). Indeed Wilson goes as far as stating in his 1987 paper that, 'curatorial reluctance to put anything on the wall but pictures is profound and deep-seated' (appendix D).

As well as a string of practical complaints, (too much clutter, too much work and too much unnecessary information), there were issues of a more serious kind: most importantly, who would write them? Although many curators were not keen to take on the additional workload that an expansion of interpretative texts would involve, they were also actively opposed to the idea that this task would be handed over to the education staff. Questions were asked about the kind of educational qualifications 'museum writers' should have, how decisions would be taken regarding academic level, content and information and who might provide necessary guidelines. This was not simply a question of establishing authorship it was a statement of ownership and authority as well. As Jackson remembers it, 'there was resistance to its practice particularly around who ... is authorised to speak about modern art in the public space of the museum (interview two, appendix A)'. There was a widespread anxiety among curatorial staff, that those who wrote about the works on display would subsequently claim a higher form of knowledge, an expertise that had traditionally and exclusively rested with the curatorial team, and most specifically with, 'senior curators ... [who were] specialists and ... [who] would have spent a quarter of a century being educated in and practising their speciality' (Wilson, *Art and Tradition*, 1987, appendix D).

Many of those working in education, on the other hand, had come to Tate from a teaching career, and were, as Jackson observed, 'educationalists ... from a kind of education background' (interview two, appendix A), generalists rather than specialists. Shifting the source of knowledge was perceived to be a radical and, for many, a retrogressive step.

As well as knowledge and expertise there were also questions regarding the museum 'voice': specifically how to maintain *consistency*. Historically Tate had communicated information about the collection using a 'very, very particular voice ... it had to be

coherent ... it had to be consistent ... the collection had [to display] a public text' (interview two, appendix A).

Tate visitors were a diverse, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and educationally differentiated audience and the type of information/explanation/interpretation on offer should reflect this. This presented Tate with a dilemma: how could those involved in the production of interpretative text write with a *consistency* of voice, while also ensuring that the text provided was appropriate, welcoming and suitable for such a varied audience. In response to my question asking whether he thought that written text had fulfilled its aims and objectives, Jackson remembered how difficult it was:

to get everyone to sign up to a set of principles, key agreements for example [concerning] the idea of fix[ing] meaning in relationship to contemporary art. [It] isn't stable. [It needs] plural voices, multiple meanings and so on ... [and must be] in opposition to the notion of an authoritative voice.

(interview two, appendix A)

Jackson's answer illustrates the extent of the problem. For many of us working in education at the time, striving for a consistency of voice appeared to be at odds with trying to communicate multiplicity and plurality of meaning.

My own personal experience of this clash of institutional message and practice was clearly illustrated during the months before the opening of Tate Modern. I had anticipated that the new thematic hang would cause anxiety for some of our lecturers and guides who were being asked to communicate the collection and philosophy behind it. To address this problem, I proposed and subsequently organised a seventeen-week course, which systematically focused on one or two rooms in each suite. In order to reflect Tate's message of plurality of meaning (as I had understood it), I invited art historians, critics and public figures as well as Tate staff to participate but was severely reprimanded by one of the two senior curators who were known at the time as 'architects' of the new hang, who informed me that as 'Tate was the author of the displays', they and *only they* should provide information. This was a clear example of theory in conflict with practice.

Tate appeared adamant that their display strategy should reflect diversity and plurality of meaning. Indeed they state in their interpretation strategy document, 'Tate should incorporate a wide spectrum of voices and opinions from inside and outside the institution' (appendix E). However their method of communicating this openness may be criticised for its strict authorial control. For Jackson, however, it was important that the newly formed interpretation and education department would be able to intervene and critique Tate's practices:

Particularly when it came to who should write and who should speak at conferences so rather than replicating all the people who had written in catalogues you wanted to invite people who were in opposition to those who had written for the catalogue and set up some kind of dialogue and its all about being a healthy grown up organisation. A healthy grown up organisation is able to be critical of ... and in open to opposition about its practices.

(interview two, appendix A)

It could be argued that any form of institutional text assumes an appearance of authority, but Tate was striving at the time to show itself as a 'broad church', and would have been unhappy with the idea that its tone was authoritarian in any way. The fact that Tate's visiting public was changing and visitors were no longer predominantly from a white middle class, middle aged, background was liberating and inspiring on many levels. A shift of visitor demographics was essential if government and funding bodies were to continue to offer financial support but also, more importantly, museum staff began to use the expansion and diversity of their audience as a reason for developing new forms of interpretation. The task of writing text that would provide the visitor with information, explanation and interpretation was a complex one. In the first instance, it was necessary to know how to, 'match a museum label with a reader' (Horne, 1980 p.157). It was precisely *this problem of matching a label with a reader* and therefore *knowing* something about the visitor, that, according to Wilson, curators in the collections division would find difficult:

By the time they [curators] reach positions of power, [they] are conditioned by their education and by their experience of the art history and museum sub-culture into ways of responding to works of art which I would suggest, are

utterly remote from the responses of the overwhelming majority of museum visitors.

(Wilson, 1987, appendix D)

2.2.4 Who writes?

So who *would* take on the responsibility of writing interpretative text?

After much debate, it was finally agreed that the most sensible solution to the growing problem of who would write interpretative text would be to ask staff in the education department to take responsibility. However, I should add that some of the texts I use in the textual analysis section are still written by curatorial staff but edited by those in the interpretation department: 'The Interpretation Curator and their team both author and/or edit all forms of interpretation', (appendix D).

It seemed entirely logical for this move to take place, as it was education staff who dealt 'most directly and continuously with museum visitors, mediating between the public and the collections' (*The Tate Gallery: An Education Department Perspective*, 1988, appendix D). The impact of this decision was two-fold: firstly, becoming 'responsible for *all* text within the gallery' had the effect of vastly expanding the workload of the education team and secondly there was a notable shift of emphasis away from what had previously been seen as the 'predominant culture in museums and galleries ... doing work with schools' (interview two, appendix A). Taking on this new role also necessitated a serious re-think about 'how the newly formed department of Interpretation and Education might differ from its present structure' (*Education Department Discussions June/July 1988*, appendix E).

2.2.5 Departmental structuring and titles

During the research period, it was the communications department that looked after marketing, media and front of house; the education department focused on schools, teachers and adults in formal and informal education; the curatorial department was responsible for research and the writing of academic information about the collection; the information department communicated general information and the publications department published catalogues, exhibition and room guides, gallery broadsheets, i.e. printed information. I find it particularly interesting that neither of

the words, *communication* or *interpretation* featured in the education department's title. Staff employed in the education department, were offered the title of curators in 1988 after Serota's appointment. Previously the curatorial label had been given exclusively to those working in Tate collections. However, in the last staff re-shuffle of 2010, the title has been withdrawn, and education, learning and interpretation staff, are now called managers. In the past six months this has changed once again and education staff are now called convenors.

When Edward Said asked, 'who writes; for whom is the writing being done; in what circumstances?' (Said quoted in Mitchell, 1983, p. 7), he was not referring specifically to museum interpretation. However, the questions he raises are wholly relevant and could be extended and developed as follows; - who writes (museum text); under what circumstances is (museum) text constructed, using which theory and on behalf of which group of people? Supplementary questions might include, what are the political and ideological values communicated by museum text, and (a question which is given primacy in this thesis), where is the evidence/research to prove that interpretative text is important/helpful/necessary?

Having fought for and won ownership of text production, it was necessary for the education team to understand what it meant to write this very particular form of text, how it should be written, for whom it was being written and the social and political circumstances which might shape its structure and form. The question of who writes text has been addressed. I now move on to consider for whom the text is written.

2.2.6 For whom is text written?

Helen Coxall's paper '*Some observations on writing accessible, relevant and inclusive interpretive text*' begins:

If you really want to write about your collections in an accessible welcoming way, ask yourself these four questions: Who is it for? How am I doing it? What are the key points I am trying to put across? What have I left out and why?

(Coxall, 1999, appendix E)

Although the points Coxall makes, illustrate her concern for the museum visitor, there is also a certain ambiguity in the manner in which she talks about interpretation. She acknowledges that writing interpretative text is part of a communicative process and that the interpreter is an enabler rather than an educator and she stresses that the writer must think about the reader/audience. However, she makes very little reference to the *manner* in which museum text is read, the critical relationship between text and image and whether text has the ability of leading the visitor back to the work:

When you write interpretive texts, you are not just writing down the results of academic research – you are communicating. If you are interested in reaching a wider audience, your role should be that of an enabler. The words you use, what you choose to say – and especially what you choose to leave out – determine how accessible and relevant the displays are to your audiences. The key to successful communication is being **inclusive** as opposed to **exclusive**.

(Ibid.)

2.2.7 Do visitors *read* text?

the vast majority of the visitors read either the labels or the text panels or both. Reading the support material seemed to aid visitors' understanding of the exhibits and to be part of the Gallery experience as a whole.

(Hooper-Greenhill, Moussouri and Hawthorne, 2001, p. 27)

Before I move on to consider what reading accompanying text might offer the viewer, I should mention that research examining whether visitors actually *do* read and do like text, is somewhat contradictory. In one section of Gail Lord's research, she reports that visitors clearly prefer to have *less* text in the galleries, 'a minority of visitors are concerned about there being too much interpretation in the galleries at the expense of the visual experience' (Lord, 1993, p. 27) and similar findings are reported by Hein, who concludes that many visitors 'seldom read labels at all'. But then in a later section of Lord's research, she mentions that there are a number of visitors for whom reading text is 'the first thing they do', 'I always go to the wall text and read [it]' (Lord, 1993, p. 20) and there are even some visitors who 'pretend' they are not reading even when they are!

Visitors can be reading exhibit labels even when it looks as if they are not ... Reading behaviour is extremely difficult human behaviour to observe. The average literate person has the ability to process print at the rate of 250-300 words per minute, and this means that the museum visitor can read 20 words or more in five seconds as he or she walks past an exhibit. It is not surprising that visitors in museums are likely to be recorded in observational studies as non readers.

(Paulette McManus 'Watch your Language people Do Read Labels', *Curator*, vol 32, no 3, 1989, pp 174-89)

In the data McManus presents taken from recorded transcripts of 114 group conversations in the National History Museum, in which visitors were *unobtrusively* observed, McManus records:

66 per cent of visitor groups had had access to the information in labels. 84 of the transcripts of the same visitor groups' conversations either contained segments of verbatim reading from texts or carried paraphrases of the content of exhibit texts.

(Ibid.)

I had a similar experience in the second set of filmed interviews when a number of interviewees described the painting they had been looking at using words they had just read in the accompanying text. For example, one young woman used the word 'uncomplicated' twice when she described Patrick Heron's *Horizontal Stripe Painting: November 1957 - January 1958*. I was surprised that she used this word, as it seemed an unusual way to describe the painting. On completion of the interview I looked at the accompanying text and observed that this word featured in Tate's written interpretation. The experiment described below, conducted by Zoi Kapoula and designed to track differing concentration levels of 23 subjects split into three groups may also have relevance here:

The groups were instructed to explore the paintings without knowledge of the title (spontaneous condition), with instructions to invent a title (active condition), and after being told the authentic title (driven condition). The paper includes plenty of statistics gathered by the eye tracking software on saccade and fixation times over different areas of each painting. But the results and discussion is the most interesting aspect. In the driven condition, they report longer fixation times due to higher cognitive activity. By knowing the

title in advance, an effort to fit the title to the painting is triggered there by influencing "semantic analysis" and leading to longer fixation times.
ZoiKapoula.<http://www.perceptionweb.com/perception/fulltext/pforth/p6080.pdf>)

Kapoula's experiment shows that during 'the driven condition', participants showed longer fixation times and higher cognitive activity. This condition might be understood as an attempt on the part of the participants to fit the title to the painting and understood as a form of semantic analysis. Similarly in an article published in 1993, *The Influence of Titles on How Paintings Are Seen* (Franklin et al., 1993), which 'explores how viewers responded to a painting under different titling conditions', there was also evidence that the 'change of titles affected individuals' interpretive readings'. In my second set of interviews, (referred to in chapter three) there were instances when interviewees attempted to match words to image although there was little to suggest that fixation times had increased.

2.2.8 Do visitors *like* text?

It was clear, from Lord's survey, that some visitors found text helpful, enabling and accessible while others expressed their irritation at the way in which they felt, 'locked into a literary explanation, [so that], you're not looking at the work'. Some visitors went as far as saying that, 'I find myself reading the wall text, even when I really don't want to' (Lord 1993, appendix B). I should note that the phrase, 'I find myself reading the wall text, even when I really don't want to' was expressed to me many times in conversation with visitors regarding text in the galleries. Interpretative text is, I would suggest, likely to be compromised in one way or another, either it will, 'serve a work by willingly providing the expected commentary or, conversely, dominate it by imposing [its] own view' (Belting, 2003b, p. 17).

2.2.9 Who is interpretative text for?

It might be assumed that the question both Said and Coxall pose, *for whom is the writing being done*, would easily answered: museum text is written for the public. According to research carried out by Morris et al. interpretative texts should be:

engaging and informative for people arriving with little or no background knowledge or confidence in the subject matter.

(Never Mind the Width Feel the Quality May 2005, p.4
www.museumsandheritage.com)

In other words gallery text should not be written for academics, specialists or other curators but for the gallery visitor. Wilson challenges this. It is his belief that 'curators essentially make displays for each other' (Wilson, 1987). It was also my experience that curators had not been used to having to evaluate the effectiveness or 'added value' of their captions and labels and would probably have been astonished if asked to do so.

The first step for museums was to have greater knowledge of their audience. It was clear that gathering even the most basic information regarding museum visitors required a whole new approach to visitor research. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre have conducted:

a significant programme of research into visitors to UK museums and galleries. Over a 12-month period, this programme included over 8,500 face-to-face interviews with visitors, 48 focus group discussions and 4,500 detailed observations of visitor behaviour. In short, this is both rich and rigorous data.

(Never Mind the Width Feel the Quality May 2005, p.3
www.museumsandheritage.com)

However, even with the benefit of such a mass of data, they are critical of this form of data collection:

Head counts are all very well, but what is needed are more meaningful measures. Measures that relate to the quality of the visit experience, measures that relate to the outcomes for the visitor and measures that simply help us to make more sense of the existing basic head counts. At first glance, we are already collecting a lot of information. We count the number of visits made. Regular snapshot surveys demographically profile existing visitors and determine what proportion of them are new visitors. We even identify and count specific target groups. But there's so much more we could do that would be so much more valuable and influential.

(Ibid., p.4)

The report goes on to suggest the following categories for describing visitor behaviour: 'Social Spacer, Self Improver, Aficionados and Sensualists', (they describe sensualists as *confident and cultured visitors wanting to immerse themselves in aesthetic experience*).

In her research Daniela Petrelli uses: 'Ants, Fish, Butterflies and Grasshoppers' (Daniela Petrelli, p. 5). I have already commented on the inadequacy of this type of categorisation.

As well as commissioning outside visitor surveys, museums and galleries (Tate in particular) began to conduct their own in-house surveys, a practice of which Morris et al. were (predictably) critical:

Museums and galleries collect more visitor data today than ever before. But how much of it gives us real insight into visitors' motivations, behaviour, experiences and responses? And how much of it simply ticks a box on a funding form?
(Never Mind the Width Feel the Quality, www.museumsandheritage.com)

This criticism may be a valid one but as the cost of buying-in large-scale qualitative evaluation became prohibitive, it was sensible and necessary for museums and galleries to initiate their own methods.

When I first joined Tate in 1987, gallery warders used a simple hand held clicker to count the number of visitors who came into the gallery. This basic head count told them nothing about age, education, demographics etc. and also made no differentiation between the number of 'visitors' and the number of 'visits'. Museums needed information about the duration of each visit and how long visitors spent looking at an artwork and what visitors were hoping to get from time they spent looking at art. There have been many research projects involving the tracking and timing of museum visitors, most notably *Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art (September to May 1988)* Douglas Worts, Art Gallery of Ontario; *Gaze-Tracking and Museums: Current Research and Implications*, Slavko Milekic, University of the Arts, Philadelphia US and *Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions: A*

Meta-analysis of Visitor Time/Use in Museum Exhibitions Beverly Serrell, Serrell & Associates, Chicago, Illinois and Colette Dufresne-Tassé, *Andragogy in the museum: a critical analysis*. However, 'very few studies [were] carried out on *learning* in the art museum' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2001, p. 22).

In 1986, Christies Fine Art students carried out research in Tate Britain which looked into the time visitors spent looking at specific art works: 'out of 165 visitors 96, or 60 per cent spent less than ten seconds in front of any work of art (Wilson, *Art and Tradition*, 1987, appendix C). With information of this kind, Tate became aware of the importance of the physical location of a label or wall text, as well as its style and content:

Given that wall texts and captions are read whilst standing up, often in a crowded situation, and that the first-glance attention span of a visitor is only a few seconds, texts need to be short, uncomplicated, and immediately engaging.

(Tate unpublished paper 080923: *Guidelines for writing labels*, 2008, appendix E)

2.2.10 Under what circumstances is text produced?

Tate has produced a set of guidelines suggesting that interpretative text should be: 'inclusive as opposed to exclusive, accessible, welcoming [and] clearly written'

(former head of interpretation at Tate Britain, Gina Koutsina):

1. Write for your audience. Most of the visitors that read wall panels are non-specialists
2. Start with the most important idea first and then support it with your argument.
3. Bring in the human element
4. Build the text around the artwork
5. Write as you would speak—or almost.
6. Write with clarity

(Tate unpublished paper 81107: *Writing Text*, 2008, appendix E)

Although these guidelines may help curators write consistently and coherently, there is very little reference to the manner in which the text is actually 'used' by the visitor. Which leads me to the third of the questions Said poses, 'under what circumstances is text produced'? There are a number of ways to approach this.

One might be of the opinion that the act of writing text will always be affected by political, ideological or social conditions, and I consider some of these in the final part of this chapter. However, the institutional answer to the question 'under what circumstances is text being produced', is most likely to be, 'as a service and provision for the general public'. And under these circumstances text should be: 'easily comprehensible to most visitors' (Tate unpublished paper 080923: *Guidelines for writing labels*, 2008, appendix E).

2.2.11 Comprehension and readability tests

I want to spend some time on the question of comprehension (or that which is easily comprehensible) and ask what this might mean when it is applied to reading text written in the form of interpretation and explanation to accompany a work of art. Does it refer to the comprehension of words or concepts or visual clues? (appendix E, Tate's captions diagnostics chart) or does it refer to the way in which visitors comprehend a visual image after they have read the text, in other words how illuminating and helpful the text might be, for 'seeing' the painting?

Wilson describes the method chosen by Tate for the readability of museum texts. Although Wilson's paper was given in 1987, as far as I am aware similar tests are still used. Based on an undergraduate paper by Mary-Ann Edwards, a communications student at University of Leicester Museum studies department, the type of readability tests used by Tate, are based on the Fry test of readability:

The Fry test uses three samples of one hundred words to find an average sentence length and average number of syllables per 100 words for any given author. These are plotted against each other to obtain a measure of readability, notably paragraph length, sentence structure and of course the degree to which the reader comprehends the vocabulary, references and concepts embodied in the text.

(*The Readability of Tate Gallery Texts*, Report by Wilson, 1991, appendix E)

Sorsby and Horne also refer to the Fry test. After studying 73 labels from seven British museums, covering arts and science topics in equal measure, and questioning

how effective a museum label might be 'in saying what their writer hopes will be understood', their conclusion was:

Our figures indicate that about three-quarters of visitors to museums will be unable to pay attention to at least two-thirds of the labels because the vocabulary and sentence structure are too difficult ... it seems that the interest stimulated by the object [I would love to have this explained more fully] will generally be stifled by the label because this has not been matched to the reading level of the public.

(Horne, 1980 p.157-159)

A painting is a visual object comprised of space, form, colour and conceptual ideas. Describing or explaining the essence of this unique object with a formula testing *reading* (of any text) is questionable. There is no attempt on the part of Sorsby, Horne or Wilson, to ask what 'readability' might have to do with looking at visual imagery. In his 1991 paper on the subject of reading paintings Wilson declares, 'All readability factors are particularly important in the context of museum labels and wall texts' (appendix D). To be able to read, to be able to move across words from left to right (or right to left) would I suggest, be more likely to be linked to the irrational act of seeing [a painting], 'like hunting and like dreaming ... entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect – in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain' (Elkins, 1996, p. 11).

Also of relevance here is research by Agostini and Chokron in 2000:

a significant effect of reading habits on aesthetic preference, with **left-to-right** readers showing a preference for stimuli with a rightward directionality while **right-to-left** readers preferred stimuli with a leftward directionality. These findings raise the question of an interaction between cultural factors and cerebral dominance.

(Agostini, 2000)

(I have asked the curator of interpretation at Tate, whether there is a preference for positioning text to the left or right of the image. She assures me that there is no such preference. However I have observed that it is more common for text to be positioned to the left, in fact almost always where a choice is possible, i.e. where

there are no doorways, other architectural features or sculptures. In a predominantly left to right reading culture, text positioned to the left will be more likely to be 'read' before the work is looked at).

2.2.12 Analysing wall text and display captions.

It is the ambition of any researcher that during the course of research, certain findings, discoveries or revelations will contribute to new thinking as well as initiate other projects. My motivation for embarking on this thesis was inspired by what I perceived to be an increase in the production of interpretative text in museums of art. I wanted to examine the nature, function and form of this text firstly from the institutional point of view and then from a visitor's perspective. I have outlined some of the problems that cultural organisations have needed to address regarding the manner in which they communicate with their public: they must be welcoming and accessible; they must continually review their inclusion and access policy and methods of knowledge sharing, they are required to maintain a high profile in research and scholarship and provide diverse and multi-cultural programming. They must take responsibility for sponsorship, funding and marketing, the selection, organisation and successful staging of exhibitions and acquisition of new work. Above all, cultural institutions must understand the needs of a large, diverse and rapidly increasing visiting public.

The provision of interpretative text will inevitably be affected by any, or all of these considerations. So far, this chapter has traced its development and authorship. In part two I will attempt an analysis of selected captions, partly using Tate guidelines but also using my own evaluation (I will suggest that successful text will always direct the viewer back to look at the art) and testing out my own expectations of how text might enrich the viewing experience. I will also make reference to the manner in which the National Curriculum guidelines have shaped the writing of interpretative text. But first, in order to propose any form of evaluation or suggest whether text succeeds or fails, it is necessary to ask:

2.2.13 What kind of text is museum wall text?

Museums exist because that is where objects deemed worthy of being preserved for future generations are kept. Museums are run by curators and conservators – people who usually have degrees in art history. Not only are they the guardians of objects, but they wrap them in texts: interpretative texts, texts that attribute and identify, historical and critical interpretations, social histories.

(de Duve in Elkins, 2006, pp. 59-60)

De Duve's assertion is that two of the prime functions of interpretative text are to attribute and to identify. To a certain extent, both of these feature in wall texts and captions. But this does not address the full complexity of text or attempt to understand what interpretative text is, and what it is not.

Text written to accompany paintings is very specific. It is not primarily a marketing or promotional tool (although it might sometimes be used for this purpose) or a standard academic document (despite the fact that many curators are keen for it to be thought of in this way). It is not an extract from a novel or a poem (although sometimes it might include this); it is not an advert written to persuade, with repeated words and dramatic grammar (again this may be a feature of interpretative text); it is not a note or a letter communicating a personal message, it is not a recipe to instruct, a pamphlet to inform; it is not written to accompany a diagram or chart.

For those working in the education department, written interpretation has always been a method of communicating to the public, information about works of art in a friendly and accessible way according to specific guidelines (full Tate documents in appendix) and conforming to an agreed level of legibility/readability (appendix D). Although Tate guidelines are clear about the tone, (welcoming and friendly), legibility (100 words caption, no technical words etc.) and readability levels appropriate for interpretative text, there is nothing to describe the type of text it might be. In *Patterns of discourse and text* (1998), text type (using the word type to mean *kind* not font) is categorised as descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative:

- Descriptive text is used to create a vivid impression of a person place, object, etc. Its features are to engage or set a mood and the language it uses aims to show rather than tell the reader.
- Narrative text is written to entertain, to gain and hold the readers interest. The most common elements are story, setting, characters, event, theme and resolution.
- Expository text is text which explains something.
- Argumentative text is used to justify an opinion through reasoning or argument.

(Rothwell, Guijarro, Hernández, 1998)

In the analysis of Tate texts, some of these categories might be considered useful.

I have also considered using a literary, linguistic or a semiotic methodology and content or discourse analysis. I have looked at *Visual Methodologies* by Gillian Rose, which 'offers a methodological guide to the production of empirically grounded responses to particular visual materials' (Rose, 2007, p. 2).

Rose suggests a specific method for looking at visual images (but not *text* explaining *visual imagery*), using the following categories: colour, spatial organisation, focus, light and expressive content (Rose, 2007, pp. 38-48). Again some of these categories might be used in my analysis.

I have also considered Michael O'Toole's, *Language of Displayed Art* (O'Toole, 1994, pp. 5 - 21). O'Toole uses similar categories: compositional, representational and modal categories, which he suggests are suitable for analysing the '*language for visual text*', by which he means the visual image, *not* the words used to elaborate upon the visual image.

Louise Ravelli's *Museum Texts* (Ravelli, 2006), has also been helpful, with its description of words in museums as a communication of the museum's ideology, 'the museum as text'. Ravelli offers analytical descriptions, which are similar to those of both Rose and O'Toole: representation, and interactional meanings. However she approaches text as generic to *all* museums not art museums in particular and crucially, does not specifically relate text to painting.

Michael Halliday's, *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (Halliday, 1973), questions the demands we make on language and is concerned with the function of language, under the categories, representational, conative and expressive. Jurij Lotman (Lotman, 1977, pp. 32-33) uses semiotic theory to consider the concept of the text as a unity and Ellen J Esrock's *The Reader's Eye visual Imaging as Reader Response* (Esrock, 1994) offers an account of the power of literary theory over image theory and concludes, 'If once there was too much chatter about images ... now there is too much chatter about language' (Esrock, 1994).

At first glance it may seem as if all of these approaches are relevant. However, it is my contention that there is still no structure available for writing and analysing text *for an image*; in other words text written with the function of performing an explanatory, interpretative role, to explicate, elucidate, and elaborate on the work of art alongside which it stands.

In the following analysis, I will be using both Tate and national curriculum guidelines. Although these guidelines make no mention of how successful a particular display caption might be in drawing the visitor back to looking at the painting, this is something I will also take into consideration.

2.2.14 An analysis of Tate texts

The following wall texts and display captions are taken from paintings chosen by interviewees in the filmed interviews of chapter five. Tate uses different guidelines for wall texts and display captions. Wall texts are intended to, 'give an explanatory overview of the contents of the room, introducing the ideas behind the selection of works ... mak[ing] the argument for the display'.

Complex ideas need not be avoided in wall texts, but they should be presented in a simple, non-academic manner. Though many of our visitors are well educated, only a small percentage will be art history specialists. We are not writing for this specialist audience but for a broad public. We need therefore to make a conscious effort to avoid vocabulary, references and knowledge assumptions peculiar to art history. The first sentence of the wall text should

summarise what is to follow, rather like a standfirst in a newspaper that sits below the headline, introducing the article.

(Tate unpublished paper 090429: *Writing Guidelines for Displays* by Jane Burton, appendix D)

Display captions, on the other hand, should be 'short, simple in structure, uncomplicated, immediately engaging ... ideally present[ing] only one idea' (Tate unpublished paper 090429: *Writing Guidelines for Displays* by Jane Burton, appendix E).

The first of my examples is the wall text that accompanies the Tate display, *Subject Matter* in Room 21. This room has an introductory wall panel introducing the theme of this room.

Wall text for Room 21: Subject Matter

In Europe and America in the 1950s a new approach to abstract painting overturned the aesthetic certainties of earlier modernist painting. For the American critic Harold Rosenberg, Action Painting indicated how the painting became "an arena in which to act" for the artist. He continued: "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter - The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value - political, aesthetic, moral." Several terms were attached to this new painting emphasising artists' renewed engagement with subject and matter, including Abstract Expressionism, Abstract Impressionism, Tachisme, Art Autre, Aformalism, Non-Form-Form, Metavisual and Informal Art. However, for many artists a subject was not just found in paint and what was done to it in the studio. It was formed in the tension between the manipulation of material and the transformation of motifs and experience often drawn from the figure and landscape.

The first sentence of the wall text links the phrase *aesthetic certainties*, which is a complex and, some might say, controversial idea to *earlier modernist painting*. Both of the phrases, *aesthetic certainties* and *earlier modernist paintings*, might be difficult concepts for the general public.

Tate guidelines suggest that curators should make 'a conscious effort to avoid vocabulary, references and knowledge assumptions peculiar to art history'.

Here, I would suggest, the text does not conform to the guidelines. Furthermore, the language used might be described as academic although Tate guidelines suggest that texts 'should be presented in a simple, non-academic manner'.

The wall panel also mentions Harold Rosenberg, a critic with whom the public may or may not be familiar, using his description of action painting as *an arena in which the artist could act* as an 'event'. Imagining a painting as 'an arena in which an artist could act' might, like the phrases above, suggest unfamiliar concepts of artistic practice.

The text further suggests that the painting was the result of an encounter, and refers to abstract expressionism, tachism, art autre, aformalism, non-form-form, metavisual and informal art. As many of these terms are completely new to me and I have spent years working in museums, I can only imagine that they will be largely unfamiliar to a general audience, only a small percentage of whom, according to Tate guidelines, 'will be art history specialists'. Use of such terminology also conflicts with Tate's caption diagnostics chart (appendix E).

I would suggest that there are many elements of this wall text, which present difficult complex, art historical ideas. However the text may also be seen as a clear example of the way in which gallery text changed in response to requirements of the National Curriculum.

some notion of historical sequence and coincidence is essential to a proper understanding of the evolution of art and design ... this should be seen as an enabling framework rather than a crushing burden of facts to be memorised. 'Teachers are urged to ... give pupils opportunities to study particular works and also, complementarily, to help them towards an understanding of broad contexts.

(Dyson, 1989)

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2.2.15 Patrick Heron

Azalea Garden: May 1956 (display caption)

Heron painted this picture, inspired by his garden in West Penwith, Cornwall, during a period when he saw himself moving from representational art to abstraction. He recalled: 'I referred to the series as garden paintings, since they certainly related in my mind to the extraordinary effervescence of flowering azaleas and camellias which was erupting all over the garden.' Amongst the older generation of British artists, Heron admired Hitchens for his ability to create the illusion of space through colour. In 1953, Heron organised an exhibition entitled 'Space in Colour' at the Hanover Gallery that included works by Hitchens, Lanyon and himself.

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The display caption above uses a number of different strategies for communicating information. It begins with a statement: *Heron painted this picture* in West Penwith, Cornwall. The caption goes on to explain that Heron saw himself moving from representational art to abstraction. The use of the phrase, *saw himself*, might almost suggest that his actions were beyond his control. The display caption continues in this vein, with a phrase commonly associated with notions of artistic genius and extraordinary skill and talent, *it was inspired by*. The curator tells the reader that Heron admired Hitchens for his ability to create an *illusion of space through colour*. An illusion of space created through colour is a complicated concept and the display caption then goes on to mention works by Hitchens, Lanyon (making reference to other artists is something the guidelines suggest is bad practice).

The second display caption also refers to a work by Patrick Heron and I include it as it was mentioned by one of my interviewees in the second set of filmed interviews.

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Horizontal Stripe Painting: November 1957 - January 1958 (display caption)

Heron was a critic and painter who championed an approach to painting that assessed quality according to such formal values as the flatness of a composition and colour. Of his stripe paintings he wrote, 'The reason why the stripes sufficed ... was precisely that they were so very uncomplicated as shapes ... the emptier the general format was, the more exclusive the concentration upon the experiences of colour itself.' Heron resisted the total abandoning of subject matter and even such works as this have been seen in relation to landscape, the horizontal bands and colours perhaps suggesting the horizon at sunset.

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THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES**

The display caption begins by identifying the artist as a critic and painter. In terms of the hierarchy of words used here, critic precedes painter (although this may be simply an alphabetical arrangement). The label goes on to state that Heron *championed an approach to painting that assessed quality according to such formal values as the flatness of a composition and colour*. The idea that Heron used the formal values of composition and colour as a means of assessing the quality of his painting is something that might not particularly enhance the visitor's experience of the image. Furthermore, this notion might be understood as a reference to Clive Bell's concept of significant form:

lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'.

(Bell quoted in Harrison and Wood, 1992, p. 113)

The caption goes on to explain (in Heron's words) that *the reason why the stripes sufficed was precisely that they were so very uncomplicated as shapes*.

There is an indication here that the uncomplicated nature of his stripes might somehow, encompass a deeper concentration of the experience of colour itself. Not only might this be understood as an evocation of Benjamin or Adorno's concepts of *aura*, 'a capacity to point beyond a work of art's givenness' (Sherratt, 2006), but there is also an implication that shapes, in this instance coloured stripes, are able to embody a particular aesthetic. Of interest here is research carried out by a group of scientists from Berlin concerning models of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgements:

The effect of visual complexity on preferences was investigated in a number of studies ... colour is extracted in early processing of a visual stimulus (Zeki, 1980) ... basic forms such as circles, triangles and rectangles are most beautiful in certain colours (Jacobsen, 2002) ... symmetry is also detected ... [and] grouping and order.

(Helmut Leder, 2004, p. 495)

The display caption uses a number of highly suggestive words: *championed, resisted, total abandonment*. It also makes reference to subject matter, flatness of a composition and colour and assessed quality, before it ends with a suggestion that the horizontal bands of colour evoke the horizon at sunset. This seems to be directly at odds with the artist's own words: *the emptier the general format was, the more exclusive the concentration upon the experiences of colour itself* and is, I would suggest, a clear case of curatorial interpretation.

I want now to see how far the two display captions I have referred to (wall texts have different criteria) adhere to Tate guidelines 080923 (appendix E).

- i. Both display captions have exactly 101 words (Tate recommends that display captions have 100 words).
- ii. Tate recommends 'that sentences should be short, simple in structure, and should ideally present only one idea'. In each text all of the sentences are short (from 22 to 33 words) except one sentence in the second text, which has 202 words. Generally speaking both texts conform closely to Tate

guidelines, although the second sentence in the second text is extremely long.

- iii. 'Given that wall texts and captions are read whilst standing up, often in a crowded situation, and that the first-glance attention span of a visitor is only a few seconds, texts need to be short, uncomplicated, and immediately engaging'. The first sentence of both texts is short but I would question how engaging they are. Both use rather complex technical language: *when he saw himself moving from representational art to abstraction and that assessed quality according to such formal values as the flatness of a composition and colour*.
- iv. 'Specialist terminology should be avoided; where it must be used, it should be explained'. In both cases specialist terminology is used: *moving from representational to abstract art ... such formal values as the flatness of a composition and colour*. There is no explanation of these terms.
- v. Both texts contain sentences that begin with a subordinate clause, which Tate guidelines suggests is not ideal.
- vi. 'Texts should address the work on view, and generally avoid reference to other specific works, unless they are in the same room, and the visitor can easily be directed to them'. The first text makes a reference to another painter, *Heron admired Hitchens and also to Lanyon*.
- vii. 'Quotations can enliven texts, but should be short, and carefully chosen for their lucidity'. Both texts include quite lengthy quotes from the artist. (The Morris Hargreaves McIntyre research document, *Engaging with Displays: Mapping visitor behaviour at Tate Britain* (2009) states that 'visitors would like to read/hear information in the artists' own words'.
- viii. In both texts, the tone is formal rather than informal
- ix. Both texts use specific art historical terms, *total abandoning of subject matter, the flatness of the composition*.
- x. 'Texts should ... focus on the subject and on what can be seen': I think that neither text does this.

- xi. 'Texts should avoid biography unless absolutely pertinent'. Both include biographical detail

Both texts comply with Tate guidelines regarding consistency and length, sentence structure and tone. However, the first, for Azalea Garden, might be considered more successful in relation to Tate criteria. Following some brief biographical detail, and rather complex art historical reference, it makes a clear attempt to give the visitor an insight into the source of Heron's inspiration and artistic intention, *they certainly related in my mind to the extraordinary effervescence of flowering azaleas and camellias which was erupting all over the garden*. Although there is nothing to indicate in any of the Tate guidelines that wall texts should encourage visitors to look back at the painting, in conversation with Gina Koutsina she was clear that should be considered highly important. The sentence, *flowering azaleas and camellias which was erupting all over the garden*, might, I believe, encourage the viewer to look back at the work and try to see it with the artist's eyes (this might relate to Kapoula's 'driven condition').

The second text talks about the uncomplicated nature of Heron's stripes suggesting that using such an uncomplicated motif, encourages the viewer to think about the colour rather than the form, *the emptier the general format was, the more exclusive the concentration upon the experiences of colour itself*. However it then goes on to offer a narrative reading, using the passive past tense, this painting has *been seen in relation to landscape, the horizontal bands and colours perhaps suggesting the horizon at sunset*, (seen by whom?). I personally find it very difficult to see the horizontal banding of this painting in terms of a vertical horizon at sunset. In terms of the visitors' experience of the work, I am not convinced that either text helps much. Visitors might for example, be interested in the manner in which Heron painted both paintings, the type of paint he used, whether he positioned his canvas vertically or horizontally, how important the outer edge was and the choices he made about colour.

Both the wall text and the display caption offer information about the artist, although neither speaks much about the specificity of the 1950s and post war Britain.

As well as following Tate guidelines the contextual information provided by wall texts and display captions show how directly they have been influenced by the guidelines of the National Curriculum:

Pupils should be taught about the roles and purposes of artists, craftspeople and designers working in different times and cultures [for example, Western Europe and the wider world ... [and] investing[e] art, craft and design ... in a variety of genres, styles and traditions [for example, in original and reproduction form, during visits to museums, galleries and sites, on the internet (<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/subjects/art-and-design/keystage2/index.aspx>).

The wall text offers additional complex information about other styles of art but gives no explanation of how these styles might differ. Both display captions include the artist's words, which might connect the work to the painter or might reinforce notions of artistic genius.

2.2.16 Joseph Mallord William Turner

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Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth (display caption)

Turner painted many pictures exploring the effects of an elemental vortex. Here, there is a steam-boat at the heart of the vortex. In this context the vessel can be interpreted as a symbol of mankind's futile efforts to combat the forces of nature. It is famously said that Turner conceived this image while lashed to the mast of a ship during an actual storm at sea. This seems to be nothing more than fiction, but the story has endured as a way of demonstrating Turner's full-blooded engagement with the world around him.

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This display caption has 92 words. There are five sentences, each one quite short. The first sentence acts as context and background information about the artist, 'visitors feel the interpretation should give an overview of the story of the artwork, the context of the artwork and the influences of the artist', (Morris, 2009). This sentence tells the viewer that Turner painted many pictures exploring the effects of an elemental vortex. Although it might be obvious from the painting what an elemental vortex might look like, I think this is a difficult concept to include without some attempt to define it, particularly so, for an overseas visitor.

Furthermore, suggesting that Turner painted many pictures using this theme might suggest that this is a recurring motif. The second sentence is written in an informal, personal manner. Using O'Toole's method of analysis this might equate with the modal function (O'Toole, 1994, p. 5), and might therefore be successful in drawing the visitor in with the word, *here* (in the middle of the picture), *there is a steam-boat*. This is one of a limited number of examples of the display caption actually encouraging the visitor to look at the image.

The text continues, *in this context, the vessel can be interpreted as a symbol of mankind's futile efforts to combat the forces of nature*. This might be understood as an example of curatorial interpretation. The language used is 'poetic', suggestive and arguably interpretative, *mankind's futile efforts*. There are other similar examples of curatorial interpretation: *full blooded engagement with the world around him*, and *has endured*. The caption continues with a story, a myth about Turner: *it is famously said that Turner conceived this image while lashed to the mast of a ship in an actual storm*. As this is a story with which many visitors may be familiar, this might be thought of as inclusive and friendly and give the viewer a sense of familiarity and achievement. However the text then denounces the story as fiction, which might leave the viewer wondering why it was mentioned in the first place or that the curator has been rather patronising to include it. The final sentence is once again written using expressive language. Overall the text type is narrative. There is only one sentence that clearly invites the viewer directly to look, *here*, that O'Toole might call compositional: most of the information is contextual, mythological, and factual.

As far as the success of the text in taking the viewer back to the painting, I would suggest that only the second sentence, *Here, there is a steam-boat at the heart of the vortex*, manages to draw the viewer back to look (visitors in Meijer's research expressed a desire that wall texts should *help [them] to look more closely at the works*)

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/meijer-scott.shtm>).

Some visitors (particularly those who have themselves painted or drawn) might have liked to know more about Turner's technique in painting this picture, how he achieved the swirling motion of the vortex, how he layered the paint, whether he used wet on dry techniques and how he achieved the effects of light.

2.2.17 Mark Gertler



Merry-Go-Round 1916, display caption

This work was painted at the height of the First World War, which seems to be its subject. Men and women in rigid poses, their mouths crying in silent unison, seem trapped on a carousel that revolves endlessly. Gertler was a conscientious objector. He lived near London's Hampstead Heath, and may have been inspired by an annual fair held there for wounded soldiers. The fairground ride, traditionally associated with pleasure and entertainment, is horrifically transformed into a metaphor for the relentless military machine. He explained, 'Lately the whole horror of war has come freshly upon me'.

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This text has 96 words and six short sentences. It begins with context, setting the scene of the painting before going on to describe the content of the scene. Here it uses a different kind of language, contriving to evoke a particular mood, *mouths crying in silent unison ... trapped on a carousel that revolves endlessly*. The caption continues to 'tell' the viewer that Gertler was a conscientious objector and then reverts back to context with information about where he lived, the fair at Hampstead Heath. The final sentence is devoted to the artists' words. In terms of both Tate guidelines and the research carried out by Morris et al., this text is successful. The text type is narrative and descriptive, it uses the artist's words, it provides background and is written in an accessible manner. The caption begins with historical context, that it was painted at the height of the First World War and then rather tentatively suggests that this *might* be its subject. The curator then offers his/her own interpretation of the painting, that the 'men and women in rigid poses, their mouths crying in silent unison' are *trapped on a carousel that revolves endlessly*. The text includes three 'factual' phrases: that Gertler was a conscientious objector; that he lived near London's Hampstead Heath and that a fair for wounded soldiers was held annually on the Heath. After this 'factual interlude' the caption takes its focus back to the fairground ride, *traditionally associated with pleasure and*

entertainment ... horrifically transformed into a metaphor for the relentless military machine. This is an unusual use of words. According to the writer of the caption, 'the fairground ride *is transformed* into a metaphor, rather than the more usual way of using the metaphor as itself transformative. The text ends with the artist's words; *lately the whole horror of war has come freshly upon me.* These final words may suggest inspired vision and instability.

2.2.18 Lucian Freud

The Freud painting chosen by the first interviewee is not a Tate work. As an alternative I am using both the wall panel and display caption of one of Freud's paintings in the current Tate display dedicated to his work.

Wall panel for Room 20

Freud has been a public artist for seventy years. He is known as one of the leading painters of his time. When most important art has been characterised by challenges to convention, Freud's painting has remained resolutely figurative. Yet, there is something undeniably modern about his way of looking if not about his way of painting. Almost all Freud's works are figurative and almost all of people he knows: family, friends, lovers, and their pets. Certain individuals, such as the performance artist Leigh Bowery, are clearly chosen for some physical characteristic; even these become intimates through Freud's repeated depiction of them. Freud's paintings possess other qualities. The early works have a sense of the uncanny or an air of anxiety and apprehension. Later there can be something absurd about the way his figures are arranged. While his paint changes over time from thin and smooth to dramatically thick and broken, his precise observation is consistent. Yet Freud has said he hopes the paintings are "factual, not literal". This is as true of his studies of plants and still-life as of his portraits. The critic John Russell suggested that Freud's paintings portray "the act of looking" as much as anybody or anything. This display has been devised by curators Robert Upstone and Chris Stephens.

The wall panel begins with a tentative statement: *Freud has been a public artist for seventy years* (the implications of being a 'public' artist are not explained). It goes on to assert that when *most 'important' (my inverted commas) art has been characterized by challenges to convention, Freud's painting has remained figurative.* This is a provocative, cryptic statement, which begs further explanation: why was

most important art characterized by challenges to convention and why was it impossible for figurative art to be seen to be challenging convention in a similar way? The following sentence, which begins with the word 'yet' appears to be claiming that *despite* the fact that his work is figurative, it is *still* modern (again use of the word 'modern' might need further explanation). Later in the text the writers (they are named) use a different form of language, suggesting that the work has, *a sense of the uncanny ... an air of anxiety and apprehension, something absurd about the way his figures are arranged*. All of these terms have roots in existentialist and surrealist interpretation. The curators go on to suggest that Freud himself *hopes that his paintings are factual, not literal*. The wall panel might have been more interesting if the writers had explored this further.

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Standing by the Rags (display caption)

The female nude has been Freud's main theme for years. Critics have linked his work to the tradition of realism, but he pointed out 'there is a distinction between fact and truth. Truth has an element of revelation about it.' Like William Coldstream's paintings also shown in this room, Freud reminds us that this woman is standing in his studio. The rags piled behind her are those he uses to clean his brushes. They introduce an idea of dirtiness, perhaps even bodily secretions. He may be suggesting there is more to a truthfully represented body than its appearance.

(Tate display caption May 2007)

This display caption has 97 words, and six short sentences. The first sentence is factual. The second sentence uses some art historical terminology, for example the term realism. This sentence also makes a rather complicated allusion to fact and truth. The fourth sentence refers to another artist in the same room, William Coldstream. The final three sentences are directly related to the work. In terms of drawing the visitor back to the work I think the detail that might do this is the mention of the rags used for cleaning his brushes. Visitors might have found it interesting to know how long the model had to stand in this pose (her legs are so red) and why Freud might want to make the connections between the female form, dirtiness and bodily secretions.

2.2.19 Comparative analysis of two texts

I had intended, at this point in the thesis, to refer back to wall texts of the 1980s and 90s, which had originally been available in a set of green files kept at the information desk of Tate Britain. However when I began to look for these files I was told that this material had been shredded and had been replaced with on line information. I comment on this in more detail in my conclusions for this chapter.

However, looking back in my own archive of Tate material I have uncovered some original wall text and I want to end this chapter with a comparative analysis of text as it would have appeared early in the research period and text as it now appears.

2.2.20 Max Ernst 1891-1976

Information panel produced in the 1980s (exact date unknown)

German-born painter, sculptor and printmaker; one of the leading Surrealists. Born at Brühl, near Cologne. Began to study philosophy at the University of Bonn in 1909 but became increasingly preoccupied with painting; self-taught, but influenced by van Gogh and Macke. Artillery officer in the first world war ... Made collages and, later, paintings with irrational combinations of imagery. First one-man exhibition in Paris, 1921. His discovery of the technique of frottage (rubbing) in 1925 provided him with a means of evoking hallucinatory visions.

Display caption for *Pieta or Revolution by Night*, August 2004

In 1924 the poet André Breton published the first Manifesto of Surrealism. The primary aim of this literary and artistic movement was, he explained: 'to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality.' Inspired by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, Surrealism used irrational images to portray the working of the human mind. Max Ernst's *Pietà or Revolution by Night* is typical. The painting replaces the traditional scene of Mary clasping the body of Christ with an image of the artist himself, held by his father. A staunch Catholic, Ernst's father had denounced his son's work, and the painting is often seen as rising out of their troubled relationship, although - like dreams - it resists precise analysis.

Although these two texts are not exactly comparable, one is a general text, the other, a display caption for a particular painting, I think there are important observations to be made.

The early 1980s text is predominantly factual. It tells the viewer that Ernst was born in Germany, that he was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, a leading Surrealist and that he had studied philosophy before becoming a painter. He was self taught and influenced by van Gogh and Macke and he made collages with irrational combinations of imagery.

The second 2004 on line text, the display caption for *Pietà or Revolution by Night*, 1923 is very different in tone. It begins with a quote from Andre Breton from the first Manifesto of Surrealism and describes surrealism as a 'literary and artistic

movement ... [which hoped to] 'resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality.' The caption goes on to state that surrealism was inspired by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, and used irrational images to portray the working of the human mind.

It is not until the fourth sentence that Max Ernst is even mentioned and then, I would suggest in a rather dismissive manner, by saying that this painting (for which the display caption is written) is 'typical'. The caption then goes on to mention Ernst's father, 'a staunch catholic' who denounced his son's work and that this painting is seen as rising out of their troubled relationship.

Looking closely at this display caption I am struck by a strange mix of impersonal information and curatorial interpretation. In 169 words, the painting by Ernst is mentioned only once. All other 'information' is about the movement of surrealism (art history), Freud's theory of the unconscious (interpretation), religious iconography and the relationship Ernst had with his father (again, interpretation).

The earlier text, on the other hand, gives a great deal more factual information about the artist: where he was born, his education, his artistic influences, exhibitions and use of the technique of frottage (explained as rubbing).

I would suggest that the earlier text offering as it does, biography, education, influences and technique, is typical of an art history pre-1980s. Whereas the modern on line version which relegates the artist to one mention, but refers in some detail to the movement of surrealism, the influence of Freud, and family relationships may be characterized as a contextual, social and psychological analysis.

Summary for Chapter two: part two

In part two of this chapter, I have focused on the words used in Tate wall texts and display captions, drawing attention to their very specific nature. The chapter began with a history of Tate education with special reference to the point at which interpretation became part of the department. I traced the development of text and noted how it had originally been part of the work of the publications' department, before it became seen within a curatorial remit, and then looked after by education

staff and finally by a dedicated Interpretation team. This evolution is important. It illustrates the increasing importance of interpretation and draws attention to the way in which it has changed from being a service provided by journalists, to writing of an academic nature and most recently as a tool for access and audience engagement. In addition, I make the suggestion that the introduction of New Displays, a new National Curriculum for art and design and a growing emphasis on access policy contributed to the production of more elaborate, more expansive information and explanation in the form of wall texts, labels and room panels. I also made a comparative analysis of two texts, one written in the 1980s and one recent on line text and commented on the difference of these two approaches.

I have tried to draw attention to the specificity of museum text and illustrate that it is unlike other forms of captions, for example those used in scientific diagrams, for marketing, publicity, etc: 'Effective labels and effective exhibitions are unique combinations of variables that together can enhance or deter communication' (Serrell, 1996, p.234). Museum wall texts aim to provide information at a particular level for the general museum visitor, frequently described as 'passing quickly by'. Although there are detailed guidelines regarding the writing of this text, there is very little to indicate why the decision has been taken to provide text in the first place, or suggest ways in which the writer might help the visitor look back at the painting.

There is a great deal of talk about intellectual access in museums and galleries. This may, in part be traced back to the free entrance debate referenced in chapter two. It is a government requirement that museums provide visitors with information, intended to offer them *a way in* so that they are able to have a level of understanding of works on display. The National Curriculum provides clear guidelines relating to the type of information students should be given:

Pupils should be taught:

- a. about characteristic features of the periods and societies studied, including the ideas, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of men, women and children in the past
- b. about the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies

studied, in Britain and the wider world
c. to identify and describe reasons for, and results of, historical events, situations, and changes in the periods studied
d. to describe and make links between the main events, situations and changes within and across the different periods and societies studied.

<http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/subjects/history/keystage2/index.aspx>

Museum and gallery wall texts have responded to these guidelines. Texts relating to paintings do show an awareness of the need to, 'describe and make links between the main events and situations'. This is clearly shown in the modern on-line text for Max Ernst's Pietà. Museums are also mindful of the national curriculum requirement for students to, investigate art, craft and design in the locality, in a variety of genres, styles and traditions, and from a range of historical, social and cultural contexts ... in original and reproduction form, during visits to museums, galleries and sites, on the internet

(http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/uploads/Art%20and%20design%201999%20programme%20of%20study_tcm8-12052.pdf).

The greater the attention given to facilitating access, intellectual, social and physical, the more democratising, enabling and inclusive an activity the museum visit is thought to be. However, in the act of providing text, it might be said that the gallery inevitably intervenes between artwork and viewer and the nature of that intervention (additional information, wall text, audio guides, hand helds, video etc.) is constructed and communicated in the gallery's own terms, and becomes part of the gallery's communicative strategy, 'museum texts are important because they form a central component of a museum's communication agenda' (Ravelli, 2006, p. 3).

In his curators blog for the John Martin exhibition, Martin Myrone states that, 'For every exhibition at Tate, we produce a range of interpretative materials to help visitors understand and engage with the art on display ... [however] the main interpretation in each room is the wall text'

<http://greatbritishartdebate.tate.org.uk/interpreting-john-martin-what-do-you-think/>

Michael O'Toole begins his chapter, *Semiotics at Work in The Language of Displayed Art* with the following words:

You've come a long way to see this painting. Its beautiful – even much more beautiful than those hundreds of copies you've seen of it – but you don't know what to say about it.

(O'Toole, 1994, p. 3)

He goes on to imagine looking at Botticelli's *Primavera* in the company of three companions, one of whom knows a lot about Roman and Greek mythology and can name all the figures, another who has seen a film about fifteenth century Florence and remembers something about the painting being commissioned and a third, who did art at school and says things about the composition, perspective, the foregrounding of the figures and the artists' palette.

Regarding the contribution each of the three companions makes to the conversation, O'Toole says:

The trouble with these sets of observations about the painting is that they don't make contact with each other at any point. They are monologues, and they fail either to relate different aspects of the painting to each other or to help their speakers relate to each another. And although the comments are all rather impressive...they don't seem to convey how these various people relate to the painting itself.

(O'Toole, 1994, p. 3)

O'Toole's comments that the observations made by each of the three friends don't convey how individuals 'relate to the painting itself' is critical for the museum interpretation debate. I want to end this chapter by proposing that we imagine the same paragraph used as a description of the provision interpretation curators make in the form of wall texts and display captions and paraphrase O'Toole as follows:

Are museum texts monologues, which fail either to relate different aspects of the painting to each other or to help their speakers relate to one another. Are

the comments curators of interpretation make, although all rather impressive, unable to convey how they, or how we, can relate to the painting itself?

O'Toole suggests that each one of the observations made by each of the three friends is delivered as a monologue directed to one single specific aspect of the painting and that although individually each comment might be interesting, together they do not present an overall experience of the painting. Furthermore, he concludes that in the manner in which they isolate information, they fail to relate different aspects of the painting to each other, or help their speakers relate to each other. Above all, he suggests, they don't seem to convey how this information helps them (or us) 'relate to the painting itself'.

If, as I have tried to show in my analysis, a wall text or caption is comprised of sentences of information and explanation, offered in the same way that each of O'Toole's friends make their own contribution, that is, individually interesting, but failing to present a coherent vision of the whole painting, then a museum wall text might also make it difficult for visitors to 'relate to the painting itself'.

Thinking back, for example, to the Turner display caption, it might be possible to designate aspects of the text to each of O'Toole's companions: the fact that Turner painted many pictures using a similar theme might for example be offered by an art historian, the story that Turner was supposed to have lashed himself to the mast of the boat while painting the picture might be the kind of information given by someone who had seen a film about Turner and symbolic references, *mankind's futile efforts to combat the forces of nature*, might be made by a writer or poet. Each comment might add something to the visitors experience but together, in the same way that O'Toole refers to his friends' 'conversation', they may not help the viewer engage with, or experience the painting.

I want to make clear here, that I am using O'Toole's comments here as a way of suggesting that *information communicated through text* (not a conversation as in

O'Toole's example) might be thought of in a similar way, that is, delivered as a monologue, by the curator, to an unnamed recipient: a situation in which each sentence of a wall text might be 'rather impressive, [but together might not] ... convey how to ... relate to the painting itself'.

I would like to end this chapter with my reflections on the importance of conversation in museums and galleries. In my experience as a museum educator, conversation between people in front of paintings almost always does involve a sharing of ideas: people don't generally speak in monologues, they offer observations and then listen to what others have to say. Conversation allows for different people with different experiences to share ideas and this exchange of views is a rich and valuable way of seeing with fresh eyes. Conversation, I would suggest, involves very different modes of communication to that of a written wall text.

The relation between message and speaker at one end of the communication chain and the relation between message and hearer at the other are together deeply transformed when the face-to-face relation is replaced by the more complex relation of reading to writing.

(Ricoeur and Valdes, 1991, p. 29)

Chapter 3: Interpretation and access

The previous chapter:

- i. Listed a number of external factors, which may have been responsible for an increase in the provision of written text in museums of art. These include free entrance for museums, a new National Curriculum for Art, changes in cultural policy, an increased emphasis on access for all, a new director, new displays and an expansion of Tate, evaluation, visitor audits, performance indicators, a growing demand for income generation, external funding, and the influence of the New Art history.
- ii. Traced the history and development of the emergence of the term 'interpretation', looked at its shifting ownership and considered how it has been used in Tate.
- iii. Examined selected Tate wall texts and display captions and offered a textual and content analysis of these texts, using Tate and national curriculum guidelines.
- iv. outlined the problem of finding an appropriate methodology for evaluating museum text.

It has been important to provide some institutional background for interpretation, to trace its development, growth and position within Tate. Interpretative text is written with very particular aims and objectives. Chapter two adopted an institutional point of view, made reference to writing guidelines, the recommended number of words for a wall text or caption, appropriate tone and voice, range of content and accessibility. What it did **not** attempt to do was ask, what form of writing interpretation might *be*: to suggest for example, that interpretative text is an example of a particular form of literature, and by literature I mean, 'any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 9). Eagleton's definition of literature is useful: interpretative text is, it might be

argued, text that is valued highly by the museum, by the writer and also by the viewer/reader.

Chapter three will attempt to do exactly that: to consider whether interpretative text functions beyond description, the genre of journalism or accepted art history taking it into the more conflicted areas of authorship, context, meaning and intention, and ask whether James Elkins is right to suggest that, 'the discipline of art history is lacking an equivalent to literary criticism: art criticism is widely regarded as journalism and is light years behind the practices of academic literary critics' (Elkins, 2006, p. 114). This chapter will also refer to the considerable research into interpretation and intellectual access that has been undertaken in the context of gallery education and the range of materials (not just written text panels) that have been produced in an attempt to develop new ways of interpreting works of art.

But first two questions.

Do curators write interpretative text in a literary style? Do they simply adhere to institutional guidelines relating to style and content, or are they also writing interpretative text with the intention of communicating ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Is interpretative text *just* art history, dates, provenance, factual information? It may well contain some art historical information but research shows that visitors expect much more. For example, an evaluation of all text and captions conducted in the *Rothko* exhibition (26 September 2008 – 1 February 2009, Tate Modern), showed that 61 per cent of visitors looked at wall texts for, 'more background: (art) historical context, information about Rothko's artistic development, motivation of the artist and also some human interest details and help to look more closely at the works' (<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/meijer-scott.shtm>).

Chapter three is divided into two parts and will consider how visitors access and make meaning of paintings, *with* and *without* text.

In part one, drawing on research conducted in Tate, I examine the expectations visitors have of written interpretation and conclude that these can be summarised as context, meaning and artistic intention. This is followed by a section which makes specific reference to the writing of Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal and considers how each of these three concepts have been defined using a literary as well as an art historical perspective. I also discuss here the issue of a theoretical structure for writing museum text and present the case both for and against a dedicated theory for museum interpretation. Finally I suggest that, ' a certain "theoretical" move could reenergize ... dealings with all kinds of cultural artefacts and maybe even enable ... [a] reconnect[ion] with some phenomena of our present-day culture that now seem to be out of reach for the humanities' (Gumbrecht, 2006, p. 1).

In part two, using filmed interviews I examine the way in which people describe paintings from memory, reconstructing an image in their mind's eye. In an attempt to match a philosophical theory to my empirical data, I draw heavily on the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and make a case for viewing both the filmed interviews and the manner in which visitors engage with paintings and text in the museum situation, using a phenomenological approach.

Part One: with text

It is perhaps unsurprising that the concepts of context, meaning and artistic intention, are regarded as important for visitors: these concepts are also important for art historians, art writers and specifically, for this thesis, interpretation curators who are responsible for the production of museum wall text.

In this chapter, however, I will also be questioning how philosophers, linguists and literary critics address issues of a similar nature. As many of the writers to whom I refer, are not specifically writing about works of art, there are instances when I use the word *text*, to refer to a visual text, in this thesis, a painting.

3.1.1 The nature of the relationship between context and text

A number of assumptions operate within the word “context” itself which the term is rarely required to unpack or declare. First, there is the implied opposition between context and work of art, context and visual text; these are taken as predestined antonyms, in that the text is something to be explained by the context: here lies the visual text, waiting for the context to come to order its uncertainties and over there is the context, as that which shall act upon the text and transfer to the latter its own certainties and determinations. Context and text are thus established in the guise of a separation that is at the same time an evident hierarchy, for the expectation is that context will **control** the text.

(Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 66)

Bryson’s proposition is that there are a number of rarely interrogated or openly exposed, assumptions operating within the word *context*. He goes on to suggest that *context* is regularly used as a means of *explaining* text (here, I am using Bryson’s phrase, visual text, to refer to a painting): in other words that a painting assumes the role of a text which is, ‘waiting for the context to come to order its uncertainties and determinations’ (Ibid.): that context and text are *predestined antonyms*. Although he doesn’t actually use the word conflict, there is an implication that the two are working against one another (he does, in fact, speak of implied opposition): that in its role as explanatory agent for text, *context* occupies a position of enhanced status and in the resulting hierarchy, takes control. If Bryson is correct, and if context does in fact *control* text, then museum interpretation, as context, may be far more than simply, an ‘add-on’, it may be the dominant means by which gallery visitors form an opinion and decide upon the ‘meaning’ of visual imagery.

I want, for a moment, to focus on the relative hierarchy of the two words, context and text. The interim report for the Lord 1993 visitor survey states that, ‘most people spent from 5 seconds to one minute reading text about a work, and from 2 seconds

to 15 seconds glancing or looking at the work' (Lord, 1993). If it is true that visitors spend more time reading text than looking at paintings^{xxii} (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a), why might this be: what is it that draws visitors more towards context, as interpretation, than the visual text, the work of art? It might help to look at the grammatical function of each word. Although technically, both (context and text) are nouns, the word 'context' has the feel of an adjective; it appears to be working *for* text. In the museum situation, context appears to take an active role, apparently working hard to help the viewer see, see better or more closely. Text, on the other hand, in this case the painting, may be seen to simply exist.

Of course, the idea that it is possible for a painting, or any other work of art, to 'simply' exist in a space that is unaffected by external social or cultural forces, is difficult to imagine:

the work of art is recognised as not only reflecting its context but mediating it, reflecting **upon** it; and the work is understood as not simply passive with regard to the cultural forces that have shaped it, but active – it produces its own range of social effects, it acts upon its surrounding world.

(Bryson in Bal, 2001, p. 2)

Nevertheless, it is important to consider where this proposition might lead. If museum visitors are drawn to context because it appears to be *actively* assisting them, what role would the painting play: would it become an illustration of the text?

Is Matisse right in his observation that:

many people like to think of painting as an appendage of literature and therefore want it to express, not general ideas suited to pictorial means, but specifically literary ideas.

(Matisse quoted in Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 2002, p. 72)

What is the relationship between the thing, and what is said of the thing, the *what* and the *what about*?

there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' ... since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one true meaning', or that things won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative — a debate between not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong' but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and

contesting meanings and interpretations. The best way to settle such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one's reading in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing.

(Hall quoted in Rose, 2007, pp. 38-48)

3.1.2 The *what* and *what about*: full or fuller meaning

In *Sense and Reference*, *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*, (Thiel, Blakeley and Frege, 1968), Gottlob Frege, talks about the *what* of discourse as opposed to the *what about*: the *what*, as sense, correlates the identification and predicative function within a sentence, the *what about*, its reference, i.e. how it relates to the world. Here, I want to suggest the use of similar categories when referring to works of art and the written information that accompanies them. When visitors were asked for their comments regarding the provision of word alongside image many said, 'It was extremely helpful to know the context' (the *what about*); 'I find the background and interpretative notes very valuable (context); 'information about pictures is very good and interesting' (content); 'it helped make the works more accessible' (Lord, 1993, p. 31).

In a questionnaire given to visitors to the Rothko exhibition in 2008, '43 out of 50 visitors (86 per cent) said that they were **planning** to read the wall texts' (Scott, 2008). The fact that visitors are actually *planning* to read wall texts indicates that they *expect* the provided text to give them extra help, information and explanation: that *this* text will enhance their experience and provide *full* or *fuller* meaning. This is not a simple idea and there are a number of dangers involved: the implication that full or fuller meaning might be possible; the assumption that fuller meaning is necessary or even desirable and a negation of the complex relationship between *intent* (curatorial and artistic intention would apply here), and *content* and whether they are able to co-exist. Furthermore, if text is able to provide full or fuller meaning, where might this fuller meaning be located and what would be the relationship to that upon which it seeks to contextualise or elaborate?

Gumbrecht speaks about the difference between deep and superficial encounters:

If we call an observation “deep”, we intend to praise it for having given a new, more complex, particularly adequate meaning to a phenomenon. Whatever we deem “superficial”, in contrast, has to lack all these qualities, because we imply that it does not succeed in going “beyond” or “under” the first impression produced by the phenomenon in question.

(Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 21)

In terms of museum text, if ‘deep’ in the sense in which Gumbrecht is using it, is similar in feel to *going under* or *beyond* (one’s first impressions), this might help to explain one aspect of written interpretation: that it will offer the museum visitor a new, more complex, more meaningful way of understanding a painting for example. If, however, interpretative text (which may include aspects of content, context, intention and meaning) *does* have the ability to go beyond, to extend and expand knowledge of the visual, and in order to facilitate *going beyond*, seeks to find for itself another, different, separate space (i.e. a space which is neither the space of the painting nor the space of the text but a new conceptual space), then context may find itself *apart from* rather than *a part of* the source of its focus. In a similar way, interpretation performing the role of *what about*, to the *what* of an art work, may also find itself in another space: physically positioned alongside, but not exactly connected to: in other words it is *apart from*, or even at odds with, the visual text:

The text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.

(Barthes, 1977, p. 46)

There are reasons why the museum might imagine that providing text in this way proves their commitment to access and diversity. But how has this rise in text affected the museum visitor? In this chapter I want to suggest that, within the frame of the museum, an uncomfortable uncertainty exists as to whether the context, *the what about*, takes precedence over the work, the *what* in Frege’s terms (Frege and Beaney, 1997).

3.1.3 Is context easier than text?

After reading that a certain painting was produced in 1946, one visitor told me that '[she] looked at it differently' and now saw 'elements of war'. In the course of many informal conversations with Tate visitors in September 2009, I have often heard them refer to context as if it offered them a way *out* of the difficulty of confronting an image, alone and unaided. However, Bryson says: 'It cannot be taken for granted that the evidence which makes up "context" is going to be any simpler than the visual or the verbal text on which such evidence is to operate' (Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 67).

Tate staff use context to describe the way in which this type of information helps 'engage' visitors, giving them 'a way *in*'. These two words, *in* and *out*, apparently oppositional but also closely related, are reflective of the dilemma facing museum interpretation. Is it the role of text to be used by visitors as a way *out*, a substitute for looking *at*, or is it the role of text to be used as a prop, an aid, a stimulus and direction to looking *in*? Bal uses *about and for* in a way not dissimilar to the in/out debate. She describes a state of existence in which, she suggests, 'representation hovers on the edge between these two incommensurable yet inextricable means' (Bal, 2006, p. 214). If context is written *for* a work of art, it may help the visitor look *in*, if, however, it is the role of context to describe, to talk *about* text, this may have the effect of taking the viewer *out/away*. Text (in the form of context) might problematise, or facilitate the practice of looking. Above all, if museum text is highly valued (in a way similar to literature, as Eagleton describes it) it will undoubtedly have 'an effect': that is, it will, in some way, influence and communicate to the viewer, authoritative, received knowledge, information, explanation or interpretation and this knowledge is frequently described by visitors as valid and worthwhile.

3.1.4 Is text 'as context', objective or subjective?

the very work of interpretation reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text which has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself.

(Ricoeur, 1974, p.4)

When museum visitors talk about paintings, they often refer to them as a personal expression of an artist's feelings, an example of the realization of their ideas or observations. These realizations may not be necessarily representational, but they are often spoken about as if they were a form of 'reality as felt' (Harrison and Wood, 2003, p. 189). In contrast, visitors expect the words used to describe or interpret a work of art to be factual, objective, neutral and unbiased, 'straight' information about the times, the painter's life, circle of friends, influences, even though as Martin Kemp observes,

there can be no objective way of judging the relationship between a representation and what it purports to represent, since what is seen as reality in a given culture is definable only in terms of its specific modes of representation.

(Martin Kemp in Panofsky and Lavin, 1995, p. 234)

Visitors to the Rothko exhibition, for example, 'assumed wall texts and captions would ... be factual' (Scott, 2008): in other words that context in the form of information, explanation etc. would not 'be subjective' (Lord survey p.II-14). This desire on the part of visitors to differentiate in such a radical way between the objective and subjective roles of text and context is, I would suggest, a problem specific to museums of art, and I want to look at each side of this paradox.

3.1.5 Text is objective

Believing that wall text and caption text has an essentially objective factual role (which is the position many visitors adopt) might indicate that text of this kind is somehow exempt from its own contextualization, exempt from any requirement that it too, like the visual text upon which it seeks to elaborate, must always be understood as individual and personal opinion, expressed in a particular way at a particular time, i.e. shaped by its own history. Furthermore, believing that text is objective assumes that interpreters are able 'to stand outside ... [of their] beliefs in a neutral encounter' (Mailloux quoted in Mitchell, 1985, p. 67). It would be difficult (maybe even impossible) to imagine the kind of situation Mailloux describes here; one in which interpreters *stand outside [of their] beliefs in a neutral encounter*.

In the Tate conference Preziosi spoke of the art museum as ‘a space where both what is staged and the staging itself are productive of knowledge: where there is little that is not potentially interpretative whether by design or appropriation’ (Tate conference appendix B). Written interpretation is also positioned within a space, which is itself a site of staging and home for that which is staged: a space where every aspect of its ‘being’ the building, content and each and every type of communicative act, is interpretative (Preziosi conference paper, appendix B), so too, the museum curator and interpreter brings to a work his or her own history, background and education and the resulting intervention can never be neutral.

3.1.6 Text is subjective

If, on the other hand we accept that interpretative text is a subjective intervention: *as subjective*, in fact, as the visual text to which it ‘speaks’, other problems might occur. Primarily that this ‘new’ text might be seen as competing with the subject of its interpretative analysis leaving those engaged in writing text *for* image in the ambiguous position of also writing *against* it, so that “works [lose] their formal autonomy and became incommunicable except through commentary...[competing] with art itself’ (Belting, 2003b, pp. 17-18). Moreover the museum curator or interpreter may use text as a vehicle for acting out, his or her own desires, in which he or she, ‘either want[s] to serve a work by willingly providing the expected commentary or, conversely, dominate it by imposing his/her own view’ (Belting, 2003b, p. 17).

3.1.7 The authorship of text

The authoring and dating of labels and wall texts is now customary in Tate, a decision taken after many visitors commented, ‘if it’s going to be subjective, then I think we should know the person’s [the curator’s] name’ (Lord, 1993, p. 15). This new level of transparency has been welcomed by Tate director Nicholas Serota, who has expressed his belief that, ‘The increasing complexity and sophistication of such presentations [he is referring to Tate displays] will make the viewer even more conscious that it is the mind and eye of the curator which shape the display of a

collection' (Serota, 2000, p. Introduction). The confidence with which Serota predicts that, 'the viewer [will become] even more conscious that it is the mind and eye of the curator which shapes the collection' is reassuring. However I would suggest that many visitors continue to believe that, far from actually *affecting and shaping the collection*, curators who write interpretative text are simply acting as the messengers of the artist. I have been criticised for expressing this view. It has been pointed out to me that visitors are not so naive as to believe that a museum collection is **not** carefully structured and shaped for ideological and political as well as artistic and aesthetic reasons. I would challenge this.

In my own series of workshops and courses, (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/coursesworkshops/19298.htm>) which take as their focal point the working museum, and look in depth at the architecture of museum space, the manner in which choices are made regarding the acquisition and display of the collection and the methods used to communicate both the art works and the museum's message, I have been struck by a general lack of understanding about how a museum makes decisions about its hang for example, themes, juxtapositions of work, acquisition policy etc. I have asked the question often enough of groups of visitors and students alike, 'how do you think artworks are acquired; how do you think collections are formed, who do you imagine makes acquisition choices and what role do you think curators play?' Invariably the answers I am given demonstrate uncertainty about the way in which a collection is formed, confusion about how decisions are taken regarding acquisition policy and dismay at the thought of the museum as a mechanism for establishing a form of power or a stage for framing content.

Rather than becoming aware (and wanting to be aware) of the museum's artifice, visitors, I would suggest, want to believe in the art they see; they want to consider it aesthetic, beautiful, magical, religious. Furthermore, if transparency is only available to a small professional audience, might this not result in the museum acting as a site of inequality, of division, of class, experience, education difference? As Tony Bennett remarked in the Tate conference:

any attempt to bring the aesthetic under sociological principles of explanation – by interpreting it as the expression of a particular class world view or habitus, for example – runs the risk of being discounted as failing to understand the very qualities that distinguish it.

(Tate conference)

Furthermore, the considerable length of time that texts remain on the gallery walls or as on-line information, (a quick trawl of Tate in May 2010 shows that almost all were written in 2004) invests them with a semi-permanent status which might lead visitors to assume that there has been no change of curatorial opinion and the intervention of historical events has had no part in the shaping or revision of ideas (this of course is diametrically opposed to the thinking of the new art history and also Tate's new ideas regarding the thematic hang). In this way, display captions might be invested with a timeless quality, which has the effect of distancing them from the context of their own production.

Claims about the quality of cultural forms, their greatness, universality or timelessness were not to be taken at face value, but to be analysed to show how they are bound up with demands for social entitlement by those who prize them.

(Bennett, 2009, p. 10)

If, however, it were possible to read written texts '*in the same fashion as the ... visual text in question*' (Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 67), it might be more likely that written text would be understood as a contingent, discursive intervention rather than a definitive statement. With reference to the written word, Stanley Fish remarks:

sentences emerge only in situations, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible.

(Fish, 1980, pp. 307-308)

The point Fish makes is a simple one: that words and sentences in different locations, at different times will have different meaning. Of relevance here is the description used in Tate's guide of 1990 which refers to 'the interrelationship of British and Foreign art' (1990 Tate Plan). It is highly unlikely that the word 'foreign' would ever be used in this context in a modern gallery; instead Tate's message is now quite different:

While it has traditionally focused on art from Western Europe and North America, Tate seeks to represent international modern and contemporary art from a global perspective and has recently expanded its holdings of work from Latin America, South-East Asia and Eastern Europe.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/about.htm>.)

Comparing the different tone and vocabulary used in the quote above with the 1990 text shows a clear change of emphasis. Tate is engaged on an expansion of its collection so that it may now be seen 'to represent international and contemporary art from a global perspective', which is quite different from the earlier description of 'the interrelationship of British and Foreign art'. Words used in the more recent text position Tate, within a global perspective, whereas the earlier quote implies that 'foreign' art is being assimilated into the existing collection. This fundamental change of attitude is reflected as much in the choice of words and emphasis of meaning as it is on the shift of acquisition policy.

3.1.8 Archiving Tate

I have already made reference to the disappearance of Tate's green files. The range of information, which had been collected and amassed in those green files, was a mixture of catalogue information, detailed technical analysis, letters, handwritten personal comments and photographs. It has since been replaced with an on-line digital version. In the paper Hal Foster delivered at the Tate Association of Art Historians conference in 2007, he spoke about the archival impulse. In this paper, Foster spoke about *archival art*, but similar observations might have been made about archival information that *relates* to art. He warned against the idea that 'the ideal medium of archival art is the mega-archive of the Internet ... [whereas] the

actual means applied to those 'relational' ends are far more tactile and face to face than any web interface (Foster, 2004, pp. 4-5). The information contained in Tate's green files was 'tactile' history, conversations, and face-to-face interactions. As such any web-based alternative can only ever be, in my view, an edited, sanitised, homogenised version of history.

3.1.9 How visitors use text

Gail Lord's visitor survey showed that some visitors found text helpful, enabling and accessible, while others, (and this finding was similar to that of Hein), expressed their irritation, at the way in which they felt 'locked into a literary explanation' (Hein, 1998, p. 152). Some visitors were strongly of the opinion that 'people are not looking for words, they're looking for pictures' (Lord, 1993, p. 19) and one or two even went as far as saying that, they found themselves reading the wall text, even [when] they didn't really want to.

labels were generously sprinkled around...a visitor could read those parts of the label copy that directed his attention to important differences between the works without reading the attribution (**if he could keep his eyes from straying**)...

(Council on Museums and Education in the Visual, Newsom and Silver, 1978, p. 87)

My own informal research into how visitors use text reveals four main types of behaviour: some look just at the painting, or just at the text: some, first, the text and then the painting, others looked first at the painting and then the text, but the most commonly observed pattern of behaviour was, 'visitors ... mov[ing] back and forth between text reading and viewing the picture' (Lord survey p.22), appearing to treat the, 'paintings from which the context ha[s] been derived ... as confirmation of the truth of the analysis' (Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 72). In these instances it might be said that visitors are using the display label as a checking device, a confirmation of the accuracy of the relationship of the interpretative words positioned alongside the image.

3.1.10 The meaning of paintings

I suppose it is not surprising that after so many years of working in museums of art I am often called upon to accompany friends and relatives. I always take up the invitation because looking at paintings has always interested me. Sometimes we stand together and my friends will question me. They want to know, not just whether I like it or not, but is it 'good' and always, crucially, what does it 'mean'. What is meaning in relation to a painting? Keith Moxley in the *journal of visual culture* comments:

In a rush to make sense of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, our tendency in the past was to ignore and forget 'presence' in favour of 'meaning'. Interpretations were hurled at objects in order to tame them, to bring them under control by endowing them with meanings they did not necessarily possess.

(Moxley, 2008)

Moxley's point that interpretations are hurled at objects in order to tame them, and bring them under control and that the meaning provided is *new* meaning that they (the paintings) *did not necessarily possess* is crucial for this thesis. Meaning, in the sense, in which Moxley uses the term, might then take priority over presence. In other words meaning will be prioritised. Gumbrecht on the other hand believes in the possibility that 'meaning effects and presence effects' can exist 'in simultaneity'. Furthermore he suggests that:

Within this specific constellation, meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and the—unbracketed—physical presence of things (of a text, of a voice, of a canvas with colors, of a play performed by a team) will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension.

(Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 108)

Gumbrecht is clear that this state of simultaneity is not one of 'complementarity' but rather a state of 'tension/oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects [which might subsequently] endow the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest'. However there is also ambivalence in his theory: he expresses his 'fear that effects of meaning [at least an overdose of

them] might diminish [his] moments of presence but then says, that 'he knows at the same time that presence could never become perfect if meaning was excluded' (Gumbrecht, 2004, pp. 136-137).

In their attempt to provide institutional meaning, museums and galleries of art appear to be actively engaged in actively avoiding *instability and unrest*. Furthermore, the opposing views that Gumbrecht and Moxley express might be seen as a reflection of the discussion around interpretation and meaning in art museums. If Moxley is correct and the type of meaning museums provide is 'meaning that they [the paintings] *did not necessarily possess*', then text based interpretation may take the form of a panacea for the *deep craving and profound desire* that both curators and visitors have to control and tame art objects and diminish the effects of instability. If, on the other hand, museums reflect Gumbrecht's notion of meaning and presence existing in tension and oscillation, then interpretation might stimulate and energise the dynamic quality of a museum visit.

How important is meaning?

can we really assume that the reading of texts is reading exclusively concentrated on meaning? Do we not sing these texts? Should the process in which a poem speaks only be carried by a meaning intention? Is there not, at the same time, a truth that lies in its performance?

(Gadamer quoted in Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 64)

Although Gadamer is referring here to poetry and moving the discussion into the area of dialogical interpretation, a comparison with the relationship of text and paintings might be useful. Gadamer questions whether text should be read with the *exclusive* aim of extracting meaning, suggesting instead that it might be possible for 'truth' to be found in the speaking and performance (of a poem) rather than its 'meaning'. This is a dilemma which museums of art regularly face in regard to interpretative text. Should a visitor's pleasure of a painting be 'mediated' through meaning or is it possible for pleasure to be located in a non-meaning, non-literal experience, found in the colour, form and composition of an image.

In the Tate conference, Preziosi appeared sceptical of the possibility that an artwork might communicate something of itself directly to the viewer. He challenged the idea that:

if you stare long enough and hard enough and in the right frame of mind, the staged confrontation will generate understanding or deep appreciation of what has been wrought by the object's maker, author, and by extension the maker's mentality or skill?

(Tate conference)

Museums and galleries are in a difficult position: if the text they provide is a structured analysis of the formal elements of a work of art, the colour, composition and form of a painting, they may alienate those for whom 'feeling' is of fundamental importance. If however they choose to believe in an interpretation of art informed by, 'Kant's understanding of disinterestedness as requiring no concern for the real existence of the thing ... only a pleasure arising from the object's universally apprehended form' (Holly and Moxey, 2002, p. 109), they may be criticised for taking an elitist approach. Meaning, it seems will always occupy a central role in interpretation as it 'presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers ... [and] seeks to resolve that discrepancy' (Sontag, 1967, p. 6). Furthermore, if Preziosi is right in suggesting that

an artwork [would] be mute or illegible without a certain kind of staging ... is an artwork ever not framed, whether materially or virtually? Does it not swim or sit or hang suspended in an ocean of verbiage which may at times be palpably embodied in a visible gloss of words on a wall or pedestal or in your ear?

(Tate conference)

3.1.11 Interpreters as newsreaders

Your idea of art has changed along the way, but it is not the meaning or explanation of this change that you pass along. You are in the debt of interpretation.

(Duve, 1996, p. 69)

I want to continue for a moment to think about painting as a formalist structure, a composition of lines, shape, colour and form and ask how it is possible that this structure, this material expression of form has the capacity to create meaning. Hirsch considers the relationship of meaning to interpretation from a literary perspective:

I am not now nor have I ever been a proponent of a “moment of interpretation before intention is present”... phonemes and graphemes “become signifiers only when they acquire meanings, and when they lose their meanings they stop being signifiers”.

(Hirsch quoted in Mitchell, 1985, p. 49)

Hirsch suggests that the *phonemes* and *graphemes* of writing ‘become signifiers only when they acquire meaning’. A comparison might be made with the visual arts: that the marks, colours and forms of a painting, ‘become signifiers only when they acquire meaning’. How this meaning is then communicated in the museum setting, whether through the words of the museum curator, or as the ‘presence and nature’ of the physical properties of the artwork is the critical point. If intention, in the form of interpretation, is acknowledged to be important by those, ‘who share interpretative strategies ... for constituting their [artistic] properties and assigning their [artistic] intentions’ (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 119), which, in the museum setting would be the curators, then intention becomes a form of imparted knowledge. However, in the act of communicating *this* meaning it inevitably becomes *new* meaning, new information, new knowledge, written and designed to communicate and be accessible for the general reader/visitor. In this sense, the curator becomes, in the terminology used by Meyer Abrams, the newsreader:

Each “Newsreader” ... play[s] a double game ... “introducing his own interpretive strategy when reading someone else’s text, but tacitly relying on communal norms when undertaking to communicate the methods and results of his interpretations to his own readers”.

(Abrams in Fish, 1980, p. 303)

Using a similar analogy, it might be said that the curator, educator or interpreter is also playing a double game. They are newsreaders: they ‘read’ the visual text, (the painting), invariably with reference to other texts which may be written or visual and

then communicate a commentary, *their* commentary back to the visitor, in what they assume to be a form of language which is easily accessible, easily understood. They too are involved in, 'a double operation of advance and containment ... [in an act which] liberates with one hand [and] legislates with the other' (Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 66).

3.1.12 Who owns meaning?

If curators use interpretation to communicate the *meaning* of art works in a manner similar to that of a newsreader communicating news, are curators also 'the *owners* of meaning': the primary communicators of the *what about, in relation to the what?* 'We are made to understand that the historian-critic of today is one who with patience, fine cunning, and a certain behind-the-scenes modesty will restore the original substance of "what Vincent saw"' (Preziosi, 1989, p. 22).

Standing in front of a painting in an art museum surrounded by a group of students or visitors, and in response to my question, 'who is the best person to tell us what this painting means or what it is trying to communicate', the answer I am most often given is *the artist*. For most museum visitors, the only true source of *meaning* is that which the artist intended.

Although, there are surprisingly few issues about painting upon which artists and art historians agree, challenging the notion that it is only possible to understand a painting through the intentions of an artist is one of those rare areas of agreement.

Michael Baxandall says:

I am not aligned or equipped to offer anything useful on the matter of whether it is necessary to appeal to an author's historical intention in interpreting a picture. The arguments for doing so – that it is necessary if there is to be any determinate meaning in a work, that the relation between intention and actual accomplishment is necessary to evaluation ... are often attractive.

(Baxandall, 1985, p. 41)

Furthermore Nicos Hadjinicolaou warns that:

The error lies in thinking that an understanding of the individual's motivation for producing a painting is the same as an understanding of the painting.
(Hadjinicolaou and Asmal, 1978, p. 21)

Notwithstanding these comments, Wilson reports that 41 per cent of visitors expressed a desire to have, 'biographical details of the artist with a note of his intentions in the creation of his work' (Wilson, 1987, appendix C). For many visitors knowing what the artist intended, allows them to judge whether she or he has been successful, in achieving his or her aim: 'knowing when a picture was painted helped [me] understand the artists' motives' (taken from informal discussion with gallery visitors in September 2009).

Not only is this an assumption which is denied credence by many art historians (Baxandall, Hadjinicolaou) it is also at odds with the way in which many artists speak about their own work. As Picasso said, 'A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand ... it changes as one's thoughts change', (Picasso quoted in Harrison and Wood, 2003, p. 508). Many visitors, however, continue to believe that *only* the artist can decide upon the meaning of a work. As there are very few instances when the artist actually writes the wall text or caption to accompany his or her work (artist Richard Wentworth is an exception here), the responsibility to communicate the artists' meaning and intention, (if indeed such meaning is recoverable), is given to the curator or interpreter; it is the curator who is expected to re-cover the original intention and provide a level of additional explanation that the painting itself is (apparently) unable to provide. If this is the case, then institutional text might be celebrated for its post-modern character; providing an eclectic, fluid, intervention which, 'effaces the boundary between art and everyday life' (Tate on-line glossary). Furthermore, curatorial interpretation might be seen as challenging traditional beliefs in meta-narrative, and notions of artistic genius and unique creativity.

Just as Panofsky (1904-1990) and Bourdieu argued against a privileged account of art history, so modern interpretative texts might be said to provide a democratic form of interpretation. In *Gothic Architecture and Scholastic Thought* (1957), Panofsky argues that the style and patterns of gothic architecture did not come from *the original mind* of the artist, as some form of translation of the artistic muse but as the direct result of the socio-historical conditions of the time. For him (and this would have resounded strongly with Bourdieu) it was not even a question of current style, fashion or zeitgeist but a direct homology between the structural patterning inherent in the scholastic system of the day and the ways in which these were reproduced. The main point here is that art did not depend on the individual characteristics or disposition of the artist but arose out of structural meaning rooted in a particular time and place, 'works of art (and their interpreters) simply...belong to traditions' (Panofsky and Lavin, 1995, p. 11).

In a very different time, at a very different moment, when, 'identity has become a prism through which other topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted, grasped and examined' (Bauman, 2001, p. 140), the art museum finds itself once again, in a conflicted position, needing to provide interpretation and meaning while also acknowledging the danger and difficulty of 'trapping' the shifting nature of that meaning: needing to

distinguish [itself] from other historical, scientific, and religious institutions in contemporary society by foregrounding and making potentially available knowledge of their own artifice; the artistry of their fabrications.

(Tate conference)

The artist as celebrity has gained new status but so too has the curator (possibly now the über-curator) and meaning and intention may end up being owned by both and defended by neither.

3.1.13 The art museum

The meaning afforded to any work of art (in Tate, in London, in 2011 or at any time during the research period) is rooted, not in *one* seamless history but in a myriad of

histories, of the museum itself, of its directors and curators, of the history of art, of the history of politics, of war and conflict and of education and institutional power. 'Things 'in themselves' rarely, if ever, have one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning ... what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them ... *give[s] them a meaning'* (Hall, 1997, p. 3).

Preziosi spoke at length about the artifice and 'fabricatedness' of the art museum in the Tate conference, about staging and showing, about transparency, about power and authority and the duty art museums have to make their artifice available and transparent to their audiences (Tate conference, appendix B). He suggested that a clear distinction should be made between encountering and interpreting: referring to the former as an interpretative activity and the latter as a consequence of time, place and circumstance. Griselda Pollock also spoke about time, place and circumstance and with reference to Jean-François Lyotard, she suggested that:

A distinction should be made between the time it takes a painter to paint the picture (the time of production), the time required to look at and understand the work (the time of consumption), the time to which the work refers (a moment, a scene, a situation, a sequence of events: the time of the diegetic referent, of the story told by the picture), the time it takes to reach the viewer once it has been created (the time of circulation) and finally, perhaps the time the painting is. This principle, childish as its ambitions may be, should allow us to isolate different "sites of time."

(Tate conference)

In the summary at the end of this chapter I focus specifically on the space of production and the disparity between this and the space of consumption and I would suggest there are direct parallels to be drawn between the space of, and time of production.

Whereas Preziosi put emphasis on the fact that art was not an alternative reality alongside what was *really* real, but a possible new reality, a challenge to representation, a device capable of making the familiar—unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar—familiar, he also expressed his belief that museums of art should be civic

as well as civil, social spaces: that they should be places that encourage dialogue, critique and change.

The policies, aims and objectives of the museum, its voice, its methods of communication, decisions about audience and above all interpretative and educational guidelines remain, it might be argued, as closely linked to Victorian social policy (Cole, Toynbee, Arnold) as they are to twenty first century culture which claims to display less rigid class boundaries, vastly expanded culturally diverse populations, newly defined borders and new methods of observing.

It may, at one time, have seemed obvious that the museum, as provider, would take responsibility for the relationship of word to image, the relationship between writer and reader and between the written and the spoken word: that the museum would accept the role it plays in bestowing upon the visual text:

the status of a given, or a series of givens, [that] once the text is placed within its orbit, the text's vagaries and waywardness can be brought to an end, by replacing these features with the context's univocality and rectitude.

(Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 66)

But in so doing, text-based interpretation may also become *another* form of history/context/meaning, communicated in its own voice, *another* different voice which belongs to neither viewer nor work (or artist) and 'understood [only] in its own terms' (Hymes, 2003, p. 240). As Preziosi commented:

However discursive its aims, however diverse its meaning and however eclectic its approach, the art museum will always be content on one side and the framing and staging of content, on the other ... any form of critical interjection will be impossible, because that interjection will automatically become, or morph into the museum's content. As such, staging and framing content, may become so closely related as to seem at times virtually invisible, *like the tain of a mirror*, 'which is effaced by attending to the mirror's image or apparent content'.

(Tate Conference)

I want to go back for a moment and clarify my position on voice. I am not suggesting that *only* the artists' voice has supreme authority. Any such assumption would suggest implicit belief in a:

classic art history [which] based its account of meaning on what was then, in the period when art history emerged as a modern discipline in the early part of the century, the leading model of communication – *expression*: by means of certain signs a speaker (or artist) conveyed his or her thoughts to a listener (or viewer). It was the task of the art historian to retrieve that original intention, standing behind the work; an intention which, at the moment of its expression, would have had clear outline and form.

(Bal, 2001, pp. 2-3)

The character, the voice, the positioning of text alongside a painting invests it with importance and authority, it becomes far more than just *another* idea: it is decisive, definitive and conclusive: *this text* is located at the end of the line.

In its function as container of valued objects, the art museum constructs its own truths, establishes its own values and makes its own judgments (Belting, 2003b; Bennett, 1995; Duncan, 1995; O'Doherty, 1999). It does this in every aspect of its organisation: its acquisitions, chosen methods of display and overall character, 'The art museum has become a theatre ... a stage set ... a market place ... a cathedral' (Searing, 2002, p. 124). It is also a space, which struggles with its identity in relation to value and use.

Since entering that complex realm known as 'public space', British art museums have tended to be associated with the problematic relationship between value and use. In addition to their status as places of aesthetic refuge, conservation and contemplation, they have been identified as environments where specific practices are measured: the display of social behaviour, the rituals of leisure and the performance of the visit are important components in the history of the visibility of these cultural institutions in part as managerial systems and sites of social assembly.

(Trodd in Pointon, 1994, p. 17)

Tate has its own specific mode of representation, discernable in its exhibition and display policy, its educational and interpretative strategy, as well as embedded within its own history and collective memory. However, the people working in

museums are only a tiny connection in a long chain of subject, 'for any museum with a past ... the agent is both historically double and "monumental", serving collective memory' (Bal, 2001, p. 120).

Our perception of a work of art is not something that is fixed. It depends as much, if not more, on the period in which the work is being viewed and on our expectations of it as it does on the period in which it was created.

(Laneyrie-Dagen, 2004, p. pxii)

The game of interpretation needs both a work and an interpreter, or museum curator, who, it might be said, 'claims a right equal to the work itself' (Belting, 2003a, p. 148). And there are other rules to this game of interpretation, and other players, some arguably, wishing to create a situation in which 'the students stand to be transformed from ignorance and insensitivity into art lovers: the blank pages onto which museum education writes its script (Pollock and Zemans, 2007, p. 11).

The question of who owns interpretation is still being decided, and there are many interested parties: as Clifford Geertz observes, 'the woods are full of eager interpreters' (Geertz, 1983, p. 21). If, as Belting suggests, 'A given work requires to be understood, and its viewer wants to understand it' (Belting, 2003a, p. 148) then it might be fair to conclude that the visitor becomes a willing and active participant in the game of provider/ consumer. The visitor is keen to understand the works on display, and keen to read the accompany text: as such, the viewer might be seen to play an active role in perpetuating the dominance of institutional meaning but it might also be the case that:

it is the destiny of artworks to be interpreted: that it is quite possible that many work-products carry subjective traces of their creators, but the specificity of works of art is that their materiality cannot be detached from ideas, perceptions, emotions, consciousness cultural meanings, etc, and that being interpreted and reinterpreted is their cultural destiny ... From time to time the artist's gaze is suddenly split and we find ourselves in the position of observer-interpreter.

(Bracha Lichtenger Essinger quoted by Griselda Pollock, Tate conference)

3.1.14 Galleries without interpretative text

If text is so potentially problematic, why not abandon it altogether and revert to the kind of displays that were prevalent in the mid twentieth century? It might be interesting to imagine for a moment, a situation in which all forms of interpretation were absent, even though this kind of situation is unlikely to occur, given that the acquisition of an art work is itself an interpretative act — denoting importance, value, significance, so too is the decision to display it, where and how it is displayed, alongside which other works etc.:

Communication within a museum potentially encompasses all of an institution's practices which make meaning - from the pragmatic effect of whether or not there is an admission charge (which makes meaning about what the institution is, and who may enter it), to the overall aesthetic impact of the building. To the organisational layout of the galleries, to the written texts pasted on walls.

(Ravelli, 2006, p. 1)

Notwithstanding the unlikely possibility of entering an 'interpretation-free' zone, former Tate curator Helen Charman and freelance lecturer Michaela Ross, imagine how it might feel:

philosopher Alasdair Macintyre tackles the problem of a world without interpretation, the experience of which could only be recounted through literal sensory description: this is what I see; this is what I feel, touch, taste; this is what I hear. A world in which the stars would be but many small light patches against a dark surface. If all our experience were to be characterised exclusively as sensory data... then we would be confronted by a world, which is a world of textures, shapes, smells, sensations, sounds and nothing more.

(Charman and Ross, 2004)

After considering Macintyre's position, Charman and Ross conclude that, perceiving the world in this way (with no interpretation) would, 'invite[s] no questions and give[s] no grounds for furnishing any answers (Ibid)'. However there is another way of looking at this: one might also argue that resisting the intervention of interpretation (and here I mean specifically written interpretation, not conversation or discussion), looking at paintings *without* context and explanation might be more likely to actually *invite* questions, etc.

My own experience has shown me that visitors looking at works without the help of institutional text have an abundance of questions and suggestions about works they see presented and are generally excited rather than daunted by the task of 'working things out for themselves'.

Once "reception" goes beyond being a discourse based on other prior discourses and ventures out into domains where there are only viewing practices without accompanying discourse, a sudden vista appears which is that of night.

(Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 76)

Personally I am much persuaded by this evocation of a form of reception *beyond discourse*, indeed, my understanding of that *which is night*, is positive and liberating. However, I can also see that looking at art in the manner Bryson describes as, 'entering into the night', might not always be seen as a welcome prospect. (The filmed interviews of chapter five consider this prospect). There are people, for whom engaging with art works, *cold*, without institutional information, is uncomfortable and unnerving. One of the comments made by those interviewed by Gail Lord illustrates this: 'but suppose there's nothing. You just come into a room of paintings and you're completely ignorant ... you look at them and you might like them visually, but then you're stuck' (Lord, 1993, p. II 20). It should be noted, however, that another participant in the same visitor survey expressed similar feelings of loss and confusion *having read the text*: 'if I came into the Gallery because it was a wet day and I read that, I'd think, Oh God, this is way beyond me' (Lord, 1993, p. II 14).

I have attempted to illustrate how difficult it has been to find a theory that is dedicated to interpretation in the art museum, a theory that will both 'clarify its aims' (Mitchell, 1985) and 'succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in domains other than those to which they ostensibly belong' (Culler quoted in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 13). I will now attempt to examine the role of politics in the interpretation debate.

3.1.15 The politics of interpretation

Tom Mitchell asked a group of literary critics and historians to interrogate similar issues in relation to literary studies. It was his book, *Against Theory: literary studies and the new pragmatism* (Mitchell 1985), that prompted me to question why no such theory is available for museum interpretation and why references to meaning, intention, interpretation, authorship, truth and signification are not included in museum guideline documents or museum studies programmes. Mitchell suggests that one way of approaching the problem would be to look at the close link between interpretation and politics and taking Carl von Clausewitz's, *Reflections On War* as a key text, that the word *interpretation* is substituted for the word *war*. The original quote is as follows:

It is, of course, well known that the only source of war is politics – the intercourse of government and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own.

We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase “with the addition of other means” because we also want to make it clear that war in itself does not entirely suspend political intercourse or change it into something different...Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed may be its own, but not its logic.

(Mitchell, 1983, p. Introduction)

In Mitchell's version:

It is, of course, well known that the only source of interpretation is politics – the intercourse of government and peoples: but it is apt to be assumed that interpretation suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own.

We maintain, on the contrary, that interpretation is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase “with the addition of other means” because we also want to make it clear that interpretation in itself does not entirely suspend political intercourse or change it into something different ... Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is interpretation not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed may be its own, but not its logic.

It is the first part of the phrase, 'but it is apt to be assumed that interpretation suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own', that I suggest, might have relevance when applied to museum interpretation. I wonder whether museum interpretation is indeed, 'ruled by no law but its own', whether museum interpretation invents its own structures, that museums of art, 'work without precise guidelines which means that they can do virtually what they please without being accused of making a mistake' (Hadjinicolaou and Asmal, 1978).

Von Clausewitz goes on to say that he is using the word, *politics* to mean *the intercourse of government and peoples* and here, I think it would be fair to say that museum interpretation *is* highly structured. As Hadjinicolaou points out, 'it is ... necessary to pay close attention to one concept, ideology, which is of vital importance for the discipline of art history' (Hadjinicolaou and Asmal, 1978, p. 9). Mitchell develops his argument by suggesting that criticism and interpretation (the arts of explanation and understanding) have a, 'deep and complex relation with politics, the structures of power and social value that organise human life' (Mitchell, 1983, p. Introduction).

There are many government publications that explore the deep and complex relation the arts have with structures of power and social values: *The Learning Power of Museums*, May 2000; *Valuing Museums* NMDC, 2004; Anderson 1997, *A Common Wealth; museums and learning in the United Kingdom, a report to the Department of Heritage*, 1997; *Efficiency and Effectiveness of Government-sponsored Museums and Galleries*, 1999. If such a relationship is understood to be symbiotic, if interpretation *is* political, if its 'grammar' is *an autonomous art or science*, an act of political manoeuvring; if interpretation is the logic that governs assessment, and mobilizes interpretative tactics, then is it also possible for those involved in its production and dissemination to position themselves outside of their own social and political encasement? In this scenario, surely interpretation would simply become yet another, albeit *different*, expression of political dominance.

In some ways, understanding interpretation as a political act, would justify the position I have taken in chapter two, that it is possible to understand its growth, development and expansion as symptomatic of changes and events which occurred in the fields of education, politics and culture. Every one of these 'triggers' might then be seen, in Mitchell's terms, as 'a continuation of political intercourse, maintaining a form of political status quo in which, interpretation in itself does not entirely suspend political intercourse or change it into something different' (Mitchell, 1983, p. 1).

Visitors might not, however, feel comfortable with the idea that their museum visit simply reinforces the society's dominant ideology or that the art displayed is being used by the museum to represent its own political expression of the world, 'the origin and reception of works is ... made more comprehensible by reference to social divisions and their economic bases' (Wolff, 1981, p. 29). Even those museum professionals, who are keen to characterise their practice as transparent, may not readily accept that: 'all intellectual and/or cultural work occurs somewhere, at some time, on some very precisely mapped-out, and permissible terrain, which is ultimately contained, if not actually regulated by the State' (Said quoted in Mitchell, 1983, p. 46).

So, far from suspending political intercourse, museum interpretation might simply reflect another form, *its own* form, of political intercourse. Indeed, as Griselda Pollock asks, 'can there be an ethical politics of the museum as a public forum in the endlessly shifting conditions of liquid modernity?' (Pollock and Zemans, 2007, p. 3). Pollock raises the issue of finding an ethical politics for museums in the endlessly shifting conditions of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). A similar question might be asked of interpretation, can there be an ethical politics of interpretation, as it exists in a public forum, affected by the endlessly shifting conditions of the modern world?

During my time at Tate there were examples of exhibitions that attempted to undermine or overthrow a dominant discourse. One notable example was *Visualising Masculinities* in 1992-3. This was an exhibition that took the view that masculinity 'is a historical construct changing from period to period, and as a category is neither 'natural' nor culturally innocent' (Taylor, 2004). However the works displayed in that exhibition, while apparently acting as examples of, 'a crisis of faith in the conventional premises of masculinity across a wide historical period'^{xxiii} were mostly works drawn from Tate's collection, and might, therefore, be seen as reinforcing an institutional discourse.

Summary for Chapter three: part one

By way of a summary for part one of chapter three, I want to revisit some of the more critical issues involved in the writing and reading of interpretation in the art museum, listing those I see as particularly problematic.

The first relates to universality and asks whether museum text represents a particular notion of universality. As display captions and wall texts frequently remain on gallery walls for ten years or more, any information that is communicated might be perceived as timeless, unchanging, and unaffected by external historical developments.

The second relates to theory and asks whether museum text, like any other literary theory, would benefit from a structure around which it could base itself and against which it could be evaluated. As Terry Eagleton says (of literature), 'without some kind of theory, however unreflected and implicit, we would not know what a "literary work" was in the first place, or how we were to read it' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 13). There are conflicting ideas about theory: one view is that the absence of a theory for the writing of museum interpretation should be urgently addressed; that text of such importance, written using standard guidelines must be revised. Another might warn against the introduction of any kind of dedicated theory, believing that this might restrict rather than liberate this strand of museum practice.

My third worry is that institutional text is too closely linked to institutional aims and objectives. Museum text communicates a set of powerful serious messages, which are arguably as political as they are ideological and artistic. These messages are communicated via a series of codes: codes of artistic practice, codes of behaviour and codes of value. Hodge and Kress (1988) use the example of the sequence of red, amber and green in traffic lights to highlight the danger of assuming that codes should, in any circumstances, be considered universal or that it is safe to ignore the fact that most of the messages contained within the codes are based on power:

traffic signals transmit an ideological message as well as particular instructions. They present a version of society, an image of impersonal rationality operating impartially on behalf of all. This ideological meaning is not a gratuitous addition but part of its effectivity, since it is faith in this benign impartiality, ...that conditions motorists to abide by their message almost unthinking. The basic constituents of this as of every other such social message system concern two dimensions: power and solidarity.

(Hodge and Kress, 1988, p. 39)

Unlike, traffic lights, which are connected to the legal system of the state and enforced by its officers, museum text has no legal requirement. However museums have made ethical agreements and are bound by funding requirements to make their collections accessible and accountable. In this sense, text may be understood as giving a green light to all visitors, in a way not dissimilar to Hodge and Kress suggesting that traffic lights operate impartially on behalf of us all. The museum text has many functions but the first is to reinforce the museum's message of value and context, which underpins its ideology. The rationale of its collection is rarely questioned: it is assumed to have value as well as structure and rationality.

Although, of course, there is no requirement for any visitor to read the accompanying text, its close proximity to the artwork and the authority with which it 'speaks' might mean that this text becomes a, 'product of collective experience which far transcends it [the capacity to perceive meaning in pictures]. It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, is possible' (Geertz, 1983, p. 109).

Finally and most importantly I want to refer to the very different roles adopted by written text based interpretation and that of spoken dialogue in the art museum, 'In as much as texts are, among other things, instances of written language, no interpretation theory is possible that does not come to grips with the problem of writing' (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 25). Terry Eagleton refers to the language of text as, 'language made strange' (Eagleton, 1983). It goes without saying that written language is different from the language of painting but it is also very different from the language of speech. Conversation is an act of exchange, of identification of meaning and personality, a spoken discourse, addressed to a second person (or persons), 'someone who is determined in advance by the dialogical situation, a joint act in which speaker and discourse overlap' (Ricoeur and Valdes, 1991, p. 6). And although, *my experience cannot directly become your experience*, in other words an experience by one person cannot be transferred, *as 'such and such' an experience*, to someone else: 'what is communicated in the speech act is not the experience of the speaker as experienced but its meaning. The lived experience remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public through discourse' (Ricoeur and Valdes, 1991, p. 6).

In the course of writing this thesis, and in conversation with colleagues, museum visitors and friends, I am often challenged with the question 'so, how do you feel about conversation, talks and discussion in the museum? I have always felt that two people in dialogue or a group discussion, in fact almost any form of conversation is productive and inspiring and this is a view that visitors also express, 'I prefer to visit the museum with a guide who explains and helps ordinary mortals understand the obscure points' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

Although technology appears to be leading the way in museums of art, some galleries are adopting an approach similar to that of the newly opened Turner Contemporary, who promote their own, 'friendly team of Navigators ... to help you get more out of the gallery and the exhibition ... *Led by your questions*, they will spark discussion as they take you on a personal tour'. Towner's Gallery Assistants are 'positioned in each space to enhance your visit. Our front of house staff have a

wealth of knowledge and experience, and love to talk – so ask a question and make their day!’ (Selwood 2011)

I worry that, although the kind of institutional text presented to the museum visitor often has ‘an author’, it is ‘the material marks [that] convey the message’ (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 26) and these material marks are ‘unlocked, decoded, then handed on to anyone ... interested’ (Mitchell, 1983, p. 11). In such a way, it might be said that institutional texts, ‘are indifferent to their addressees. Wandering here and there they are heedless of whom they reach’ (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 25-39). They have no way of knowing whether anyone is reading or listening, they ask for no response, there is no specific person to whom they speak, they, ‘detach meaning from the event’ (Ibid.) and change the experience of looking from present to past tense, introducing another layer of meaning, another layer of intentionality, that of the text’s author:

The author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.
(Ricoeur and Valdes, 1991, p. 28)

If museum interpretation is based on a notion of universality, of univocality, of one person’s ability to write clearly and accessibly words which are not simply *the same as* the visual text, the painting, but additional to, then text has a difficult (maybe impossible) task. Working within set guidelines and institutional objectives interpretation must communicate with different audiences, different cultures and different intellectual capabilities, interpretation must convey plurality of meaning, plurality of interpretation and multiple meaning. Ultimately, interpretation must fuse past and present. As Bennett put it at the Tate conference:

the historical challenge facing art galleries now if they are to engage with, rather than be islands in the midst of, their culturally diverse hinterlands is not to opt for some singular ‘parti pris’ between these contending positions but to work a way through and between them.

Tate conference

In response to the dilemma described by Bennett as 'fusing past and present', Tate has produced a range of interpretative materials suitable for culturally and educationally diverse audiences. The following section is focused on these new developments.

New interpretative materials at Tate

There have been enormous advances in the range of interpretative materials on offer at Tate:

At Tate, we are building digital into our thinking on all levels. Through forums, blogs, social networking, films, mobile technology and other platforms, people can look at art, hear artists talking about their work, and take part in discussions and share their own thoughts. And with so many platforms available there are now many different, and sometimes unlikely, contexts to come across art. This has given us the opportunity to introduce people to art they might not otherwise come across, and bring communities of like-minded visitors together to connect in ways that aren't always possible in the gallery.

(Serota, 2011)

Undoubtedly, the most wide-ranging 'new' medium for distributing information, education and inviting audience participation is online and digital communication.

Tate makes links to facebook, twitter and Youtube on their web site. They also provide hand held devices, 'a system of gallery interpretation which connects handheld computers to a wireless network and provides multimedia information, communication and access to database-stored texts', touch screen labels, labels which ask questions or include mistakes, and multimedia and highlight tours of the collection. Gillian Wilson, curator of interpretation at Tate Modern begins her 2010 paper on multimedia programmes at Tate with reference to the book *Me++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City* (Mitchell, 2003)

(<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/wilson/wilson.html#ixzz1dsQzrQlg>.)

This book, Wilson explains, is focused on, 'how reliant we have become on networks and, increasingly, on mobile, wireless access to these systems of information and support. Through connection to global phone systems or the Internet, our traditional ways of communication have expanded to allow easy coverage across the world':

I am inseparable from my ever-expanding, ever-changing networks ... Not only are these networks essential for my survival they also constitute and structure my channels of perception and agency - my means of knowing and acting on the world. They continuously and inescapably mediate my entire social, economic, and cultural existence. And they are as crucial to cognition as my neurons. (Mitchell 2003)

I find it strange that this quote was included in a paper celebrating new ways of helping visitors look at paintings. Taking Mitchell's line it would seem almost impossible to experience paintings in any way other than one based on networks and technology. However, Wilson makes clear that Tate has:

moved some way towards defining pedagogies or methodologies which inform these learning resources ... and game strategies that work to help families engage more closely with art on display: card games or matching games which families can borrow to use when they visit the gallery; a system of gallery interpretation which connects handheld computers to a wireless network and provides multimedia information, communication and access to database-stored texts.

She stresses that it is the aim of all Tate interpretation to:

work to help families engage more closely with art on display ... Many of our visitors take part in low-tech, object-based gallery activities which are used to add to people's learning experience as they make their way around the space, the key always being to make sure that visitors' attention is focused on the artwork rather than solely on the game they are playing ... We know that people enjoy such means of interpretation'.

(<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/wilson/wilson.html#ixzz1dsQzrQlg>)

Research undertaken by Lord and Morris Hargreaves McIntyre and more recent studies all conclude that most visitors like interpretation and it is clearly one of Tate's aims to ensure that visitors' attention is focused on the artwork rather than the game (or audio, or multimedia tour). However, research that is able to 'test' how effective any kind of interpretation has been 'in bringing the visitor back to the work' has yet to emerge. One notable exception is Tate's 'Write your own label':

Would you like to see your ideas about art on the walls of Tate Britain? We're asking visitors to write about any work of art on display at Tate Britain which especially interests them. We'd particularly like to hear from visitors who have a special interest in the subject matter of some of Tate's paintings. Are you interested in music, fashion, botany, theology or engineering? Have you visited, or do you live near, a place shown in one of the landscapes? Have you experienced an event shown in one of the paintings?

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/writeyourown/>

This initiative appears to give visitors freedom and control and confidence to express their own opinion. It also encourages the viewer to look closely at the work. It should also be noted however, that Tate maintains full authority and editorial control, a position which has prompted Andrew Dewdney to remark, 'Tate's legitimate editorial act of excision can be considered as a familiar occlusion of the agency of the knowledge of reception'

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/tate-encounters/edition-6/papers.shtm>.

We reserve the right to edit comments for clarity and style ... [and] reserve all rights to reuse comments in any medium or format ... [and] at its sole discretion, to choose to include or not include such submission for any such use.

<http://213.121.208.204/britain/writeyourown/form.jsp?acno=T00696>

As well as educational aims and objectives, it is important to remember that the introduction of hand held devices, multimedia tours, audio guides and other digital aids has brought financial gain. As Sara Selwood says:

Complementary information isn't just being used as a marketing or educational tool. It's increasingly recognised as a commodity in its own right. In these straightened times, it constitutes another income stream. Over and above the usual types of pay-for information (such as audio guides and catalogues), galleries are exploiting a range of other knowledge-based services ... private, guided tours costing from £5.00 to £1,000.

(Selwood, 2011)

Further stressing this point, Elena Lagoudi and Charlotte Sexton from the National Gallery based a large part of their paper, *How Can New Technology Help Engage Audiences with an Old Master Collection* speaking about the business model of

projects [that] represent a natural evolution, building on past experiences of developing a broad range of audio guide and multimedia tours and podcasts. Since 2005 we have been developing an audio brand and an integrated, innovative and sustainable business strategy. This strategy's strengths are based on good asset management, multi-purposing content, using resources in a strategic way so that we avoid waste, and self-sustainability of the service.

<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2010/papers/lagoudi/lagoudi.html>

Written text in museums and galleries of art is written so that it is accessible for everyone. However it might still be missing one crucial element, the individual, the speaker, the body, and it is to issues of the sensual body, the essential self and the seeing I, to which I turn in part two.

Chapter three: part two: without text

We learn to see a thing by learning to describe it; this is the normal process of perception, which can only be seen as complete when we have interpreted the incoming sensory information either by a known configuration or rule, or by some new configuration which we can try to learn as a new rule.

(Williams, 1961, p. 39)

Until now the thesis has concentrated on written text in the art museum, specifically Tate. I have contextualised its history, examined the institutional aims and objectives that govern it, introduced a political dimension and questioned the desirability of a theory for museum text. Part two of this chapter moves away from the relationship of institutional words to image and focuses instead on the relationship between the image, the painting, and the viewer. Here I explore the manner in which paintings are encountered, remembered, described and felt: how words are used, not in a textual way but as an expression of an individual self in a particular space, images that are felt and words that are spoken.

I begin with a description of a film made to explore memory, images stored in the mind's eye and gesture and I suggest that using specific Merleau-Ponty texts might generate a new way of understanding what the films reveal. I also describe a second film which examines how reading text may impact on the way in which visitors describe paintings and finally how each of the films and the theoretical texts have relevance for the practice of writing interpretation in the art museum.

The filmed interviews

3.2.1 Why a film and why interviews?

My interest in the research topic was born out of many years working in museum education and my observation that visitors were showing increasing reliance on written text in the galleries. I thought that text, although in many ways extremely helpful, was possibly neglecting or unable to address some of the important qualities that make a painting ... a painting. Asking visitors to describe a painting^{xxiv} they

remembered, away from the galleries and away from text, might, I conjectured, show that people use different semiotic modes when they remember and describe an image, to those they use in the synchronised act of reading and looking at art in the galleries. Furthermore, that these different modes of activity may be closer to the way a painting is made. I knew of course that language would be involved, words to describe objects, form and content but I was keen to see whether there would be an increased level of physicality, embodiment and space in their descriptions.

Having made the film, it then seemed necessary to make a second film which showed how visitors describe a painting having read the provided text and possibly a third and a fourth, in the galleries, outside of the galleries etc. This, I think would have taken me off track. I am not proposing that the film is scientific or evidence based, and making any number of other films would never have given it this status (I discuss the scientific nature of the film later in this section). Although I do make some reference to a second film, it is the first film, which is important.

The film is a series of interviews with Tate visitors, colleagues and friends conducted away from the galleries, away from paintings and away from text. Those I interviewed were asked to 'see' a remembered image in their minds eye and then describe it back to me. This involved ethical as well as artistic decisions. For example I needed to obtain verbal agreement from those taking part that they were happy for me to use the film for research purposes.

There were also considerations regarding the 'look', of the completed film, the character of each clip, the integrity of the editing process and the story it might tell. The look of a film, like the look of a painting has particular significance for the thesis and I have been surprised and pleased that the film has almost by accident, been described as compelling, 'in its own right'. The film then, has a dual function: as a narrative, a record of the way in which visitors, friends and colleagues describe a painting they remember but also as a visual journey, an exploration of voice, movement and gesture.

3.2.2 The interview question, location, equipment and approach

Deciding on an appropriately worded question for my interviews proved more difficult than I had anticipated. I used the following:

Can you describe to me a painting you have looked at in Tate or another you remember well, if you prefer? I don't need to know anything art historical about it. I don't need the artist's name or date or any other information but simply for you to describe to me how the painting looked.

The use of the word *simply* was a mistake: asking, *how the painting looked*, was clearly not a simple request. On a number of occasions, interviewees reacted with confusion and misunderstanding, asking what I meant by the phrase. This forced me to modify the question and ask them to describe what was *in* the painting. It has been suggested to me that in modifying the original phrase, I was leading my interviewees to a pre-decided conclusion. This was certainly not my intention. I was simply trying to put them at their ease. In retrospect, however, I think both formulations were problematic. Asking how *a painting looked* assumed that this inanimate object, this thing, the painting, had the ability to look or to function *on its own*, to communicate itself.

The question also appeared to leave the action (of looking) and its relationship to the noun (the painting) unresolved. Was the painting being looked at, the subject of the viewer's gaze, or was *it* doing the looking as well as projecting itself to be looked at, what Elkins describes as, 'objects trying to catch my eye ... their gleams and glints ... the hooks that snare me' (Elkins, 1996, p. 20). Asking what was *in* the painting was equally problematic, understood by some to indicate that it was essentially what was '*there*', i.e. the narrative or content that interested me, as opposed to how the image appeared. In response to the question interviewees *thought* I was asking, I was occasionally given the names of objects, or a list of people or points of interest in the landscape. These items were recounted to me in a type of identification process, a naming of parts, rather than an attempt to recreate or evoke the *look* of the thing. However, I was particularly keen to understand whether when visitors engage with space (i.e. what is *not* there as well as what *is*), their eyes, 'roam where they will' (Elkins, 1996, p. 11), moving backwards and forwards across the painting

very much as a painter approaches the act of painting, 'The viewer in Menzel's work ... is repeatedly invited to perform feats of imaginative projection not unlike those that gave rise to the paintings in the first place' (Fried and Menzel, 2002, p. 13).

Asking interviewees to describe to me a painting they remembered was essentially asking them to communicate *a memory* of an experience of looking (I imagine that time is the significant factor here, for surely even the most direct experience of looking becomes memory as it is translated into words?). According to Martin Jay, Bergson believed that 'memory consists both of images available to voluntary recall by the intellect and corporeally inscribed habits "which accumulate within the body"'. Whereas the former are like pictures in the mind, the latter are actions that are repeated without any intervening images' (Jay, 1993, p. 193). I think the distinction Bergson makes here, between images and actions, is critical, and will be referred to later in this chapter as I describe the way in which interviewees used a combination of remembered images, words and actions when they described a painting: whether for example a visitor's memory of looking at a painting can be exclusively categorised as the second of Bergson's definitions, i.e. *an image available to voluntary recall by the intellect* or whether recalling an image of a painting is closer to his description of *corporeally inscribed habits which accumulate within the body*, is something to which I will refer, throughout.

Most of the interviews I conducted took place in the entrance/exit foyer at Tate Britain on the same day towards the end of the afternoon. Although in many ways, the foyer was an ideal space as it allowed me to approach visitors who had completed their visit, there were still problems. Many interviewees were dressed in outdoor garments: hats, coats umbrellas etc, impairing their freedom to use gesture. To account for these difficulties, I allowed time for those I interviewed to de-robe before the interview began, in the hope that their ability to move and gesture would not be radically affected. The alternative to positioning myself in the foyer would have been to conduct the interviews in a designated space, with a desk etc. This, I felt, would have imposed a formality and unwanted structure on the interviews and

overall, I felt the informal option was preferable. I took the decision not to use conventional filming equipment, cameras, sound etc. I was keen not to intimidate those I asked to take part. Instead, I used the Apple imovie programme on my laptop, which was much easier to manage, less obtrusive and left me free to engage with my interviewees in an informal manner.

Having positioned myself in the foyer, I approached anyone who looked as if they might have time to stop, as well as one or two Tate staff who passed by. Later in the day I interviewed other colleagues in the education offices and two additional interviews took place at home. Although I may be criticised for including colleagues and friends, I defend my choice by suggesting that describing a painting is difficult for anyone, whatever their experience or education and it was certainly the case that colleagues and friends, even those who had spent many years looking at paintings, expressed similar levels of anxiety when asked to remember one specific work. In some respects, I feel therefore that the responses of museum professionals and those familiar with art and art history are particularly interesting. In all, I conducted thirty-eight interviews.

I thought carefully about how to make my initial approach. I decided to make my Tate staff pass clearly identifiable. This I hoped would give people confidence in my position. However I also wanted to assure them that my research into how people remember and then describe paintings, was a personal interest, rather than an institutional project and so I prefaced the interview question with a sentence or two introducing myself, explaining that I had worked for many years in Tate and was now undertaking my own research, looking at the manner in which people remember and describe paintings. Still, I found that approaching people *cold* and asking them to describe (which involved remembering) a painting, made them very anxious. I had anticipated this reaction. Interestingly in the interviews I conducted with Tate colleagues and friends I observed just as much, if not more, anxiety. The reactions of all participants, visitors, colleagues and friends, indicated that they viewed the exercise as some sort of test which all were keen to 'pass'. Furthermore it seemed

that their desire to excel and meet their own, and the researchers expectations with a 'successful' response was critical, not only because they wanted to 'do well' but also (and I make reference to the work of Ellen J Esrock here) because cultural pursuits, museum visiting and an appreciation of art appeared to be important for them.

In studying readers' careful descriptions of their imagery, one might learn not only about the readers' own, personal constructions of themselves but also about how their belief systems are fuelled by cultural ideologies of gender, class, and race.

(Esrock, 1994, p. 13)

3.2.3 Pattern of behaviour and first reactions

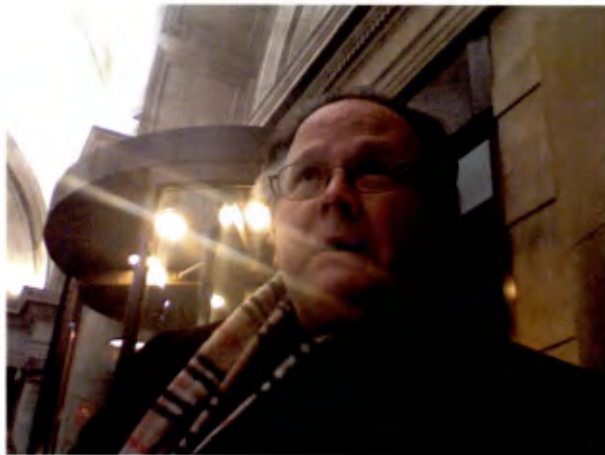
After hearing the question, *can you describe to me how the painting looked*; there was an uncomfortable moment, as interviewees appeared to search (frantically in some cases) for an image 'in their minds eye ^{xxv}'. Some then asked, 'what do you mean, how the painting **looked**?' (In one isolated case, there was a particularly unexpected response to my question, when the interviewee gave me a totally literal description of how the painting looked, i.e. its shape, its size, in which gallery it was hanging and alongside which other paintings). After I had clarified the question, many of them closed their eyes, looked up, left, right (mainly right) or down, but almost always, away from the interviewer.



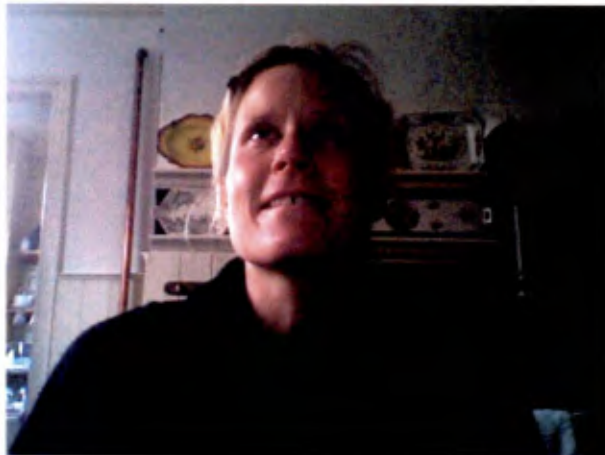
Michelle Shields: interview conducted in researchers home. Copyright Sylvia Lahav.



Rebecca Sinker: interview conducted in Tate Britain offices. Copyright Sylvia Lahav



Tate visitor: Interview conducted in Tate Britain foyer. Copyright Sylvia Lahav



Helen Baggett: interview conducted researchers home. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

Then, having 'located' a painting, there was visible relief, even delight before they gave their description.



Rebecca Sinker: interview conducted in Tate Britain offices. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

Sometimes their descriptions would take the form of an actual, almost literal list of *what was there in the painting*, (resembling an inventory). At other times they would describe a painting, as if they were actually *in it* or 'seeing it' in front of them.



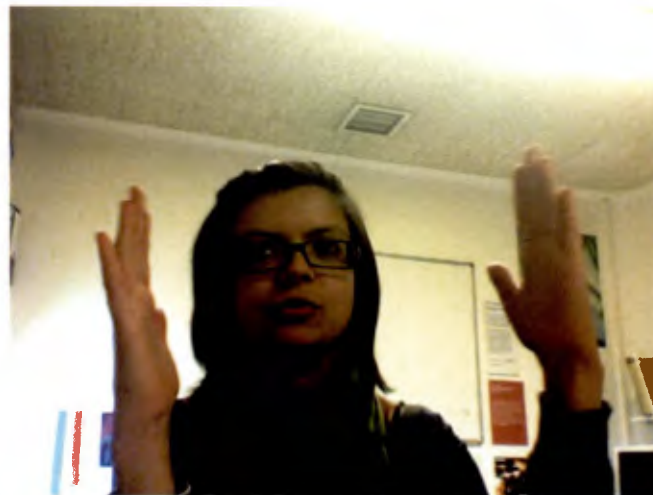
Tate visitor: Interview conducted in Tate Britain foyer. Copyright Sylvia Lahav



Helen Baggett: interview conducted researchers home. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

In some cases, they even began to physically construct a frame around their heads, as if they were building the image around them, recreating the image they saw in their minds eye, in *real* space.

Kirsty Beavan: interview conducted in Tate Britain offices. Copyright Sylvia Lahav





Michelle Shields as before. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

A great deal of attention was given to the position of objects, to the movement within the painting and the pictorial depth of the scene. These references were most often made with the help of hand and body gesture. The image below illustrates this perfectly. In this clip the young woman looks up to her right and as she remembers the image, she has particular recall of the swirling movement of the water in Turner's painting of a shipwreck.



Rebecca Sinker as before. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

She describes the Turner painting as follows:

It's an enormous swirl of black and grey paint, there is the shape of a ship in the middle although it is quite indistinct, you know it's a ship but it's not painted in any great detail. There is a huge amount of dynamic energy in the movement of the paint in these quite muted monochrome colours although obviously there is colour in it as well, yellow, blue and green probably but certainly it is mostly black and white, particularly dark black and it represents a storm and a shipwreck but the main thing about it is the dynamic sweep of the movement within the painting so you get that real feeling of maelstrom and chaos and the lack of control within the elements of nature.

Rebecca Sinker

As well as using hand and body gesture, some interviewees adopted a pose, expression or character of one of the people, an object or even an animal that they remembered seeing in the painting. It was as if they were, 'read[ing] their own image into ... [the] phenomena', (Fried and Menzel, 2002, p. 36). For example, the first interviewee noticeably drops her voice to reflect her sadness when she 'looked at' the painting:

When I looked really close the paint was really thick in parts and you could see where the paint brush and also ... that was in the centre and then it dispersed and it was less paint so it was very three dimensional. It was a portrait ... closely cropped around the head. And he was looking down and this section was all thick paint ... it was quite a stunning painting but also quite a sadness about it. I think there was no gaze because he was looking down and it upset me.

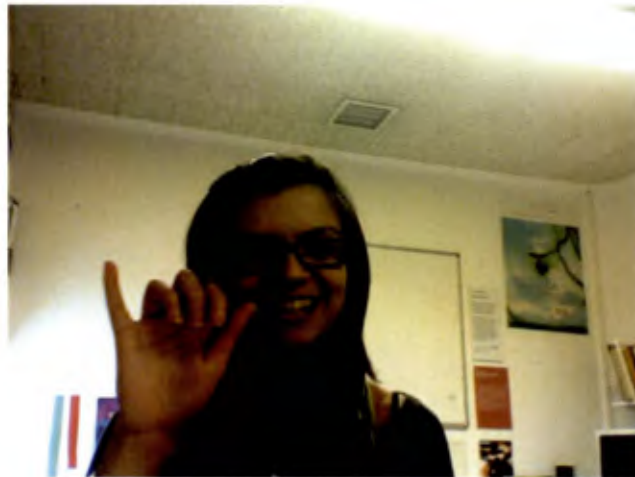
Michelle Shields

Another, while describing Mark Gertler's, *Merry-Go-Round*, (Gertler, 1916), mimics the way the people seem to be screaming as they go round and round:

There are people sitting, all of them, but they are like tailors dummies or something ... they are going round ... they're screaming and there's a man and a woman and ... her mouth is very memorable ... a big round open mouth.

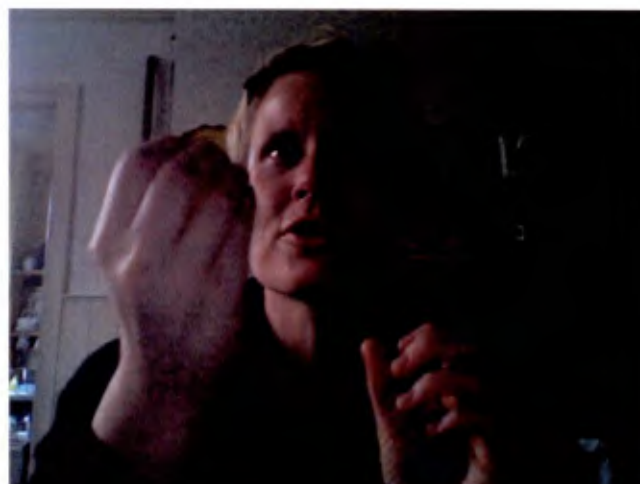
Kirsty Beavan

As she remembers the look of the horses' mouths, 'the horses are white but they have got a blue tinge and they have got really sharp teeth, their teeth stick out', she bares her teeth.



Kirsty Beaven: interview conducted in Tate Offices. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

On a number of occasions, interviewees appeared to be physically measuring the thickness and appearance of the paint as they 'saw it' in front of them.





Helen Baggett and Michelle Shields as before

It seemed that as they described 'their' painting, interviewees were 'acting out', or making reference to a range of senses, not just sight but also touch, feel and taste. The interviewee below is saying, 'uhmm, yumee' to describe the look/taste of the paint on the canvas:

I was asking what they thought it was and two different groups on the same day; two little children said rainbow rain. It is called Azalea's Garden. It is rectangles; lots of bright colours painted on in dashes and you can see where layers have overlapped colours on top of other ones so you can imagine it being done. A limited palette but really bright, splattered on. Yes, yummy.



Jocelyn Clark: interview conducted in Tate Offices. Copyright Sylvia Lahav

3.2.4 Is the film scientific and can it be described as an experiment?

The principles and empirical processes of discovery and demonstration considered characteristic of or necessary for scientific investigation, generally involving the observation of phenomena, the formulation of a hypothesis concerning the phenomena, experimentation to demonstrate the truth or falseness of the hypothesis, and a conclusion that validates or modifies the hypothesis.

<http://www.experiment-resources.com/definition-of-the-scientific-method.html>

Although the filmed interviews might be categorised as scientific data, it is unlikely that my analysis of them would be acceptable using the above definition: there are far too many 'unknowns'. They might be described as a record of 'the observation of phenomena', and based on 'the formulation of a hypothesis concerning the phenomena'. It is, however, unlikely that the data collected could be described as 'experimentation to demonstrate the truth or falseness of the hypothesis' or that precise conclusions could be reached. It would certainly be possible to repeat certain aspects of the interviews, the location for example, and the interview question, however, much of what followed had an element of change: all of the interviews (except two which took place in my own home), were conducted in Tate Britain, although not in exactly the same part of the institution; all of the interviews took place on the same day, but at different times of the day; all interviewees were asked the same question, although for some an additional phrase was added; there was no set time allotted for each interview, although they were generally no longer than two minutes; all interviews were filmed, although subsequent editing took place. Taking the constants as well as the variables into account, and using Hindess' definition that, 'scientific knowledge is thought to be valid only if its production conforms to the prescribed procedures' (Hindess, 1977), the interviews cannot be called scientific.

Is the film an experiment? At first I *was* calling the film an experiment. However in view of its non-scientific nature and also the fact that, although I did make another shorter film where visitors were asked to describe a painting *having read text* I think

more rigid controls and other films would have been necessary. If the film is neither scientific nor experimental, how can it be described? I would suggest that the most accurate way to describe them would be to call them examples of lived experience: the films are illustrative examples of the way in which interviewees attempted to, 'constitute social reality through language gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign' (Butler, 1988).

3.2.5 Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology

During the interview process I was often drawn back to reading Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in particular his essay, *Eye and Mind* in *The Primacy of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort and Lingis, 1968, pp. 159-190). I want to consider how the responses of those I interviewed may be given a phenomenological interpretation and attempt to use Ponty's theory to test my own observations. I am aware that this, 'presuppose[s] a particular kind of relationship between philosophy and the sciences ... in which one is able to judge and to validate the claims to knowledge made or advanced by the other' (Hindess, 1977); nevertheless, I believe that links can be made. My work is focused on the museum visitor, Ponty's, on the artist. His specific interest in the act of painting and his insistence that the act of seeing is an act of corporeality (as well as opticality) make his work entirely relevant for this thesis. I want to use the filmed interviews as a way of addressing the seeing "I" as well as the seeing eye and exploring the manner in which a painting is experienced, remembered, described, communicated and encountered. Above all I hope to show that, 'physical forms possess a character only because we ourselves possess a body' (Wolfflin in Fried and Menzel, 2002, p. 35).

3.2.6 A phenomenological reading

Initially most interviewees closed their eyes, looked up or down but almost always away from the researcher, which might be interpreted as a phenomenological act. They appeared to be entering their own private space, an act that Ponty describes as individuals seeking a space of submersion and submission, a receptive contemplative private space, which allows the pleasure of complete abandonment:

As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against it* as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue, such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery. It thinks itself within me ... it begins to exist for itself.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 249)

It was particularly noticeable that as interviewees tried to create a distance, they closed their eyes to allow the space to be more private, more secluded. Having found a painting (in their mind's eye) many showed relief and pleasure, (both of these reactions were also evident when visitors were looking at paintings in the galleries). Many interviewees seemed to identify with the emotions or posture of people or animals from the painting, almost as if they were taking *segments derived from the body of another* (Merleau-Ponty and Edie, 1964, p. 168). In interview four, for example, the woman describes a painting with two lovers. As she becomes more comfortable with her description she smiles lovingly and inclines her head in the position of one of the lovers in the painting. Another interviewee, referring to a portrait of a man says, it was 'quite a stunning painting but there was also a sadness about it ... there was no gaze ... he was looking down', [at this point she also looks down and drops her voice to a whisper empathising with his sadness], 'it upset me'.

The portrait is not simply intended to evoke the person portrayed; that would be better achieved by a biography. Instead the portrait has to be a 'spectacle which is sufficient unto itself', something which cannot be appreciated without seeing it and which, in the seeing it, enables us to see the person portrayed in the painting.

(Merleau-Ponty and Davis, 2004, p. 29)

Examples of re-enacting, adopting the same manner, mood, or deportment of a seen person or object might be understood as an act of empathy. This is something Ponty refers to using Schilder's, *The Image and the Appearance of the Human Body*:

smoking a pipe before a mirror, I feel the sleek burning surface of the wood not only where my fingers are but also in the ghostlike fingers, those merely visible fingers inside the mirror. The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and ... my body's "invisibility" can invest the other bodies I see ... just as my substance passes into them; man is mirror for man.

(Schilder in Edie, 1964, p. 168)

This description of someone being able to invest *his* body with another body is something I noticed on a number of occasions. For example, with reference to Mark Gertler's 1916, *Merry-Go-Round* painting, one of the participants described the people on the merry-go-round, 'there are people sitting, all of them, but they are like tailors dummies or something'. As she remembers this, she sits very upright and adjusts her own posture. Then, when she refers to the mouths of the women: 'they're screaming and there's a man and a woman and ... her mouth is very memorable ... a big round open mouth'. She mimics an open mouth, and speaking of the horses' teeth, 'The horses which are white but they have got a blue tinge and they have got really sharp teeth, their teeth stick out', she bares her own teeth. The actions, feelings and experiences she has absorbed from the painting, become the actions, feelings and experiences she herself *feels*: 'instead of experience being theorized as the passive and partial reception of essences, it becomes the 'generation' of, or bringing into being of certain forms of appearance' (Cazeaux, 2005, p. 112).

There were also other examples of interviewees acting out physical movements. In the fifth interview after asking for confirmation as to how many boys are *in* the boat and how many *outside*, the interviewee begins to emulate the action of *hauling herself up* in a way similar to the actions of the boys. Also in interview six, describing a Turner painting, a participant says, 'it is the dynamic sweep of the movement within the painting so you get that real feeling of maelstrom and chaos and the lack of control within the elements of nature'. As she speaks these words, she herself looks out of control: swirling imaginary paint around in the air and creating her own scene of physical chaos.

It is the gestures she uses, and the way in which these gestures are expressed that appear to both engage her with, and bind her to, the image she has seen: 'I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous machine. My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it' (Merleau-Ponty and Edie, 1964, p. 162).

A number of interviewees created frames around their heads when speaking of the painting. They constructed the sides, top and bottom of the picture, and then appeared to enter the picture and describe it from within:

The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen ... there is a human body ... between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place – when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible...

(Merleau-Ponty and Edie, 1964, pp. 162-163)

And there were also instances where interviewees not only 'saw' their remembered painting, or heard it, but also actually seemed to taste it. For example, remembering Patrick Heron's, *Azaleas Garden*, the young woman physically 'showers' paint onto an imaginary canvas, and then describes the painting as if she were tasting it, licking her lips and whispering the word, 'yummy'.

I am aware that there are conflicting ideas regarding multiple sensory perception. Locke and Ponty for example display, 'two competing epistemologies' (Cazeaux, 2005, p. 111). Locke (1632-1704) argued for the importance of literal language and made clear his belief in the discrete and essentially separate nature of the senses. Ponty (1908-1961) on the other hand believed, 'that the senses are interrelated aspects of our bodily engagement with the world' (Cazeaux, 2005, p. 111). Almost three hundred years separates Locke and Ponty and it is not surprising that ideas about how we see things in the world would have changed in that time.

However Jonathan Crary maintains that the real change took place in the early nineteenth century, in particular in the 1820s and 1830s when 'a new kind of observer took shape in Europe radically different from the type of observer dominant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (Crary, 1990, p. 5).

At that time, according to Crary, 'the individual as observer became an object of investigation and ... the status of vision was transformed ... taken out of the

incorporeal relations of the camera obscura and relocated in the human body' (Crary, 1990, p. 16).

I found that many interviewees not only used a variety of different senses (sight, touch, taste), but were able to move from one sense to another (as interviewee seven does, from sight to touch to taste).

Furthermore that their ability to use all the senses seemed to neither corrupt nor dilute the original source (as Locke suggests it might) but appeared instead to enable them to experience new relationships and new experiences: allowing the see-er, like the painter, to encounter a painting with his or her entire body, 'my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world' ... because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself' (Edie, 1964, p. 163). In my own observations I found that interviewees used a mix of different senses, closer to the ideas of Ponty than of Locke.

We operate in and upon the world without making any explicitly conscious differentiation between ourselves as the subject of experience, and the world as the object of it ... our fundamental cognition ... is not purely 'mental' a wholly intellectual operation – it is rather a function of all our sensory, motor, and affective capabilities.

(Crowther, 1993, pp. 102-103)

3.2.7 Is it appropriate to use a phenomenological reading?

Despite their largely unscientific nature the films are, I would suggest, valuable as a visual record of how visitors remember and describe a painting they are 'seeing' in *their minds eye*. Furthermore the films also illustrate that this experience is closer to the kind of phenomenological encounter which Ponty suggests is corporeal, bodily, a lived-in rather than an optical, experience, 'there never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident' (Crary, 1990, p. 6). Interviewees in the first set of films used their bodies, gesture and acts of a mimetic kind when they remembered a painting: there was evidence that they were not only seeing the painting in front of them, but also performing acts *like it* and becoming *part of it*.

Ponty says that the world is all around us, not just in front of us, and any encounter a

viewer has with a painting is physical and personal, an encounter in which an individual will interact and become implicated. There were also many examples of interviewees appearing to actively engage in a 'drive to rediscover the world as apprehend[ed] in lived experience' (Merleau-Ponty and Davis, 2004, p. 52).

I feel, therefore that a phenomenological reading is entirely appropriate as a way of understanding the manner in which paintings are described and specifically for an encounter which takes place in an art museum, 'The museum is a stage for socialization; for playing out the similarities and differences between an I (or eye)' (Preziosi, 1998, p. 512).

3.2.8 The second film and general observations

The second film and set of interviews are coupled with some general observations about how visitors use the galleries. These interviews also took place in Tate Britain on two separate occasions, in 2009 and again in 2010. The venue was Room 20, a gallery with two entrance/ exits. I was interested to see how visitors negotiated the gallery: if they walked straight through, I did not attempt to approach them. If however they paused to look at one of the paintings I made contact with them. Otherwise, visitors were chosen on a random basis, but this time, I used a slightly different question, 'Can you describe to me a painting in this gallery. Take your time to look around and choose a painting that attracts you. Feel free to read any accompanying text. And now describe to me how the painting looked'.

Most people **did** read the accompanying text, sometimes quite openly but also (and this was very common) in an almost secret, rather guarded manner. Similar behaviour was also noted in the McManus research, 'visitors can be reading exhibit labels even when it looks as if they are not' (Paulette McManus 'Watch your Language People Do Read Labels', *Curator*, vol 32, no 3, 1989, pp 174-89).

The reactions I observed were very different from those when interviewees were remembering their painting. Those who chose to read the accompanying text, looked back and forth from text to painting, apparently seeking confirmation from the

accompanying text. On one occasion a woman even described a painting using an exact word from the wall text, describing a Patrick Heron painting as, 'its uncomplicated', and then repeating, 'yes its uncomplicated'. When I looked at the accompanying text panel, I realised that the word uncomplicated was used there too, 'Of his stripe paintings he wrote, "The reason why the stripes sufficed ... was precisely that they were so very **uncomplicated** as shapes'. In general terms this might not seem so unusual but in this case, I felt that the word was a particularly unusual one for her to use. Hein makes a similar observation:

Others have noted that although a majority of visitors appear to ignore labels as they walk through an exhibition, or do not pause long enough to "read" the text...some still capture the content of the interpretative materials.

(Hein, 1998, p. 140)

Although it may not be possible to draw any definitive conclusions, this does seem to indicate that visitors consider institutional authoritative interpretation the most reliable source of information, (particularly if they are presented as the artist's own words), something they can be confident in repeating as part of their own descriptions, reflective of the, 'museums certainties about its offerings and the way it presents them' (Council on Museums and Education in the Visual, Newsom and Silver, 1978, p. 81). Whether this is classified as a product of 'learning' or shaping opinion is debateable.

3.2.9 Visitor behaviour

As well as the observations I made while filming, there have been many occasions when I have observed the way in which people walk around the galleries. Many visitors find it extremely difficult to look at a painting face-to-face. Instead, they tend to position themselves at the side of a painting to look at it (the image on page 96 illustrates this point).

If the caption is placed on the left of the painting, they often stand between the caption and the image. If the caption is on the right, they often stand on the right.

This rather uncomfortable positioning of themselves somewhere between text and image might be understood as lack of confidence, a sense of unease, uncertainty or inability to commit fully (time, etc).

It might also have something to do with the positioning of the wall caption. This has been discussed in chapter two with regard to an experiment carried out in France in 2000 by researchers Sylvie Chokron and Maria De Agostini.

It would be interesting to see whether the positioning of text (left or right) has any affect on the way in which visitors physically approach a painting. I have yet to come across any research which focuses on the manner in which the brain 'scans a painting' and then scans 'a painting and a text' in sequence. The research below records that:

that people who read linear text comprehend more, remember more, and learn more than those who read text peppered with links. One group read it in a traditional linear-text format; they'd read a passage and click the word next to move ahead. A second group read a version in which they had to click on highlighted words in the text to move ahead. It took the hypertext readers longer to read the document, and they were seven times more likely to say they found it confusing.

(<http://www.wired.com/magazine/tag/brain/>)

This of course is a very different exercise: testing linear reading against reading interspersed with clicking on links. But there are interesting similarities, specifically the notion of breaking the flow of reading textually, with visual stimulus. When visitors were reading accompanying text they often used a backwards and forwards technique, looking at the painting, then the text, then sometimes back at the painting, or sometimes not. This is a pattern of behaviour that may indicate that they are matching word with image, looking at what the text *says* is there, with what they themselves *see in the painting*: in other words checking that what they see is what the text *tells them they are seeing*. It would also indicate that text provides context, meaning, intention (as I explored in chapter four) but also affirmation.

3.2.10 Afterthoughts regarding both films and questions of a phenomenological nature

Asking visitors to describe 'the look of a painting' proved problematic; primarily because of the language used but also the philosophical and linguistic concepts it raised. Attempting to clarify my original question, I resorted to asking visitors what was *there* in the painting, which often resulted in a list of objects identified, a naming exercise. This was in itself a valid response but I was also keen for them to communicate to me was the spectacle of the image, the look of objects and people but also the spaces between: in other words describe what *wasn't* there as well as what *was*. However, as so often happens in the process of research, the formulation of the question, proved revealing and highlighted what I have since begun to think of as an institutional pre-occupation with the 'there' rather than the 'not there': an emphasis on the dis-located object and tendency to prioritise the present rather than the absent:

In spite of the tendency for our verbal and visual languages to grant a higher priority to the concept of presence than to absence, those ideas and structures that seem to be absent are often strongly implied by the presence of opposing concept.

(Dunning, 1991, p. 184)

It was noticeable that those interviewed *away from text*, used methods of recall which were generally more physical, they showed signs of 'living within the painting', becoming and 'being' part of its fabric and materiality: most importantly expressing how one painting was special *for them*.

There are of course a number of ways to interpret this. Describing an image, away from it, may demand more physicality and more gesture. However this in itself makes the exercise worth doing. Perhaps I should have anticipated that it would be difficult to give a description of the look of a painting, rather than simply charting 'what was in it'. It might be said that galleries and museums encourage a situation where everything displayed is, 'destined for the incessant unveiling of meaning' (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort and Lingis, 1968, p. xviii).

Apart from the very significant perceptual difficulties, many of those interviewed were suspicious of a request, which (they perceived) was depriving them of verbal substitutes, the words necessary to 'pin the thing down'. They appeared uncomfortable about the idea that they might discard that visual pairing of 'object and label' and allow themselves to enter a zone of uncertainty, one in which they were expected to, 'to go[ing] out to, and meet[ing], in a bodily sense, the image as they remembered it, and immerse themselves in a *theory of vision as carnal and networked to the flesh of the world*' (Iverson, 2003, p.75). It is this inter-relationality of body, vision and object, which is in direct opposition both to Locke's notion of objective reality and Descartes subordination of body, (as the perceived flesh of the world), to mind, (as the abstracted locus of pure thought). Furthermore, it is this interaction of the senses, this fusion of sight and body that might precipitate a situation in which the viewer might be able to:

see that colors (each surrounded by an affective atmosphere which psychologists have been able to study and define) are themselves different modalities of our co-existence with the world ... spatial forms or distances are not so much relations between different points in objective space as they are relations between these points and a central perspective – our body...and to vary our grasp on the world, our horizontal and vertical anchorage in a place and in a here-and-now.

(Merleau-Ponty and Edie, 1964, p. 5)

Phenomenology makes clear that the world does not stand before us, through representation, rather, it is the concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible, 'breaking the "skin of things" to show how things become things, how the world becomes world' (Edie, 1964, p. 181).

3.2.11 A question of seeing: Descartes or Merleau-Ponty?

The museum is a space for showing things, objects, sculptures, paintings, etc. As well as simply offering what there is to be seen, it also provides interpretation in the form of written text. Although the text may be written in such a way that it is clear that it is *one person's* interpretation, the work of art is sometimes described as if it could only be 'physically seen' in *that way*.

In this final section I want to raise issues around the act of seeing and suggest that juxtaposing phenomenological ideas with an opposing philosophical account might help theorise and crystallise the dilemma facing many modern museums.

How do we see a painting?

The engagement we each have with a work of art is in one sense private; we see things according to our own vision and state of mind and mood, making our own sets of associations, and to a large extent our eyes do the interpreting.

(O'Toole, 1994, p. 4)

Similarly, for Ponty, looking at a painting is never, 'see[ing] it according to its exterior envelope', but always an embodied encounter, not simply one concerned with vision. A painting, 'speaks to our body and to the way we live', (Merleau-Ponty and Davis, 2004, p. 63). In this sense, one persons experience of a painting, can never be the same as another; for not only is it impossible to *feel as another feels* or *see as another sees* it is also impossible to see *what* another sees. According to Ponty, seeing will always be the:

Product of the way in which my senses approach the painting and allows it to be manifest to me . . . acknowledging the personal, that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and acts. So the intertwining of the body and the perceived world is not simply another way of being, but empirically a general setting through which I come to terms with the world.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.160-161)

Rene Descartes, however, believed in the possibility of an objective exterior world:

Despite the challenge of Bergson ... mainstream French philosophy remained in the thrall of neo-Kantian and positivist tendencies until well into the 1930s. In fact ... it had never been able to throw off many of the fundamental assumptions bequeathed to it by Cartesianism. Among the most stubbornly persistent was its spectatorial and intellectualist epistemology based on a subjective self reflecting on an objective world exterior to it.

(Jay, 1993, p. 263)

And it is precisely the 'spectatorial and intellectualist epistemology based on a subjective reading of an objective world (in this case a painting) 'bequeathed to it by Cartesianism', of which Ponty is highly critical. Challenging Descartes notion of seeing as, 'moving towards a point where thinking is canonically defined according to intellectual possession and evidence' (Descartes quoted in Edie, 1964, p. 171), Ponty insists that vision is not the, 'metamorphosis of things themselves into the sight of them' (Edie, 1964, p. 171).

Furthermore, unlike Descartes who believed that the see-er was engaged in an intellectual exercise, a spectator's experience of an 'objective world exterior to it', Ponty, perceived the act of seeing, as a physical act, one in which the see-er is 'immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible', (Edie, 1964, p. 162): the se-er is both seeing, and seen. Having vision and being visible is a physical act, 'immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the se-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world' (Edie, 1964, p. 162). These two positions, Cartesian and phenomenological, are fundamental to issues of seeing/thinking/being. They might also, I would suggest, become the foundation upon which a discussion around the effectiveness of *text as explanation* might be developed. Descartes, in his assertion that 'thinking is canonically defined according to intellectual possession and evidence', is presenting a type of scientific, evidence-based notion of seeing which suggests that our eyes seek out the 'truth' of what is there to be seen and engage in an act of visual interrogation informed by our intellect. Ponty challenges this. For him, it is impossible to imagine, 'an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or representation of the world, a world of immanence and ideality' (Edie, 1964, p. 162). Taking Ponty's position as one which considers the act of seeing, as reflective of a person's *being*, rather than an act of visual recall:

reaching beyond the "visual givens" opens upon a texture of Being, of which the discreet sensorial messages are only the punctuations of the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 166)

Then it is unlikely that any number of interpretative words will ever correlate with any one individual's experience of a painting. Not only that, but the positioning of text alongside an image might interrupt, even disrupt, the process of looking. If however we take a Cartesian view and believe that it is possible to see what *there is* to see (in a painting) then the explanatory, summarizing or interpretive role of accompanying text might become an enhancement to the visual experience. In most cases, however, as Gombrich observes, the act of seeing is a highly selective process:

we see a picture as representing one (or two) scenes, and because an infinity of scenes could be perceived, but only one is perceived, this means that we must consider the nature of the observer, who only responds to the picture in **that one** of many possible ways.

(Gombrich, Hochberg and Black, 1972, p. 50)

Furthermore, if the act of seeing is made possible only through a reawakening and form of re-identification of a previous feeling or experience, a personal 're-awakening of feeling', then disembodied, dislocated museum text becomes problematised:

The narrator is thus a component in a cinematic apparatus, an invisible or dimly perceivable source ... the image speaks to us and seems to narrate itself. This disembodied Voice ... in the art historical text ... is equivalent to the use of the third person in historical writing: a voice of authority and authorization.

(Preziosi, 1989, p. 61)

Do museums attempt to show the world "as it really is", do they take the view that it is their mission to 'impart truth, independently of the particular previous experiences, culture, and disposition of its visitors' (Hein, 1998, pp. 16-19)?

Or do they accept that what the viewer brings to the picture is as important as 'what is there?' do they take the position that 'the 'nature of the observer' is crucial to the seeing process. Furthermore, if the selection of what is seen, is a wholly individual act, 'of all the myriad visual details of any scene that you could record, you take only what is relevant to you at the time' (Voss, 1993, p. 23), then what role can institutional interpretation play?

Most visitors, 'extract a few details and rely on memory, or perhaps even ... imagination, for the rest':

Rather than logging every detail of the visual scene, we are actually highly selective about what we take in. Our impression of seeing everything is just that an impression. In fact we extract a few details and rely on memory, or perhaps even our imagination, for the rest. Others say that we see nothing at all, and our belief that we have only to open our eyes to take in the entire visible world is mistaken-an illusion.

(Lavin, 1993, p.271)

Taking a phenomenological reading and prioritising the "I" over the eye, might, I would suggest, require a radical shift in museum policy: a re-location of the site of the visual experience from the eye to the 'I' and greater emphasis and consideration would have to be placed on the individual visitor in a specific space: *presence* would, in this situation, become all-important:

the term space itself possesses rich semantic meanings. Eytmologically, the word does not just refer to physical extension and perspective. Space possesses the meaning of lapse or duration in time as well as distance; it carries the meaning of temporal and physical expanse as well as the time spent in an experience.

(Van Manen, 2002, p. 3)

As an alternative to a Cartesian notion of the separation of mind from body, discursive thought from sense experience, museums might offer their visitors an experience which is empirical, physical, corporeal, one which invites them to 'grasp external space through ... [their] bodily situation', which operates in an inhabited or haunted space rather than ... a disembodied thing, like any other thing in space. And in their return to ideas of 'presence', and physicality, museums might also acknowledge the importance of the relationship between the viewer and the painting and the physicality of the painter and the painting.

3.2.12 The museum space

Merleau-Ponty speaks at length about space. Space was also a concept I was interested to explore in the filmed interviews. Having outlined the process of filming

and interviewing I want now, by way of a summary, to think about the museum and space and suggest that there is a particular way in which the intervention, content and location of written text in the art museum renders the *presence* of space, *absent*.

More than almost any other social arena, the art museum is a place of space and spaces, tracing the space between the painter and the painting, challenging the space between the viewer and the painting, locating space in which the painting is located and creating both a pictorial and a contested space, described by Elkins as the 'border of the aesthetic' (Elkins, 2006, p. 3). Space is critical from the moment the painter begins to paint and this space is physical as well as a philosophical. It will influence the relationship between the painter and the canvas; it will affect the relationship that develops between painter and sitter and it will activate the dynamics of sitter and object.

Space is also critical for the museum visitor, who in taking the decision to stop and look at a particular work of art, will usually try to find the "perfect" viewing distance. This is not always easy: finding a suitable viewing distance may well be affected by any one of the following: comfort, eyesight, the intrusion of other people, lighting, reflection, cording and barriers. What occurs next is relatively under researched and little is known about the *order* in which visitors read accompanying text: whether they read this first and then use the painting as a visual aid, whether they employ a check-and-see action (discussed in chapter four) or whether the eyes take on a life of their own:

Roaming where they will and then tell[ing] us they have only been, where we have sent them. No matter how hard we look, we see very little of what we look at.

(Elkins, 1996, p.11)

Establishing the ideal relationship between the viewer and the viewed is, I would suggest, of critical importance. This is not exclusively an optical distance, but also a physical space that allows a corporeal interaction to take place. It is my contention that reading text together with looking at a painting for example, might problematise

the possibility of a corporeal interaction. For example, with its emphasis on taking objects out of their environment, and then naming them, text makes very little mention of the important spaces between, how elements of a picture are 'locked into' a complicated pictorial structure.

Text makes it more difficult to:

pay attention to nonsemiotic aspects of pictures, and harder still to separate meaning from apparent meaninglessness. In simplest terms, it is hard just to look; it is much easier to read, or to tell stories, than to stare at the peculiarities of a stubbornly silent and senselessly wordless object.

(Elkins, 1998, p. 267).

Space is also compromised in the location of a wall text or label. In most cases these take the form of small panels, which for aesthetic reasons are frequently the same colour as the walls on which they appear, and for similarly aesthetic reasons, use a small font. The words are presented, as they would be in a book and are on one plane. But positioning text next to a work, instead of in a separate area of the room, may encourage visitors to look at the artwork and the text in the same way as they read a book and look at the pictures. Viewed in this way, museum interpretation may be expected to provide a literary equivalent to a pictorial experience, as Greenberg says, 'to generate words and stay relevant' (Greenberg and Morgan, 2003, p. 158), to transform painterly ideas into literal explanations and encourage a sense of closure and finality through recognition, identification and possession:

As long as we can identify something through signification, we feel that we have caught the thing in its essence. But it has been shown by Derrida that signification is an endless chain. Just when we think that we have 'pinned down' the thing in question, we realise that what we have caught is simply another signifier.

(Grassom, 2005-06, p. 160)

However, as Ponty says, 'the visible and the philosophical explication of the visible are not side by side as two sets of signs, as a text and its version in another tongue' (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort and Lingis, 1968, p. 36). Raising the problematic role of 'equivalence' regarding text and image is not something I feel able to tackle here but

it is often taken for granted that interpretative text *can* do this. Furthermore, in its attempt to explain and expand upon the visual object, no room is left for confusion and questions without answers:

Here were the most marvellous objects – with endless wall labels. People were spending most of their time reading. It's a tragedy. They were having no emotional reaction to the objects ... I don't believe in wall labels. I believe in asking questions – and not always answering them.

(Council on Museums and Education in the Visual, Newsom and Silver, 1978, p. 112)

Allowing space for people to encounter a painting, to experience a painting and to make sense (or not) of a painting should be a museum imperative.

Looking at ... art is not an easy task, for art rarely reveals its secrets at first glance. While the experience of a work can be electrifying, we sometimes do not realize its impact until it has had time to filter through our imagination. It even happens that something which at first repelled or confused us emerges many years later as one of the most important artistic events of our lives. If we are going to get the most out of art, we will have to learn to look and think for ourselves ... in the end the confrontation of viewer and art remains as solitary an act as making it.

(Janson, Davies and Janson, 2007)

The intervention of text, however, presented alongside (i.e. in the same location) as the painting, makes the two experiences difficult to separate. This positioning makes it almost impossible for the 'original paintings ... [to remain] silent and still in a sense that information never is' (Berger, 1972, p. 31). Visitors who expressed their irritation at the intervention of text (Lord 1993) may feel that a painting should be granted the right to silence which allows, 'things themselves, from the depths of their silence ... to [have] expression' (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort and Lingis, 1968, p. 4).

3.2.13 The contested space: a space for the aesthetic

How could it happen that in thinking about art, in reading the art object, we missed what art does best? ... we missed that which defines art: the aesthetic – because art is not an object of knowledge ... art does something else ... art might be part of the world but at the same time it is apart from the world. And this apartness is what constitutes art's importance.

(O'Sullivan, 2001 volume 6 number 3, p. 25)

If interpretative texts have a single function, that of *adding flesh to the mere preservation of cultural objects*, they are utilitarian, social, political but not aesthetic, if one takes aesthetic to mean, 'the experiencing of a sensible object of any sort - natural or artifactual—when it is framed as *an irreducibly singular event*, disconnected from any determinate purpose, function or art-historical situation' (Elkins, 2006).

a work of art always **has** aesthetic significance (not to be confused with aesthetic value): whether or not it serves some practical purpose, and whether it is good or bad, it demands to be experienced aesthetically.

(Panofsky and Lavin, 1995, p. 29)

In the Tate conference both Bennett and Preziosi spoke about aesthetic significance and the usefulness of art. Bennett took as his route 'into the relations between interpretation, theory and the encounter', Rónán McDonald's position that it is precisely by being *useless* that art can be most *useful* to society: that it is necessary for the public sphere to rediscover the language of uselessness to be able to engage with this paradox.

McDonald's statement was made at the time of the 2008 McMaster's report which recommended that Arts Council England should shift the emphasis of its programmes away from socially worthy objectives (reaching minority ethnic groups, for example, or the 'socially excluded') and focus instead on artistic excellence; that there should be no requirement to translate programmes or services into definable social or political goals. Bennett explained that using this reference was not intended to illustrate his admiration for the report (quite the opposite), but to emphasise the 'general provenance of the opposition it evoked between the aesthetic on the one hand and the civic on the other'.

If museums and galleries offer no space, no risk, no possibility for confusion or curiosity, then the art that is displayed there, and the interpretation that accompanies it, will have a purpose, a *usefulness* and museum audiences will leave the museum space feeling that they have been helped to understand and have

access to all that is displayed there. If, however, art is displayed in a space which is clearer, less cluttered with explanation and interpretation (not to say empty) then visitors are more likely to experience a sense of confusion and curiosity which may in turn lead them to risk their own interpretations and allow their own imaginations to seek out their own individual 'truth'.

Summary for chapter three: part two

I have discussed at some length the question of whether the film I am presenting with this thesis might be considered scientific and concluded that it cannot. I have attempted instead to offer together with my observations of how visitors describe paintings away from text, a phenomenological reading based on the essay *Eye and Mind* by Merleau-Ponty. The films show that initially visitors find it difficult to recall a particular painting but that when they do begin to 'see it' in their minds eye, their descriptions are noticeably gestural even at times resulting in them actually 'feeling' themselves to be within the image. Although it would be difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from the filmed interviews, I would suggest that the manner in which visitors describe *a memory* of a painting is somehow more connected to their bodies and feelings of enactment than when they similarly describe a painting standing in the galleries, having read the accompanying text.

This chapter has been divided into two parts. Part one offered a detailed examination of the words used to describe paintings, how they are structured, how they function and what expectations visitors have from them; part two focused on the experience of looking, remembering and describing, sensation, the body, and the seeing 'eye'.

Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, "instinct", "temperament" ... and one face turned toward the object (the "fact" the place, the event). Or rather it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation'.

(Deleuze, 2005, pp. 34-35)

Chapter 4: Revisiting the research questions and concluding remarks.

In chapter one I described this thesis as a journey. The journey began with a broad contextualisation of the chosen time and place with background, context and history relating to the setting up of museums in the UK, the role of government and changes in educational policy. Having reached its 'destination', Tate Britain, I examined how a particular type of text, previously known as information or explanation, now called interpretation, has increased in amount and changed in nature. I looked at selected display captions to see how closely they adhered to Tate guidelines and I made a comparative analysis of an, 'interpretative' text with one that had previously been categorised as information. This comparative analysis showed that there were differences, particularly in the tone, language and level of 'factual' information used. As my research has progressed, I have sought the help of theoretical guidelines with which to examine museum interpretative text. I was hoping to find documents which were not simply about the number of words suitable for a display caption, the optimum number of ideas in each sentence, warnings against the use of technical terms etc.) but something closer to a kind of literary theory which would help position this form of text within a philosophy of interpretation. The desirability (or not) of finding such a dedicated theory for museum text is discussed chapter three.

As one of my main considerations has been to examine the effect of the positioning text alongside paintings, the manner in which visitors read text, and their memory and description of an artwork, the final part of the research has attempted to find out more about the visitor experience. To do this, I have used filmed interviews with visitors, colleagues and friends. In these interviews, I asked visitors to describe a painting they remembered well, initially, away from the gallery and away from any accompanying text. It was noticeable that in this situation, interviewees frequently used gesture and hand movement when they gave their descriptions as well as showing evidence of a form of identification with an activity, object or person they had remembered from the painting.

In contrast, when visitors were asked a similar question in the galleries, having just read the display caption, they frequently used words or phrases taken directly from the museum text and their descriptions were, by and large, more formal, less physical. In my final remarks, I use the data I have collected to draw conclusions about these differences.

Although the focus of the research has always been 'Tate interpretation', I have been mindful of the wider philosophical questions of what it means to interpret (anything) and what it means to translate from one medium to another and I acknowledge the complexity of the field of study, by referencing other texts and using different methodological approaches.

As I state in my introduction to the Tate conference, 'there [are] many issues at stake: the problem of translation from medium to word, from word to word, from language to language etc ... issues like these, which challenge the assumption that it is possible to translate visual imagery, (shape, form and colour and space), into words of information and explanation, are critically important for every institution that produces interpretation (Lahav 2011, appendix B)

There have been a number of recurring themes and questions: about access, authority and authorship, about the relationship between word and image, the importance of the body and a corporeal response to looking and the desirability of a theory to govern museum text. I want now, by way of a conclusion, to revisit some of the key issues that the research questions have addressed.

To what extent is it possible to link an increase in museum text, that is wall panels, display captions, room guides etc. to changes in government, cultural, social and educational policy and how closely are these changes reflected in institutional aims objectives?

I have given an account of the many changes in cultural and educational policy that I believe have been influential on an increase of text in museums of art and attempted

to show how these changes have impacted on the way in which museums communicate/educate/interpret for their audiences. I have explained that the policy of free entrance for museums carried with it certain conditions, in particular that participating institutions provide government with proof of their ability to attract, service and cater for visitors from a broad spectrum of class, education and cultural background. To do this, they needed to know who was, and who was not visiting, what visitors expected and what they needed from their museum experience. Above all, they needed to provide good intellectual as well as physical access. I have concluded that the provision of welcoming, accessible and 'differentially-authored' examples of text in the form of captions, wall panels, room guides etc., were chosen as the most effective way of providing both intellectual and social access.

I have made reference to the introduction of a new National Curriculum for art and design for children between the ages of 5 and 16, launched in 1988 under the Education Reform Act <http://www.education.gov.uk/>. This new curriculum placed more emphasis on individual study and critical analysis, expected students to experience 'different kinds of art ... and appreciate the visual and tactile qualities of materials and processes that can be manipulated and matched to ideas, purposes and audiences and used to represent ideas, beliefs and values' http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/uploads/Art%20and%20design%201999%20programme%20of%20study_tcm8-12052.pdf)

The new curriculum suggested that students should 'visit museums and galleries [in order that they might] engage confidently with art, craft and design in the contemporary world and from different times and cultures and become more confident to use a form of appropriate language to communicate their ideas, feelings and meanings'.

I have explained how national museums like Tate responded to these requirements by, in the first instance, providing better physical access to accommodate the subsequent increase in numbers of school children and students visiting, and then, in order to ensure greater intellectual access, by offering students a set of tools for looking at art and developing a 'visual language' with which to communicate their

ideas. Once again, I conclude that more text, in the form of captions, wall texts, teachers and student packs, exhibition and display guides were chosen as the most effective way of responding to the requirements of the new national curriculum.

The arrival of a new director at Tate coincided with new marketing strategies, a new branding exercise and increased levels of fundraising. It was largely during the research period that Tate became a key player in the commercial as well as the cultural world. In an attempt to address criticisms of being too 'London-centric', they expanded their reach and opened two 'out of London' sites: Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives. Tate visitor numbers show that marketing and branding have successfully connected Tate to a massively enlarged audience. In 1987 at the beginning of the research period Tate Britain had 1,725, 084 visitors. In 2007 at the end of the research period, Tate Britain had 1,533,000 visitors, Tate Modern 5,236,702, Tate Liverpool 694,228 and Tate St Ives 243,993. More than 45 million people have visited Tate Modern since it opened in May 2000.

[Serota's] empire and influence has mushroomed. Tate Modern [has] become a blueprint for ambitious gallery directors around the world (much-envied space, government and private cash and popularity).
<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/lifestyle/article-23827412-sir-nicholas-serota-is-the-tate-moderniser.do>

To what extent has the issue of access impacted on a rise of text in museums of art?

During the research period, 1987-2007 (and beyond) there has been a significant and growing emphasis on access and this has been reflected in all areas of museum policy. In the late 1990s, the secretary of state for culture media and sport, Chris Smith, made clear his views:

Access is a cornerstone of all this Government's cultural policies, including those for museums and galleries. We want to see access to our cultural treasures made available to the many, not just the few ... charging is not an issue which can be addressed in isolation. There are many other considerations which have to be taken into account in developing a comprehensive and successful access policy. There can be many other

barriers to access - for instance, inflexible opening hours, unimaginative presentation, and the sheer cost of travel for those who live at a distance from the great collections. And, whether we like it or not, priorities have to be judged in the light of the resources available.

<http://www.prnewswire.co.uk/cgi/news/release?id=41861>

Ensuring good access has meant that museums have had to understand the requirements of, and then prove their commitment to, accessibility for all. Physical access has been improved with many museums offering at least one entrance that is step free, toilets for disabled visitors and lifts that are not only strategically placed but also large enough to accommodate prams, pushchairs and wheelchairs. In addition, they have introduced a range of programmes for special audiences: touch tours for visually impaired visitors, signed talks for deaf people and sessions for those with mental health problems. There are activities for single mothers, teenagers, children in care, the elderly and community groups and almost all of the London museums have one or two late evening openings.

All of these activities have provided visitors with greater access. Visitors who may have previously felt excluded from visiting on physical grounds, are now catered for and those who felt excluded either socially or intellectually, are also better provided for with the production of more explanation, interpretation, information and communication: 'Tate's interpretation will reflect an awareness of the range of abilities and interests of its audiences, reinforcing Tate's commitment to access for all' (*Interpretation at Tate Modern*, appendix D).

To what extent has Tate's new display strategy, the thematic hang and a decision to move away from the traditional chronological arrangement resulted in the necessity of more text by way of explanation of these new ideas?

When Chris Smith referred to 'unimaginative presentation', he left the door wide open for museums to reconsider how they displayed, how they informed and how they communicated their collections and exhibitions. There have been many different ideas about the character and form of what an, 'imaginative presentation'

might look like. Introducing a thematic hang is just one of them. But organising a collection according to theme has also required additional explanation and this has largely been achieved with an increase in the production of all types of interpretative materials and introduced introductory panels, wall panels and room guides as well as changing the format, tone and language of display captions.

Interpretation is now seen as not only:

integral to the education programme, but also key to acquisition policy and practice, display styles and architecture of the museum. Interpretation and education is therefore seen not as a single discipline within the museum but as a collaborative part of a wider whole.

Interpretation at Tate Modern, appendix D

How have changes in the internal departmental structure at Tate impacted on the manner in which text is produced?

I have looked in some detail at museum interpretative text and posed questions about who is doing this writing, how it is valued, who owns and understands it. I have considered why the writing of museum text, traditionally performed by the curatorial team and considered a specialist, academic task is now undertaken by staff in the learning department and more commonly used as a way of providing visitors with a 'way in' to looking, a first step in the museum's strategy for providing a range of interpretative materials. I have traced the evolution of the name 'interpretation', and how this form of writing has moved from its original home in publishing, to the curatorial team before being absorbed into the department of education and learning^{xxvi} and now finally, the responsibility of a dedicated team.

Tate Modern has a Curator of Interpretation who is responsible for the interpretation of the gallery. The Interpretation Curator and their team both author, and/or edit all forms of interpretation, working with exhibitions and display curators and with individuals outside Tate.

Interpretation at Tate Modern, appendix D

I have examined Tate guidelines on comprehension and questioned why art museums continue to use readability tests as a way of evaluating how successful display captions and wall texts are in communicating the *essence* of a painting. As many of the guideline documents still used by Tate are at least fifteen years old (some much older, see appendix E) and many of the current display captions were written in 2004 or earlier, I make the suggestion that a dedicated theory might be developed which would help museums of art evaluate their written text using current research as well as referring to other literary sources and theories on interpretation.

Is it possible to characterise the type of expectations visitors have from text as those concerning context, meaning and artistic intention?

A number of museum research projects have looked into the range of opinions expressed by visitors regarding gallery interpretation (Lord, 1993; Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2007; Colette Dufresne-Tassé, 1994; Milekic, 2009, Hooper-Greenhill, 2001). The majority of these reports conclude that for most visitors the main qualities they look for in accompanying text are context, meaning and artistic intention. I was interested in these findings and keen to examine how they might be further interrogated using the work of Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal: texts that address issues of context and meaning in relation to literary theory. Bryson in particular raises the issue of the hierarchy of text and image, a conflict he describes as 'established in the guise of a separation ... an evident hierarchy, ... [with an] expectation that context will **control**...' (Bryson in Bal and Boer, 1994, p. 66).

With reference to the kind of hierarchy to which Bryson refers, I question whether museum interpretative text in the form of display captions and wall texts, has indeed begun to 'control' the image, resulting in the kind of situation that Preziosi describes as a 'mode of existence ... primarily ... of saying' (Preziosi, 1989, p. 83) ... than seeing. I also question the assumption that written text is always 'factual'. Visitors to the Rothko exhibition, for example, 'assumed wall texts and captions would all ... be factual' (Scott, 2008). I suggest that the kind of interpretation written by Tate

curators has a strong element of personal opinion and should therefore be 'read' as subjective opinion rather than objective analysis.

To what extent is it possible to link changes in the provision of interpretation in the art museum to politics?

In 'The Politics of Interpretation' (Mitchell, 1983), Tom Mitchell proposes the substitution of 'war' from Carl von Clausewitz, *Reflections On War*, with the word, 'interpretation', so that the phrase, 'it is, of course, well known that the only source of war is politics' becomes in Mitchell's version, 'it is, of course, well known that the only source of interpretation is politics', (Mitchell, 1983, p. Introduction).

Having looked at the manner in which cultural policy and the national curriculum have impacted on the production of interpretative materials in Tate and how changes in government and an increased emphasis on access has been so prevalent during the research period, I find myself in broad agreement with Mitchell.

Furthermore, with reference to Bourdieu, I have made the suggestion that text in the museum might be seen as a form of cultural capital: a commodity, one that is highly valued both by those who visit museums and those who write it. Many surveys have shown that some visitors are anxious at the prospect of less interpretative text.

Kathleen Soriano of the Royal Academy, for example has observed that 'the absence of labels can make audiences quite nervous' (Selwood, 2011). It might be said that in its role as the 'provider of accessible meaning', the museum maintains a position of power that may also be understood as political.

How do visitors describe paintings with and without text?

Using filmed interviews I have attempted to compare the way in which visitors describe paintings from memory *away* from accompanying text, with a situation in which they are invited to read the text provided before feeding back their description. Using descriptions from memory, most interviewees displayed a surprisingly similar pattern of behaviour: they looked away, apparently searching in their minds eye, before they began to physically and spatially build the image in front of them. I noted that visitors' descriptions without 'text', appeared to be

embellished with hand gesture and their method of relaying the visual image displayed a type of identification with certain elements in the painting (people sitting on the merry-go-round, horses teeth, a down-looking gaze). In these descriptions, visitors appeared to be more personally involved in the experience of recall. In contrast, having been invited to read the display caption and wall text and then look at the work, visitors responded in a less physical way, seemingly 'speaking text' to me (in some cases using the actual words they had just read in the display caption). In order to explore the importance of the body both in the viewing as well as the remembering and reporting act, I have used the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his references to the corporeal as a way of explaining why I believe text alongside a painting might destroy the possibility of a corporeal experience.

How does the positioning of text alongside a painting change the manner in which visitors approach a painting?

As space is such an important concept for artists when they are involved in the creation of a work of art, and space *should be* critical in the manner in which a visitor looks at and engages with a work of art, I consider why it is that space is not taken into greater consideration when decisions regarding the positioning of labels and display captions are taken.

Most museums still use the conventional positioning of labels, display captions and wall text, next to the painting and this according to senior Tate curator Martin Myrone demonstrates that, 'the main interpretation in each room is the wall text' <http://greatbritishartdebate.tate.org.uk/interpreting-john-martin-what-do-you-think/>.

However, I suggest that positioning captions alongside paintings may be encouraging the visitor to look at words and images as they might a diagram and text, too close, too connected and too reliant on one another.

In some cases, text becomes the most important record of a museum visit.

In the image shown below one visitor photographs the wall text. This is a practice I have noticed on a number of occasions.

THIS IMAGE HAS
BEEN REDACTED
DUE TO THIRD PARTY
RIGHTS OR OTHER
LEGAL ISSUES

This is not to say that I believe that *all* text, *any* text in the art museum should be totally abandoned in favour of a more direct experience of the artwork. Indeed, as Sarah Hyde has commented,

the fact that many galleries emphasise the virtue of direct experience, doesn't mean that interpretation isn't available: it just isn't necessarily available near the object, and it may not be text or wall-based either.

(Hyde quoted in Selwood, 2011)

Was the Tate conference successful in pushing the boundaries of the discussion around interpretation in the art museum?

Throughout the thesis I have made reference to the Tate conference, *Interpretation, theory and the encounter*. It was my intention that devising, staging and organising such a conference would 'ground' my research area and expand the field of enquiry so that it would include literary, philosophical, art historical and sociological theory and each speaker would offer their own perspective on museum interpretation. Although, in retrospect, I feel that if I had been a curator of interpretation I would have felt daunted, rather than inspired by the papers presented, and unsure about

how I might incorporate the ideas I had heard into the practical job of writing interpretation for works of art, there were many issues that were important for the overall debate about the nature and function of the museum space and I want to focus on some of them here.

Preziosi talked about the artifice of the art museum, its staging, its lack of transparency and interest in maintaining power^{xxvii}. He suggested that distinctions be made between encountering and interpreting: that encountering was an interpretative activity and interpreting, a consequence of time, place and circumstance. Understanding 'encountering' as an interpretative activity and interpreting as a consequence of time, place and circumstance would surely change the manner in which museums of art think about the relationship between the two concepts. Individual visitors would encounter, (and therefore interpret), an artwork in their own way but the museum's method of interpreting would be a consequence of time, place and circumstance. This fits well with the premise taken throughout the thesis: that time, place and circumstance have shaped the production of text in museums of art. It would also fit well with the Serota's ambition for Tate:

Our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery in looking at particular paintings, sculptures or installations in a particular room at a particular moment, rather than find themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history

(Serota, 2000, p.55).

Preziosi also stressed that art was not 'an alternative reality' alongside what was *really* real, but a *new* reality, one that challenged representation: a device capable of making the familiar—unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar—familiar, 'Art is no 'second world' (materially or virtually) alongside the world in which we live; art *is* that world)<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/preziosi.shtm>).

In whatever way the museum envisages the role of written interpretation, it might be said that it acts as a bridge between the unfamiliar (the artwork) and the familiar (the words used to explain it). In this scenario, it is written interpretation that takes

the role of 'making the unfamiliar— familiar, not the actual work of art. This, I believe is crucially different to the role Preziosi imagines that art will have. If the artwork *itself* is not changing reality and making the unfamiliar—familiar, if it is interpretation that has taken over this function, then what is the role of art?

Both Preziosi and Bennet discussed the way in which art museums function as both civic and civil buildings^{xxviii}, spaces that encourage dialogue and critique as well as providing a stage for spiritual, religious, almost idolatrous viewing.

This has always been an area of conflict for the art museum: encouraging dialogue and critique while at the same time, presenting a collection of objects that, by virtue of their very existence *in that space*, represent value, authority and establishment. The real conflict, for Bennett, is between the civil and the aesthetic and it is the aesthetic that exists 'in the nexus of relations between text, the art object and the institutions authority'.

This again is a critical issue for museums of art. Bennett's discussion of the aesthetic focused on the opposing concepts of *useful* or *useless*. He used the kind of civic criteria of judgment implied by Rónán McDonald, *the uselessness of the aesthetic [is] in opposition to social benefits*^{xxix}.

In suggesting that art galleries actively engage with the social, rather than exist as islands in a culturally diverse hinterland, Bennett questions whether museums are, in fact, addressing this need. In my experience most cultural institutions (and Tate most decidedly), are only too aware of the necessity of acting as fully participating members in a culturally diverse landscape (Tate Britain describes its new interpretation strategy as, 'working towards a more pluralistic approach to the provision of complementary information' (Selwood, S, *Museums Journal*, 111/12, 22-28) and the range of programmes they offer and the audiences they target are most decidedly chosen to illustrate their commitment to social issues.

Finally, Preziosi raised the issue of agency, '*the problems of accounting for encountering and of understanding interpreting are wound up in an epistemological conundrum, which might appear to require the simultaneous belief in diametrically*

opposed notions of agency^{xxx}. The idea of diametrically opposed notions of agency is critical and certainly echoes how I feel post-conference: that making a case for the interpretation of an art work, recognising it for what it *is* (if *it* can *be* anything) does, I think, require belief in diametrically opposed notions of agency: whether agency is free or determined.

The conference stimulated me to think differently about the museum as a civic, social space, its mechanisms of staging and framing and the opposing concepts of the aesthetic and the social. However there were other issues left unresolved and some, hardly mentioned. Above all, the writing of explanatory, interpretative text for a general visiting public audience was never properly addressed. I would have liked Preziosi to talk more about agency and non-agency, to focus on art and the encounter and most importantly I would have liked to ask, is it *only* possible for an art work to be either mute or non mute, is there not another more dynamic category something along the lines of affected *and* affective? If the museum is like a stage and if the art displayed there is essentially 'staged' in the manner of its display and positioning then what role can interpretation possibility have other than reinforcing with words, the less tangible manifestation of arts un-naturalness? Is it at all possible to imagine the kind of space Bennett refers to: a space unaffected by any moral or political considerations: a zone of activity, shaped independently of external authority or tutelage, 'a practice of the self – that could be conducted independently of any tutelage to such external authorities, a space of freedom' (<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/bennett.shtm>).

Concluding remarks

This thesis charts a personal journey. It has been focused on my career in museum education, specifically at Tate and my observations regarding the provision and use of display captions and wall panels positioned alongside works of art. The focus of the research has been to look at text that was previously called information and is

now known as interpretation, and to consider the growth, changing nature and content of this form of text.

The production of museum text may be seen to be both historical and political and I conclude that the setting up of museums and galleries based on Victorian social policy, civilizing behaviour, social improvement and access, have all impacted upon the manner in which museums communicate with their public today. It might be said that these policies, the aims and objectives of the museum are as closely linked to policies that are social and civic as they always were. The methods and means of communication and interpretative strategy are, however, certainly very different. Museums have chosen to introduce a range of technology and a myriad of new ways of interpreting the collection: hand held devices, audio guides, audio benches, multimedia tours, pod casts, write your own labels, touch screens and on line information. The use of technology might be seen as an appropriate tool of access for the twenty-first century, offering a range of multi-media devices with which the public are familiar and comfortable, in order to communicate in a modern way.

However it might also be said that the kind of growth and provision of these new forms of interpretation raises more questions than it answers. How influential has the curator become, how powerful is the institutional meaning conveyed, how carefully are meanings 'constructed' and are these new forms of interpretation challenging and diversifying the authority of the museum or simply shifting the power away from the artist to a small, select group of institutionally chosen people?

It was always my aim to question the effect of text: how reading display captions and wall panels might change the experience of looking at a work of art. This has been difficult. Without sophisticated brain patterning techniques or advanced scientific research methods I cannot claim to have produced any scientific results. However I have been made aware that there are differences in the way in which visitors described paintings from memory, searching in 'their minds eyes' with the way in which they spoke about a painting after they had read the accompanying text. Without text, they appeared to 'see' the image in front of them and re-build it

spatially: having read the text they appear less involved and often used words they remembered from the text. Although choosing to use the work of Merleau-Ponty as a means with which to study the differences in these descriptions may not be considered 'tried and tested'. However, I feel that the kind of phenomenological experience he writes about has great relevance for my research.

It is my view that positioning labels directly alongside works of art has the effect of encouraging visitors to read text and image together, to move their eyes from one to another and check words against visual content. They rarely use the space of the gallery to stand in a position in which they can best 'see' the painting or adopt a viewing point that personally suits them. This close positioning of text directly may therefore be denying the viewer any chance of entering into a corporeal interaction.

At the beginning of the thesis, I identified two interested parties in the interpretation debate, the museum and the visitor. I now think that there are at least three more: the government, the market and all those interested individuals who are involved in the dissemination of museum knowledge, real and virtual.

Any real change that might occur in the museum's strategy regarding interpretation would be prompted by demand. However, if it is true, as it seems to be, that both the institution and the gallery visitor are keen to maintain a situation in which wall text alongside paintings is made readily available then one would need to ask why should anything change? Who might initiate change and in whose interest would changes take place?

Penelope Curtis was appointed director of Tate Britain in 2010 and took up her post in April 2011. In an interview she gave to *The Art Newspaper* before joining Tate she expressed her intention, 'to show the collection more aesthetically, sometimes with less information and allowing the art to speak for itself... in an open hang that is not didactic'

<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Avoiding-the-clich-of-combining-old-and-new/21939>.

And in a more recent paper published in the *Museums Journal*, Sara Selwood has reported that,

Curtis plans a route through the collection via a series of galleries, hung chronologically, with minimal labels and no wall texts. As she told *The Spectator*, she wants to leave interpretation open-ended. "I want people to engage directly with the art, to get hooked, not to read what an interpretation team has cobbled together – if they like what they see, there are endless opportunities to find out more about it elsewhere".

(Selwood, S, *Museums Journal*, 111/12, 22-28)

The plans that Curtis describes will clearly result in less 'text-based interpretation' on the walls alongside works of art and this signals a real change of policy but this change of policy to reduce interpretation (if that is the case), just like the one that preceded it, to increase interpretation, lacks transparency. At the end of Selwood's December 2011 article in the *Museums Journal* she refers to the fact that Curtis would not agree to an interview. This was also the response I had when I requested a meeting.

Without a theory, without discussion, without interrogation and transparency, all of these changes will be absorbed into the museum's philosophy and no attempt will be made to consider what their impact might be or how the role of the interpreter has changed and will continue to change. According to Griselda Pollock:

The mark of the postmodern intellectual situation is the role of the interpreter: translating statements, made within one communally based tradition, so that they can be understood within a system of knowledge based on another tradition. We can move away from the deadlock of word/image, verbal/visual language, object/text into the politics of difference and into the concept of interpretation as a collaborative work solicited by the artwork when, as an event in time, its mediation between subjective sites of production, circulation and consumption, precipitates a potentially transformative encounter with difference.

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/pollock.shtm>)

The main aim of this thesis has been to raise the level of debate around interpretation: to divert the discussion away from one, centred on display captions and wall texts, and tackle instead some of the more problematic issues of what it means to write *any* kind of interpretative text: all the harder when what that text seeks to elaborate upon is visual not textual.

This, I feel, I have begun to do: that the conference and my work in universities in the UK and abroad have contributed to a more complex notion of what it might mean to interpret visual images for a general public in a museum setting. There is, however, still much to do. I would like to work with Tate on a more ambitious project that explores the manner in which visitors read text and look at images *together*, in other words, how visitors synchronise reading with looking. This is a project that would need the input of a collaborative partner, Professor Semir Zeki, Professor of neuro-aesthetics at University College London, with whom I have had at least two conversations about my research, would be the obvious choice. I would also like to initiate a debate that investigates whether it would be possible (or desirable) to establish a theory for museum interpretation. These discussions might be part of small seminar sessions with museum professionals. Finally I would like to examine whether the practice of displaying text labels, at the side of a painting might not be the most effective positioning: that another space might be more suitable and would allow visitors to achieve a personal space between themselves and the work of art.

At the beginning of the thesis, I stressed that it was my intention that the role of interpretation in the art museum would be questioned, reappraised and reassessed and that it would become, as Tom Mitchell asked of it, 'responsible for its actions' (Mitchell, 1995, p.421). My research has I hope, moved the debate forward to some extent, but my ambitions and hopes remain the same.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interviews

- i. Simon Wilson
- ii. Toby Jackson
- iii. Chris Smith, Lord of Finsbury
- iv. Karen Raney

Appendix B

The Tate Conference

- I. *There will be no miracles here*
- II. Invitation for speakers
- III. Speakers
- IV. Programme

Appendix C

Lord Cultural Resources Planning and Management Ltd. Tate Gallery Visitor Audit Executive Summary

Appendix D

Simon Wilson archive papers

- i. Art and Tradition: Paper delivered at Thirteenth Annual Conference of Art Historians Conference 28-30 March 1987
- ii. The Tate Gallery: An Education Department Perspective September 1988
- iii. The Readability of Tate Gallery Texts: A Report by Simon Wilson May 1991
- iv. Education Department Discussions concerning the division of programmes at Tate Modern and Tate Britain July 1998
- v. Captions Diagnostics chart
- vi. Readability level

Appendix E

A selection of papers on writing captions, labels and wall text.

- i. Some Observations on writing accessible, relevant and inclusive interpretative text: Helen Coxall
- ii. Tate unpublished paper 090429: Writing Guidelines for Displays
- iii. Tate unpublished paper 2001: Guidelines for Writing Labels
- iv. Tate unpublished paper 080923: Guidelines for Writing Labels
- v. Tate unpublished paper 81007: Tate Britain Interpretation Writing Text
- vi. Interpretation at Tate Modern

Appendix A

INTERVIEWS

Interview 1: Interviewee Simon Wilson

Date of interview 7.2.2008

Place of interview: Wandsworth, London

SL: OK Simon, are you still remembering now what you were about to say?

SW: (comment about the microphone)

SL: Do you want me to go through the questions are you just going to talk.

SW: No, no Interpretation..... look it's absolutelyfirst of all interpretation came into use, I don't remember exactly when... but in the 80s as a museological term....covering you know, the whole business of lectures, gallery talks, guided tours, ehm exhibition leaflets, you know the little mini exhibition guides, audio guides all that stuff, came under the heading of interpretation. Now, from my point of view and I think this is important in relation to your thesis, the point about interpretation is that its not interpretation in the sense that I think you are understanding it from what you have already said to me..... and you know you are not giving people a reading of the work, what you are doing and what you should be doing ... what museums in written text should be doing is simply give a few facts and perhaps in the case of visually complex modernist works, cubist or later cubist influenced Picassos, for example, point out a few things that the unexpert, inexpert visitor might not notice. I'll give you an example ... of the Tate Picasso Woman in a Red Armchair. Now I always think that you need to do two things with that painting for the average visitor the non-expert visitor I think, who may not be familiar with modernist art. You need to, first of all, you need to tell them something very factual about the background of the picture that is that the woman in question is Picasso's mistress at the time, Marie Therese Walter who later became the mother of one of his children so that's one thing and that's just a fact, its not you know, and secondly you need to point out, I think, the fact that he has painted the face of that picture in such a way that its like one of those jokes, not joke exactly, what is the word, but it's a face that incorporates two different faces, but they also make one face so it's a full face view of the face of his lover Marie Therese but then half of it can also be read as a profile and its in a different colour and a profile of somebody leaning in and kissing the full face faces. See because people actually don't see things like that unless they are fairly sophisticated viewers of modern art.

SL: So would you say then that your notion of what interpretation is, is that it's an aid to seeing ...

SW: *absolutely, absolutely...*

SL: *so*

SW: *museum labels should give a few facts along the lines I've just been saying which will lead the viewer into the painting and get them to spend more time with it because they will want to see what's going on so it...and so it and ...uhm, I mean and I only, and ... but from what you were saying to me before.... you are, I think, from what I judge.... as far as I can judge your whole attitude is based on the fact that **you** yourself are a painter and you have been looking at paintings all your life and further more you are a very sophisticated observer, but most people who visit the great art museums of the world are not... particularly nowadays because the museums are drawing in these crowds, who actually, you know Tate Modern is a case in point, people who, you know, have no real specialist knowledge of art at all and who go because it's the thing to do and they look at these things and I don't know what they get out of them at all ... I've always wondered ...*

SL: *Why do you think they visit museums and galleries?*

SW: *Oh, well, of course there has to be something ... there has to be an initial, you know, an interest in the visual ... because human beings are, above all visual creatures and because it's the same reason that people go to the opera or the theatre or whatever, because at a certain social level it's a thing you do and the museums have made themselves so much more attractive to a wider public in recent years and have become you know ... its part of the culture, you know the 'société of the spectacle (French accent)', it's the culture of fame and celebrity. Tate Modern is a celebrity and people want to come and look at it.*

SL: *And what I'm kind of interested in is also, and we are going to get to that in a minute if you don't mind, your view on not so much the kind of interpretation you were involved then back in the 80s but what's happening now with wall texts and extended wall texts and room texts etc. ... but before I get into that ... you joined the Tate in 1967?*

SW: *yes*

SL: *and you were a lecturer then?*

SW: *yes*

SL: *were you the only lecturer?*

SW: *no, well I was the only in-house lecturer ... yes, we had a team of freelancers there were about three or four freelancers*

SL: *oh even then?*

SW: *yes there had always been freelancers, Tate had always had a lecture programme right from its inception. Yes there had always been lectures and the programme was organised by*

one of the curators who was given responsibility for it ... and they used freelancers. But I was the first permanent appointment and I inherited a group of freelancers one of whom, Laurence Bradbury I think, has only just retired, the rest are all dead I think.

SL: So in 1980 you became Head of the Department?

SW: Yes in 1966 I was appointed as a lecturer then in 1970 they decided to create an education department ... it didn't exist before ... it was just me ... and I was doing lunchtime talks in the galleries to the general public, I was doing school groups, I was doing NADFAS groups and all that stuff...and they created a department and I was not appointed...and they appointed a head of department from outside, I wasn't certainly not ready for it anyway I don't think, and ... that was a man called Terence Meecham and he was head of department for ten years and then went off to Australia and after an enormously prolonged selection process ... during which Tate failed to find someone they liked better than me, they left me in post as head of education although incidentally one grade lower than the previous head of department had been, which I don't know what that was about .

SL So that was 1980?

SW: that was 1980, more or less

SL: And can you remember how many people were in the education department then?

SW: Yes there was me ... and there was man called Robert Cumming we were both the workhorse lecturers ... and there was a secretary.

SL: was that it?

SW: Yes that was it

SL: And was it up to you to expand the department and to start making appointments?

SW: well yes, the expanding, well, yes sorry actually there was more.... when Terence Meecham went off to Australia there was me, there was Robert Cumming and there was Pat Turner as lecturers and oh yes and there was Sarah O'Brien Twohig. We had 4 lecturers. So there was a head of department and four lecturers

SL: And you did everything

SW: Yes and we did everything there were four lecturers

SL: And you did everything ... school groups?

SW: yes everything school groups everything

SL: and was there an education policy?

SW: No we made it up on the hoof. The head of education actually reported to the Head of Exhibitions who was, I think the department was actually called Exhibitions and Education and that was Michael Compton. So the head of education reported to Michael Compton and

he wasn't really much of a policy maker, he was not desperately interested in education, I mean, well he **was** interested in education but he was the kind of boss who appointed a head of education and then expected them to get on with it so we made it up as we went along.

SL And do you remember roughly speaking how many people worked in Tate at that time

SL Oh I see.

SL So there was a curatorial department but there was no press office was there?

SW No, there was a press office called Corrine Bellows. I think she had been made press officer at that time and there were two curatorial departments, British and Modern each of which had a keeper a deputy keeper and probably three curators

SL so when you started to build up the department did you think at any time, we need a curator of schools?

SW I realised when I became head of the department ... I established, its not rocket science, it was perfectly obvious, that I needed to divide the department into two sections one for schools and one for adult services (laughs) adult services ... and that's what we did and the ... ah they weren't formalised initially, those roles I mean they were just given to... I mean Pat Turner was given responsibility for schools and adult education i.e. everything which fell within the education system right through from primary to tertiary and when Richard Humphreys arrived whenever that was (question to interviewer in the early eighties?) eh he became responsible for the adult lecture programmes and I presided over the whole thing but also did a lot of the practical work for example I went on teaching schools, I did a lot of sixth form work. At that time there were a number of schools doing sixth form, A level art history classes and we built up a relationship with them eh I did a lot of teaching in the galleries and that was partly because I believed that the only way to teach art history was in front of the real thing.

SL: I wanted to ask you about the new GCSE syllabus which changed...

SW: oh!

SL: As far as I can remember that was in about 1986?

SW: yes, we were forced...

SL: Was there any consultation

SW: None whatsoever, we were forced by the curriculum changes in the 80s we were forced to make this massive provision for school groups that now of course is routine but there was no government (I complained about this bitterly at the time in fact there will be something about it on paper) but there was no government because the government, there was no consultation by government with the museums because nobody in government ever thought

of what this, this is one of the unintended consequences of curriculum changes that museums would be swamped with school groups because the curriculum changes called for a lot more course work in the form of practical hands on projects which in art meant going to museums.

SL: Do you remember who was the Minster at the time?

SW: I can't remember

SL: So when you say that there was no consultation was the first you heard of it when suddenly there were more school children visiting or did you get a bit more notice

SW: no they just started coming and the problem was that you joined the Tate at about that time

SL: yes 1987

SW: because we started to need administrative help to handle the whole thing...it was a nightmare, you must remember the phones never stopped ringing.

SL: I do remember, I remember it very well

SW: ...and I have to confess that I'm not a good manager and I was never able to manage things and you and Gloria did it very well really

SL: So at that time

SW we needed more help of course but I didn't really know how to do it

SL: So at that time there was Pat Turner, no Pat Turner had left I think there was Pat Adams, what role was she appointed to?

SW: She was supposed to be one of the workhorse teachers in the department, what you always call lecturers....

SL: and Laurie?

SW: Laurie who??

SL: Laurie Peake

SW: oh she was the department secretary

SL: no she was one of the lecturers

SW: oh of course she was why was I confusing her...did she go off

SW I'm thinking of Ann Prothero.

SL: Do you remember what the budget was for the education department at that time?

SW The 'above the line' budget, excluding salaries, was 100,000 per year? A lot of it went on the freelancers because at that time we built up the freelance pool...

SL: in 1987

SW: because it was the only way we could handle it

SL: I remember how much we paid for the freelance pool, because I helped to do that, I seem to remember that it was 12.500

SW I cannot remember what the budgets were but it will all be on file.

SL: OK so the education department ...

SW Because I did them every year, we still did civil service estimates ...

SL: You did all of that so at that time there began to be a bit of a division. I think Laurie did schools mainly and Richard did mainly adults.

SW: He did exclusively adults, well he made have taken an occasional school ...

SL: And that time what was the relationship with the curatorial team. I mean at that point were the curatorial people still writing captions and wall text?

SW: No they never did. That didn't start ... the whole business of captions and wall texts that didn't begin until Nick Serota arrived in 1988

SL So what was there before that?

SW: nothing, it all in my paper for the art historians conference which was in 1987 and therefore just before Nick arrived. There was an enormous internal ... the curatorial departments, particularly the British department ... less so the moderns ... vigorously objected to the idea of captions or wall texts, or anything. When you walked into the Tate in those days there was just room after room hung with works of art and all that was all there was, the room had a number and the works of art had a label giving you the name of the artist and the title of the work and the date of acquisition and possibly if it had been a gift it would say, the gift of, that was all there was ...

SL: there was nothing else?

SW: and the pictures were hung ... there was nothing to tell you what the theme of the room was, what the point of it was ... and there was nothing to tell you about any of the works...

SL: so not even a small caption label next to the painting?

SW: no nothing ... well yes a caption just telling you the name of the artist and the title of the work and its date ... it was a hang for connoisseurs and specialists, people who knew what they were looking at and looking for ... and it was a disgrace... read my paper I was very passionate about it

SL so when Nick joined

SW when Nick joined there was my paper, my other paper there are two papers in what I have given to you. There was the paper to the Art Historians conference in which I set out my view for the need for captions and so forth and then there was my a paper to Nick in which I reiterated that, you know the whole business of displays...and he agreed you know and we

then started for the first new hang which he did..... which opened in 1989 or was it early 1990? ... He became director in late 1988 and it would have taken a year to rehang the gallery

SL: I think it was 89

SW: but anyway he agreed, I can remember there was a passionate debate...because Nick established...at that time the Tate was run internally by what was called the Heads of Department meeting which was once a month I guess, I mean that's how the decision making happened but there were special meetings about the new hang I guess, but essentially it was the whole curatorial staff, essentially it was all the heads of departments and deputy heads and I remember these intensive debates about the new hang generally but about the whole business of captions as well but Nick just imposed it but...

SL: so who was

SW but, but ... the opposition to captions was such or the reservations were such that for the first new hang it was agreed that only major works would be captioned, certain works would be picked out, the minute though that it opened we realised that it was absurd and Nick agreed that all works would have captions and that was that....

SL: So who was opposed to the idea of captions?

SW: well, speak not ill of the dead, but the chief opposition was Leslie Parris the Constable expert ehm but the British Collection in general were against it...

SL: why?

SW: because they thought that, this brings you back to your thesis, because they thought that people would read the captions and not look at the pictures but you see I know... because I'm like this, I'm an art historian for fucks sake, but when I go to strange museums and look at a painting that I don't already know something about, of course I have a sophisticated understanding of what's going on in it visually but if it's a mythological painting, if it's something by a modern painter like Picasso or Beckman with private symbolism, I mean how the fuck are people supposed to know unless they're told and if you don't know those kinds of things then you cannot access the work on its deepest level because paintings are not just visual objects, they are incredibly complex visual constructs which embody all kinds of things which of course art historians spend their entire lifetimes, teasing out, and writing into books and what always strikes me as being grotesque about the attitude of curators to this is that the curators have all this information but they don't want to give it to the public. They know the figure in the Picasso is Marie Therese and all the rest of it but they apparently don't want to share it with the public, hello?

SL: So the new displays were instrumental in captions becoming....

SW: absolutely

SL: and at that point who was writing them?

SW: well, we set up a system, which worked extremely well they were written by the curators who were responsible for the hang. The new hang system was that each room would have a theme and it would be curated by one of the curators and that curator would choose the works, hang it and write the wall text, we established that each room would have a wall text to explain the wall text.

SL: And that was from the beginning?

SW: Yes that was from the beginning. We set up an elaborate system whereby the curators wrote the text and sent them to one of the administrative staff in the Modern collection as it then was, or the British collection, because there was still a structure of two collections, two curatorial groupings, so each of them had an administrator responsible for this. The curator sent them to the administrator, the administrator sent them to me, I edited them, sent them back to the administrator so that everything was under one control. The administrator sent them back to the curator for approval and then they were printed and put on the wall.

SL: And there were something like 150 words was it?

SW: The original word limit was 90 words and then we upped it to 110, I think that's right, its very restrictive but on the other hand its as much as you ought. We occasionally doubled up captions where there was factual information about a work, which was deemed to be necessary, but it settled down to be 110, I don't know if it's gone back to being 90 now.

SL: Was it when Tate Modern was set up that the name Interpretation came back to the education department? Do you remember how that happened?

SW oh when the department became know as education and Interpretation....

SL: Interpretation and Education actually

SW Interpretation and Education, now when did that title come in...

SL It came in at the time of Tate Modern

SW: No it was long before that...

SL was it?

SW: It was well before the creation of Tate Modern and Tate Britain. I think it was when I ceased to be Head of Department in 1991 or 1990 when Richard Humphreys became head of department I think.

SL And do you remember the kind of wrangling with the curatorial team about who actual wrote....

SW no

SL because there was a point...when it was thought that the education department should write captions and wall texts but from what I can remember the curatorial team did not want that.

SW yes I cant remember precisely the sequence but I probably would have taken the view that in an idea world the education people should write them but in the end I recognised that the only person capable of doing that was me ... (laughs) I mean who had the knowledge of the collections and in the end we had to accept that really there was no choice that the expert curators had to put their knowledge into the captions the problem is of course the content of the curatorial writing and their idea of what constituted an appropriate caption. In spite of me issuing guidelines which you have got samples of (Simon Wilson archive in appendix) but err and again it came down to editing and editing the curators captions I did for ten years and again it was, without wishing to be self important, I was the only person who could do it for a number of reasons, I was older I was one of the senior members of Tate staff in terms of experience and so forth, and the curators, many of them were quite Prima Dona 'ish', they would take being corrected from me but when we got in an outside editor, there were huge rows, the curators simply wouldn't accept being corrected by her. It was a disaster, she was forced to leave after a year, it was a complete disaster

SL Can I take you back for a moment to ... During the third term of Thatcher's office which began in 1987, and coincided with Nick coming in 1988, it was kind of partly to do with all of the arguments to do with free entrance in museums which prompted places like the Tate to start thinking more about their audience

SW: ahhh

SL Because previously they hadn't been. in my mind this is closely tied up, the notion of access with captions and wall text and interpretation do you remember that yourself?

SW Absolutely yes of course. The National Gallery started putting captions on the wall several years before the Tate did as happened with the history of the Tate and National Gallery. The National Gallery was more avant-garde than the Tate but the more so since of course Modern art has much more need of captions than art where the visual language and to some extent the narrative language is more familiar to a wider section of the public. No it was perfectly obvious to me that if we were to widen access then we had to do the things which were in fact done but it was Nick who saw that. Because give him his due he did see it and it was against his natural inclinations I mean if you are familiar with the Whitechapel during Nicks directorship it was the ultimate wide white space and if you were lucky there

was a virtually invisible label giving the most minimal information about the work, you know a title or even just a number and you had to go and look at a list. I remember the Cy Twombly exhibition where I think there were no labels at all of any kind. All very beautiful of course but strictly for connoisseurs.

SL: And just to bring this towards its end what do you think of interpretation now in Tate in general or in any gallery?

SW Just before we finish the previous question, if you look at visitor figures for the nineties you will see that attendances at Tate when Nick took over the annual visitor figure was roughly a million

SL 1.1

SW And by the end of that decade it was 2.2 and that is due to a lot of factors of course there was the enormous notoriety of the Turner Prize but it was undoubtedly due to, well I believe, I certainly like to think of course I'm biased, that it was due to making the permanent collection displays so much more user friendly

SL Interestingly the school figures which I remember in 1987 as being around 100,000, I don't think this has changed much

SW Well if the figure for school visits hasn't changed its because A, the museums are saturated and they just cant take any more. After all we did get to the point where we were telling schools, look we cant stop you coming but on that particular day we already have ten school groups in the morning...and you wont have a good time so probably there's a natural level for school visits for any given museum...but as for interpretation now, I mean when I go around the Tate, you need to make a distinction between form and content which we haven't already talked about. The form of the interpretation remains the same, if we're talking just text but the quality of the content of the actual wall text and captions veers widely and I have to say again I have to say, you can dismiss this as an old hand saying everything has gone to the 'bow-wows' since I left, what I think is that the old fashioned art history, this brings me back to where I started you know and what I believe the content of captions should be, you know the kind of old fashioned art history which would lead to the kind of captions being written which would just provide you with some facts about the work, that seems to be going and what you get now IS interpretation, you get curators giving their fucking view of the thing and that is not right.....there you go.

Interview Two: Toby Jackson, Former Head of Interpretation and Education at Tate Modern

Date: February 13 2008

Place: Starr Auditorium, Tate Modern.

SL: OK, all Fine. Toby, the research topic that I'm interested in is Interpretation

TJ: I thought you weren't going to tell me ...

SL: Well I'm just telling you that and I just want you to talk quite feely for a minute about what that term means to you, what it means to you what it mean in terms of how you see it now, but more importantly what it meant to you in terms of your work at Tate Modern.

TJ: I think it used to mean ... making meaning I think, initially, and I know that I'd come to it through, I suppose theory, through the complexity of the visual images, through the visual image, and how the.... and I suppose I had come across the politics of the image quite early on by various readings about how one apprehends visual images or visual culture and how our understanding of an image shifts and changes in time and place and depending on who the viewer is, so I had all that behind me, but I used to think that it was more about constructing different meanings as it were, initially, so that was one thing, the other thing that I recall is being in opposition to the notion of an authoritative voice. Often, historically traditionally so in museums it was the voice of the curator, the senior curator and the junior curator and a very, very particular voice and it had to be coherent it had to be consistent and I suppose that opposition to the notion of authority came from a kind of political belligerence which was inherent in me and my political past being involved in Marxist and socialist politics so I think there was something that came from that that made me think about, well I'm not going to sit back and be told what this thing might mean, so I had a certain idea of opening up the possibilities of this thing called meaning in relation to interpretation, this is turning into a lecture by the way.....you notice (laughs)

SL I'm going to take you back in a minute

TJ: oh good, no do...do

SL; because it sounds from what you are saying that you were very instrumental in the whole definition of interpretation at Tate Modern so can I just take you back for a minute and ask you when you joined Tate Modern, which year, and as I recall it they wanted you very much can you kind of say why you think you were very important as the head here of Tate Modern why they wanted you so much and also what was the department called when you were first asked to be the head of it.

TJ: So we're going to more prosaic things now are we? You ... em ... OK ... er why did they want me? I think with Tate Modern they wanted to have a break with tradition they didn't want a kind of a version of Tate Britain or Tate as it was then, they wanted to try something different and they wanted to be different I think from other cultural or visual and cultural organisations around the world so they were looking for an edge from others around the world so they wanted an edge if you like and you could see that in the way in which they were thinking about presenting the collections, thematically in a dynamic way in the way that they were organising the staff, in a number of ways in which they were thinking differently and thinking about what the museum of the future might be as it wereand I think they saw in me someone who'd only been happy doing new things, I'd gone back to first principles with programmes in Liverpool and set up things which were programmes which were different from other kinds of programmes around the country and I suppose they saw that I'd done the same in Oxford and that's where I was happy so they were looking for someone who was....who was ehm, who might be able to think differently not replicate what had happened traditionally also someone who knew sufficiently enough about modern and contemporary art to be able to talk to artists and talk to curators because that's often the case with educationalists they come from a kind of education background and they're not comfortable when it comes to talking about culture or theory....and I was...so I'm assuming that was the case.

SL: So they were looking for someone who could bring some weight, some theory, some experience but also that kind of interface between artists, educationalists and the work...

TJ: And also I think what I'd been very interested in doing in those places was to do two things, one was to amplify what was in the gallery at the time the exhibition programme the displays, the work, and what have you but also to think beyond that and be more independent to have a kind of independent programme to actually look at the relationship between visual culture, and politics.... society, the wider culture as it were, that wasn't on show in the gallery but was pertinent to how one might think about culture and I developed this idea of that being a key role of the gallery or the museum, the key role was for education to have that independence and for it to be of as significant and as higher quality as an exhibition programme or programme of display.

SL: So it was both broadening the role of education but also kind of having a much closer relationship with the curatorial

TJ: The other thing was to get away from doing work with schools all the time. The predominant culture in museums and galleries was schools work.

SL: Was it even then?

TJ: No, well, yes, I mean it was changing then but it was yes, that was the focus. I think it had shifted. But certainly when I started at Tate Liverpool that was the case ehm the well no it's not quite right because Tate had also been very very strong on the public events side. But hadn't done things like with young people who are independent, with families with communities, you know with all that kind of area. When it happened it seemed to be project led, a little bit worthy, completely untheorised, completely unintegrated had no kind of strategy behind it were just kind of projects, get a bit of money from somewhere do something with mental health or with hearing impaired nothing strategic.

SL: So you joined in 1999?

TJ: Tate Modern yes

SL: And what was the department you were asked to form and what was the name of the department you did form.

TJ: It included the term interpretation

SL: From the start

TJ: They wanted someone to take on interpretation; they didn't know what it meant...

SL: So that was their initiative to say to you

TJ Yes they didn't know what it meant they hadn't worked it through

SL: And previously had that been the name of the department at Tate Britain

TJ: No, I think it was called Education, as far as I know,

SL: Yes that was my recollection of it too

TJ: yes it was called education and I think they wanted to change Tate Britain as well at some stage but they said they wanted it to involve, they wanted to call it interpretation and but I think they just assumed that the programme would be the same it would just have a different name whereas I said, ah interpretation (laughs), that means All those kind of, those voices speaking to the public in the gallery.

SL: So the interface?

TJ: yes I took on that role

SL: And who was driving that change at the time, was it Alex or was it Nick, do you remember?

TJ: Sandy I should think was probably behind that

SL: Oh yes Sandy, OK

TJ: Because he did a kind of meeting with curators and others called The principles of interpretation which was kind of based on some work that I'd been doing for there to be a

strategy of Interpretation you have to get everyone to sign up to a set of principles or kind of key agreements for example the idea of meaning...that it is impossible to fix meaning that meaning in relationship to contemporary art isn't stable, all those kind of little mantras which have a theoretical basis but which we now use quite commonly about multiple meaning, plural voices, multiple meanings and so on, and so on, they were all kind of logged as it were, as a set of baseline principles that we all could adhere to, so the argument between curators and educationalists would be lessened as it were because you had these agreed principles. They were still there, because of course you want to push them into practice from its theory base I suppose.

SL; Was there resistance by the curatorial team....I mean do you remember when you first joined Tate Modern what you were actually doing under that banner of interpretation, and then what it became, I mean I know that it became huge but in those first early days when the team was very small did you have a curator of interpretation in those days.

TJ: no just me, Jane Burton was the first one

SL Yes but how far in was that a year in...?

TJ: no Jane was one of the first appointments, I wanted someone, I knew I wanted someone who wasn't just an art historian I wanted someone who came from journalism, or television or radio and was used to communication but had an art historical background, so that was one of the first appointments. And we appointed Tate Britain and Tate Modern together we advertised together, that was a strategic move to get them going at the same time. But yes there was resistance to its practice particularly around who should, and its what is often written about, who is authorised to speak about modern art in the public space of the museum. And err

That's from conversations in the castle, at the castle ehm and there was a lot of opposition to that, who would write, who would edit, who would have editorial control and I insisted on her being editorial control, I also insisted that we would test the quality of writing of people who were writing, not just take it for granted that a curator was able to write and could write and would write, we challenged that.

SL: And how did you test that?

TJ ehm by getting curators to write, and editing it and going through that kind of iteration process and meeting opposition when it arrived which it did and we did and just selecting those who could write well to write and not others.

SL: So at that point the role of interpretation was to write captions and wall texts or to edit them?

TJ: both, we were commissioning we would commission we would write we would edit and we would do that in other areas like leaflets like in audio, on the website in all instances where the collection had a public text as it were, we would have that commissioning role a role of writing as well when necessary and editorial control. And you know you want to do it in collaboration with an exhibition and that that side of it was slightly easier than the other bit of interpretation which was to consider the role of interpretation not as related to the production of an exhibition or display but its reception so you took a critical stance in relation to it and that would come out not in a leaflet necessarily or a wall text or a caption, it would come out in talks programme, or a symposium, or a publication whatever and that's the other side of interpretation that is the critical stance you take in relationship and so it moves away from the hagiographic, a kind of celebration of the exhibition and that again was quite tricky. Particularly when it came to who should write and who should speak at conferences so rather than replicating all the people who had written in catalogues you wanted to invite people who were in opposition to those who had written for the catalogue and set up some kind of dialogue and its all about being a healthy grown up organisation. A healthy grown up organisation is able to be critical of itself and that's part of the discourse and it gets over this huge criticism that always been aimed at Tate about it just ... about being a gate keeper for alternative or voices being in opposition to its practices, in my view it should be open to opposition about its practices.

SL: Do you remember ... sorry, this is kind of a difficult question do you remember the sequence of the way in which different forms of interpretation came into the programme, I mean it began with the simple caption then the wall text which obviously you inherited when you came that was already happening and the room text, I imagine.

TJ: yes but not the way in which they were written ... (laughs). The first thing was to go back and say they how can we written them differently about colour tone of voice, texture use of language use of technical or art historical terms, authoring or not authoring yep we went right back and talked about how we might change that kind of practices as it were, so yes we took fairly convention forms and we, I think improved them and experimented with them and played with them both typographically and terms of content and language yes so we took...at the same time we wanted to pick up another conventional form, the audio guide ... and chip technology had just come in then so we were able to have huge amounts of memory on a tiny little ... it was completely new, it was the newest bit of kit that was coming out.....

the newest bit of software and when I first started leaning about compression, which meant that you could have many voices you could have music you could have interpretation on demand because you could link it to selecting as you went through..... we abandoned the kind of guided tour, the single voice in favour of multiple access, many voices, and having different kind of audio information for different user groups so for visual impaired or for young people or for the tourists as it were....

SL: And is that what you were calling the hand held then?

TJ: No that was the audio guide, that was the audio guide, so we were right at the edge of new technology and also abandoning some of the earlier practices of using art historians or curators, we used some curators who were very very good at it, but we used.... but we brought in radio producers rather than the acousti guide producers so people like Alan Hall who is a well known radio producer which was a key decision and getting away from the usual people who write for visual impaired people, all the same, like Joyce Grenfell, and looking at audio describers, and working with them, audio describers who were art historians, different kind of tone of voice, getting the tone of voice, getting the accents, and having a range of different accents a range of different colours of voice was really important, getting away from the usual voice associated with art galleries in London.

SL: yes, absolutely, do you....

TJ: It's a small thing but its really important and we started working with Michael Rosen, who does radio and a poet, who does brilliant things for young people, he was a good voice.

SL: Do you remember if at that point there was any research into the way in which people were using the different forms of interpretation and ...?

TJ: we did some with acousti guide at that point ...

SL: and what was ... do you remember ...

TJ: can't remember. I think it was in favour, of the things we were doing I think it did inform and helped us to move in the right direction and also helped us to win the argument internally. Of course there was less interest amongst curators in the audio guide...than there was in the printed word ...

SL: Because it wasn't so visible ...?

TJ: well, it was something they had never been interested in the past particularly, it was invisible ... just a piece of kit, even though quite a lot of people use it err but as soon as you start to talk about the wall text, it's like, well they have more confidence in wall text....huge publication.

SL: When you come back to Tate Modern now, and you look at what's happening do you feel that it's continuing along the same path, or do you feel that things are changing, do you feel that there is just the right amount of interpretation or too much....

TJ: don't know

SL: you don't know?

TJ: I don't know....a lot of the things around are things that I started when I left which is only two years ago so I don't take a huge amount of notice of it now to be honest. I mean I just wondered ... one thought.... because there was, this came from Vicente Todoli that he wanted interpretation to move out of the galleries onto the concourses and that happened after I left and now the concourses are full of it and I think there is probably too much there and not enough closer to the artwork, for me.....but everything has been stripped out of the galleries but then technology enables you to do that, you can take things around with you much more easily than you could but I'm still interested in that tension, between, which is a curatorial tension, in wanting the art work to speak for itself, and to be given space, which I really believe in, if you look at the tradition of the museum these days, like the science museum or the history museum or other or this hate, its like the new slavery gallery in Tate Liverpool the Maritime museum, too much information, its complete clutter, aesthetically, I mean I get a sense of anomie, walking into something which I should feel comfortable in so I believe in giving space but I just wonder whether they have withdrawn too far and that the concourses have become a bit like shopping malls ...

SL: that's interesting because some people say that the experience of going into a gallery now is one of reading rather than of looking and it sounds like you have some kind of sympathy for that, so you believe that interpretation clearly is very important but that there is a level....

TJ: yes I think there is ... well it's only reading if you want to read ... I mean ... well all they've got is what Tate Modern had and what any other gallery had, which is the caption ... well we did try when we first opened and I think it was in the Warhol gallery which Nick hung beautifully we wanted a caption for each piece and we wanted it as close to each work of art as possible, and he said no, we'll put the captions at one end of the room err and we did that, we complied with that, and it looked beautiful and we got huge, huge amounts of complaints from the public ...

SL: oh really, who wanted the caption closer to the work ... ?

TJ: saying we don't know which is which and we want a bit ... a few little cues so eventually they crept back closer and closer until they ended up with a caption next to each piece and what we were at pains to do, in that process, and to argue with Nick, was that we weren't giving art historical information, we were just giving people a few cues, to help people see what they were looking at and it was a kind of, and that was the....because I had done a lot of work in Liverpool about ways of looking and how you might be able to look in a stage process, as it were, looking and that was very much the first point in drawing attention to some things which were significant in the work which you might miss otherwise in the hope that anyone who knew wouldn't bother reading and if people say, oh that its all about reading, then you know, I don't bother to read the captions, I just look at the work.....

SL: Can you say a little bit more about that ways of seeing or ways of looking....

TJ: its complicated ... and its gone through sort of several stages of intellectual development and my understanding of it ... and its starts off with the way in which people apprehend the world and my early reading and the ability everyone has to theorise about the world err..... without the 'knowing' in some respects and it gets back to hermeneutics..... the idea that we carry with us ideas about the enlightenment, or about the classics, or about romanticism they're in our language, they're in our culture ... and we bump out against it and we assimilate it, through ... we're 'en' cultured as it were ... as we're socialised into the kind of society in which we live. So I had a strong belief, and I knew it from research in America about kids in Harlem who were deemed to be not very intelligent because people were listening to the language not to what the 'meaning' of the language was ... and when they did some research into what the meaning was, they were deemed to be as bright as anybody else ... it just didn't sound that way ... I really strongly believe that one could theorise. So it started off with giving space to people to apprehend works of art on their own terms basing it on their own experience, and their own ability to talk about things.

SL: without any initial interpretation?

TJ: yes without anything ... just by loo ... because an image, just like a persons understanding of culture in the world, an image in a sense grows out of the same soup ...(laughs) emerges from the same nest, or whatever, it's shaped by the same things that an artist is, you know, within a culture, as I am, by similar kind of experiences, so the enlightenment runs through his or her blood in the same way it runs through my blood, and I can sense it or I can see it, when I apprehend or when I engage with that work, so even though I think that I don't know, in other words I don't know art historically where it might be coming from, I can sense, I can read it as it were can begin to understand it, so yes, without anything. And then I wanted to

find ways, we wanted to find ways, of then introducing other things like the artist voice, and as soon as you introduce the artist voice you have to deal with artists intentionality because that's problematic, so it was kind of offering another text as it were but problematising it, so another field of knowledge and how could you look at that through semiotics. And it was very keyed into the work so if the work was about forensic science, what does forensic science tell us about this work and then the idea that these are held as propositions, in other words so you don't go through this kind of stage process to come to a meaning that's fixed, another kind of authoritative voice, so they're all possibilities so they're all propositions which you hold up and that's the nature of being alive in the world, our lives are full of holding up propositions, each one becoming more significantly different at times but they all have equal weight or similar weight and they are similarly authentic as it were, so that was the beginning of that process ,of thinking about ways of looking as it were. And hermeneutics tells us that the other thing you need to do, not only to go through this process I've talked about, but also to understand what you're saying and thinking comes from different traditions which are long gone so knowing how you know is important as knowing what you know and that's tricky to do, in a wall text but you can do it in other ways and it strikes me that that's one of the very, very interesting current debates at the moment , the place of hermeneutics in the interpretation of works of art in galleries.

SL: Lets stop it there.

(At 12.37 on the day of the interview I received the following text from Toby

PS I think of interpretation less as making meaning more as exploring what art is doing hence tate mods approach to pdas, adult learning and dev of family games – lovely to cu x)

Interview Three: Chris Smith Lord of Finsbury

Date: February 18 2008

Tate Britain Education Department

This was a telephone interview and therefore has not been transcribed verbatim but by memory of the conversation and with verbatim prompts from the interviewer.

SL: Good afternoon my name is Sylvia Lahav. I have been in email contact with Chris Smith and he has agreed to give short telephone interview at 4pm today.

SL: oh hello Chris this is Sylvia Lahav speaking, thank you for your time. First of all is it all right if I make a record of just as an aid memoire?

CS: yes of course

SL: Thank you very much. Can I just explain my PhD research topic as I said in my email is looking at the role of text based interpretation in museums and galleries of art and I am interested particularly in how this form of text based interpretation and explanation has changed and proliferated in the way I see it, and how this reflects the institutional occupation with. And commitment to issues of access and then in a more philosophical way what this means for a public understanding of works of art. Now I am also interested in how a kind of re-visiting of the free entry for museums campaign was responsible for sort of kick starting a new way of thinking for museum culture in terms of income generation and greater awareness of audience. For my research I'm focusing on the years 1987 to 2007 and this is partly personal and partly pragmatic because I joined Tate in 1987 so its kind of my years and partly the more I am going into my research it strikes me more and more that these were very significant years in social and political terms but also in a kind of new philosophy for museums. Partly because 1988 it was the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's third term of government, in 1988 Serota joined the Tate too, it was big sponsorship by BP and the Labour victory in 1997, and this is where you come in Chris. I wonder if I could ask you to just speak freely for as long as you can about the years in which you were secretary of state for the department of media culture and sport how you saw your role because I have seen your role as being hugely significant in that campaign for free entrance, why you believed in it so strongly and why you feel that your years in the department were very influential in the way in which museums changed.

In reply to this Chris Smith gave short history of museums and free entry putting in context the social raison d'etre for museums retaining free entry.

Chris Smith describes the fight as being an up hill struggle with some museum directors being very resistant to the free entrance campaign believing that museums would be valued more if people were asked to pay for the experience.

SL: But fortunately also some very enthusiastic ones, I think

CS: yes and Nicholas Serota was one of them

SL: And of course its left us the envy of some of our European colleagues who in my experience when I have been there to talk think that our free entrance in museums in the UK the most wonderful thing possible

CS: And some of them are now achieving that status

SL: Can I just ask you before, thank you very much, could I just ask you whether you think Chris, and this might be a difficult question to answer, do you believe that all this would have happened anyway that all this was in the zeitgeist or do you think....

CS; No I don't I think it was very much down to hard work on the part of myself and some other political colleagues and museum directors like Nicholas Serota and Neil McGregor

SL: So this really is the kind of triumph of some individuals with vision?

CS: yes I think it was

SL: yes well you must feel very proud of your role it seems to me that that was an absolutely amazingly thing to push through at that moment.

SL: Well thank you very much Chris and I hope that one day we may continue that conversation maybe face to face. Thank you very much Chris

Interview 4 Karen Raney

Date: February 20 2008-02-20

Time: 14.30

Place British Museum

SL: OK Karen would you just talk for a few minutes or so on how you remember the issue of interpretation particularly and specifically in relation to the Engage Journal edition which focused on this. Why you thought of exploring Interpretation at that moment, what sort of difficulties there were and what kind of impression you had at the end about the whole issue of Interpretation in museums and galleries.

KR: OK, let me cast my mind back and think about how the topic came up. I don't exactly remember why we had at that moment chosen the issue of interpretation. My interest in it I think was to do with the inherent interest of the idea of meaning so when someone suggested or I thought of the idea of interpretation it was to do with trying to get to the juiciness of art, you know what's interesting about it and different ways of thinking about it that sort of thing which is always my angle anyway. I am interested in the ideas, the philosophical side of art and how it conveys things and that sort of thing and as the issue proceeded we had, if I can remember rightly we had people writing in a kind of historical way about the history of interpretation over the last twenty years in museums and galleries and the different phases its gone through and I'm trying to think of what else we had.

SL: Who was writing about the history in that issue?

KR: Helen Lockett from the Hayward and she was looking at things like wall panels and different forms of interrogation and the question of whether to use authored or non-authored from the nitty gritty of how it should be done from the different ideas of how it should be done to things like presentation colour of walls and the kind of idea behind those things and how it seemed to change over time and I think that that was what I kind of started to realise as I got these contributions in and started thinking about them I was trying to work out why....what I was sensing was this ambivalence on the part of people in gallery interpretation who basically were there to be interpreters to some degree but there seemed to be this kind of ehm two way feeling about it, one a kind of interests and the other a kind of reluctance maybe.

SL: So are you saying there was a resistance, kind of admitting to the role of interpreter or kind of admitting to the responsibility behind that role?

KR: I think both maybe. I mean the idea of being an interpreter its is a bit like you know, interpreting things like a psycho analyst, that's sort of your role but you don't want to admit to it in a way because the person is supposed to be having their own insights, or something like that, it was sort of in that area. But what I came to think that it was also deeper than that in that I think there's an ambivalence of people in relation to art generally to the idea of interpreting it. So it wasn't just gallery educators feeling difficult about being called interpreters but I just think anyone who has thought about it art or experienced it in a complex way will realise that art is this complex thing that wants to be interpreted on the one hand but doesn't want to be, so I think that part the resistance comes from art itself so that was the deepest insight I had from that issue although there were lots of interesting things along the way.

SL: And did you get the feeling that there always seems to be a dichotomy between interpretation or no interpretation which is kind of then translated into an elitist/populist kind of argument, the populist being, we must interpretation in museums and galleries otherwise people will not feel that the works of art are accessible to them, or we don't have interpretation therefore art is simply for connoisseurs?

KR: yes that came out: that if you give people too much are you patronising them if you give them too little are you withholding from them again it seemed to me that over time there was a lot of flip flopping going on and I think to me that was also a sign of this ambivalence not just that things came in and out of fashion but over interpretation and then under-interpretation. There was flip flopping that was defended in different ways like either from being too much is good, to a little is good and defended on different grounds as well depending on what was happening on the larger context at the time but again I would draw that this underlying ambivalence about verbalising in relation to the visual arts and I think, you know my on background in terms of my research into visual literacy and the relationships between text and image and the ambivalence people have or what that can represent to people the visual and the verbal and the relationship between them, I found a similar ambivalence in my research there that I associate with interpretation, you know and I think its as basic as a resistance the visual world has to being contained by words.

SL: Did you get a lot of feedback after that issue?

KR: no, no.

SL: interesting

KR: But there aren't a lot of formal channels to get feedback anyway so feedback from the journal is very accidental, what people on the advisory board seemed to say that they

thought it was valid but it wasn't prescriptive. So rather than go along with the current idea of what interpretation should be it was trying to step outside of that and look at the question of interpretation itself but I don't know what other people made of it

SL: And did you get the feeling at the end of putting that edition together that there is a theoretical basis upon which notions of interpretation and how its dealt is being trawled out in museums and galleries?

KR: no as I was saying before, I got more the feeling that these changes happened over time based on a large number of assumptions about what was useful to people or what was necessary for people and more to do with the larger context of how things were being thought about than to do with any evidence about how people use what is offered.

Appendix B

Introduction to the Tate conference: *Interpretation, Theory & the Encounter.*

There Will Be No Miracles Here

Sylvia Lahav

Three years ago I was asked to write some notes to accompany an exhibition in Belgrade called *Breaking Step*, described as 'the first major presentation of British Art in Serbia for several decades and the result of a four year association between the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade and the British Council' (<http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/4070>). One of the works featured was Nathan Coley's, *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, a work inspired by a 17th century anecdote about a French village called Modseine which became famous as a place where magical practices were supposed to have taken place. In response to the reactions this reputation caused, (so the story goes) a notice was put up stating, 'There will be no miracles here, by order of the King'. This statement was both ironic and provocative: ironically implying that miracles **can** happen and provocatively referencing authority, power and the conflict between church and state.

Coley's work took the form of a large basic scaffolding construction with light bulbs, which literally spelled out the message. I found this work very compelling on a number of levels and have thought about it many times since. I want to use it as a structure for mapping out some of the issues that I anticipate both the conference and my thesis might touch upon, issues which are especially pertinent to professionals involved in writing text for museums and galleries of art.

Although the notes I wrote to accompany this exhibition were not described at the time as interpretative notes, essentially that was what they were: they were looking at a *visual* work of art which, in this instance happened to have been inspired by an oral story. The words in the work were English, I was writing for a Serbian audience and the notes were translated into both English and Serbian. I was translating one

text with reference to another. The accompanying notes were intended to offer those who visited some form explanation and interpretation.

There were many issues at stake: the problem of translation from medium to word, from word to word, from language to language etc. Although this may be an extreme example, issues like these, which challenge the assumption that it is possible to translate visual imagery, (shape, form and colour and space), into words of information and explanation, are critically important for every institution that produces interpretation.

For the past five years my own work has been focused on museum text: the words that are written to accompany works of art in museums and galleries. I look at the phenomena from a number of perspectives beginning with the institution. I ask questions about the role of text: for whom it is being written and what are the aims and objectives that structure it? As Edward Said put it, 'who writes, for whom is the writing being done and under what circumstances?' (Said quoted in Mitchell, 1983, p.7).

There is much claimed for text as a 'way in' to looking. I examine whether text of this kind does in fact bring the viewer back to look at the work, offer them a 'way in', or whether it acts as a substitute for looking, leaving visitors satiated with institutional words, hardly needing to look at the art at all.

I make the suggestion that a rise in the production of interpretative text might come as an indirect result of art institutions needing to comply with government targets and funding criteria and that the free entrance campaign, (in this country at least), while wonderful in many ways, enabling visitors to make short focused visits, has also brought its own problems: an escalation of access-led initiatives for example.

I explore what it is that museum visitors expect from, or anticipate that text will give them over and above a more direct (I would of course not use unmediated here)

experience of an artwork. Research has shown (Lord, 1993, appendix B) that what visitors say they gain from accompanying text is background, context, meaning and artistic intention, all profoundly intellectual and philosophical issues. Is the gallery able to address them? Should museums construct their interpretative strategies around accepted academic theory rather than institutional guidelines: something similar to literary theory, which does indeed address issues of meaning, authorship, intention etc?

I consider the important issue of space. Positioning text alongside a painting or other work of art, locks the visitor into a mode of looking or observing (to use Jonathan Crary's term) which is 'on one plane' (Crary, 1990). It makes the act of moving forwards and backwards in space to achieve a perfect individual viewing point, difficult. Where does this leave the possibility of a corporeal interaction a bodily phenomenological experience?

Finally, my work questions the role of memory. After we have looked at a painting, do we retain a *strong* image in our minds eye, (or any image at all)? Has the time come to consider the experience of looking at art as simply another manifestation of a new twenty first century way of seeing, one more akin to grazing and skimming than observation?

But I began with Coley's work and I want to end with it.

My work, and the work of many of my colleagues, is to *worry away* at the genre of interpretation in galleries of art. To move on from practical concerns, style and guideline documents (approximately 100 words, one idea per sentence, no technical references etc.) and look at the deeper philosophical implications.

While I wouldn't wish to impose upon the conference any responsibility for achieving a miracle, there have already been significant advances and the miracle is that it is

possible to conduct a conference in an institution that welcomes interrogation into its practice.

Letter of invitation

Considering Interpretation: Origins, Theory and Practice
Tate Conference

I am writing to invite you to participate in a two-day conference at Tate Britain which will consider the origins, practice and theory of textual interpretation in the art museum and how this has changed in the last twenty years.

What constitutes this form of interpretation and what defines its role and relation to the viewer is now perhaps one of the most contested practices in the art museum today. In the UK its emergence and development has directly arisen out of an increasing awareness of the need to support and encourage audience engagement with works of art. In this process, however, while there has been considerable debate around the impact of interpretation, there has been less rigorous discussion about the inherent assumptions the art museum has made between the relation between image and language. This conference aims to revisit the conditions and context in which textual interpretation has evolved and to consider the theoretical and philosophical issues around interpretation.

In relation to the conference theme, the subject of interpretation and its place in the museum, I would like to ask you whether you might like to contribute to our second session which explores the relationship between text and image, and the impact that the growing reliance on text has on museum visitors today.

If you would like to discuss this further please do not hesitate to contact Sylvia Lahav, co-organiser of the conference, by email at sylvialahav@btinternet.com.

Speakers

The speakers who took part in the conference were Tony Bennett, Research Professor in Social and Cultural Theory at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney; James Elkins, E.C. Chadbourne Chair in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Jonathan Harris, Professor of Art History at the University of Liverpool; Claire Pajaczkowska, Senior Research Tutor at the Royal College of Art; Andrea Phillips, Reader in Fine Art and Director of the Doctoral Research Programme at the Department of Art, Goldsmiths, University of London; Griselda Pollock Chair in Social and Critical Histories of Art in 1990 and Director of Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History at Leeds University; Brendan Prendeville lecturer in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London; Donald Preziosi, Professor of Art History, at UCLA and Adrian Rifkin, Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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ISSUES

Interpretation, Theory & the Encounter

Friday 9 July 2010, 10.00–18.00

As interpretation becomes an increasingly conflicted site of meaning and representation within curatorial and museological practice this conference brings together key international speakers to consider the theoretical and philosophical issues which frame textual interpretation. Speakers include **Tony Bennett, Donald Preziosi, Griselda Pollock, and James Elkins.**

Programme

10.00 **Welcome** - Victoria Walsh

10.10 **Introduction** - Sylvia Lahav

10.20 **Donald Preziosi** - Palpable and Mute, as a Globed Fruit: Meaning and its (Dis)possession

Respondent: **Andrea Phillips**

11.30 Break

12.00 **Griselda Pollock** - What if art desires to be interpreted? Remodelling interpretation after the 'encounter-event'

Respondent: **Claire Pajczkowska**

13.10 Lunch

14.00 **James Elkins** - Can Pictures Think?

Respondent: **Brendan Prendeville**

15.10 **Tony Bennett** - Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage, Critique

Respondent: **Jonathan Harris**

16.45 **Panel Discussion**: Preziosi, Bennett, Pollock, Elkins: Chair: **Adrian Rifkin**

Appendix C

The result of this research is a four volume study¹ of which this is the Executive Summary. The main findings are presented in the overview Report which includes 25 recommendations. These 25 recommendations are appended to this Executive Summary.

Visitor Expectations of the Tate

Tate Gallery visitors are experienced gallery goers. First-time visitors have mainly heard about the Tate from knowledgeable friends or experts (tour guides and teachers). This illustrates the power of word of mouth marketing and therefore the importance of the visitor experience in building attendance. The Tate is synonymous with modern art for most; and British art, for many.

Visitors expect an enjoyable experience of about two to three hours. Many come to learn about schools of art or artists they believe the Tate to be a specialist in. Visitors are not intimidated by the Tate; the humour of the "Tate by Tube" posters, and the human scale of the interior (as opposed to the grand impression created by the exterior), create a fairly relaxed atmosphere.

The fact that visitors are frequent gallery/museum attenders does not mean that there is a common level of expertise among visitors. Visitors are generally conversant with terms of art history but they present many different interests and levels of knowledge.

Visitor Motivation

Even though the Audit found that more than half the visitors decide to visit within one week of their actual visit (and more than a quarter decide to visit on the day of the visit!), there is a stronger motivation to browse (and to browse among the modern collection) than to visit special exhibitions or attend particular events which may have been publicised recently in the press. The motivation to visit the major paying exhibition was relatively weak.

1. The four volumes are available in the Tate Library and from the Communications Department: *Interim Report, June 1993* (Literature Review and Research Design) by LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management Ltd); *July '93 Gallery Observations and Interviews* by Dr. Barbara Soren, *October '93 Gallery Observations and Interviews* by Sara Selwood, and the Tate Gallery Visitor Audit Summary Report, which includes the *Visitor Survey and Focus Group Reports*.

This results in part from:

- the confusion caused by there being similar names for different types of exhibitions (New Displays, Special Displays, Special Exhibitions)
- the ineffectiveness of internal directional signage for special exhibitions and events
- the ambiguity of the 1993 New Displays posters which were interpreted by many visitors as being displays of the artists depicted on the poster
- the unfriendly, unwelcoming exhibition entrance

Recommendations are made to address these issues including improved interior and street signage, banners on the side and front of the building, and moving the entrance to the paying exhibition to a more accessible location.

Orientation

Visitor orientation incorporates large issues such as whether visitors understand what the Tate is and how it is organised; why they think some works are on view and others are not; and whether visitors can find their way around.

The research indicated that visitors feel they are able to find their way around the gallery without difficulty, using mainly signs and the TatePlan. However, visitors do not have a high level of awareness of a recommended route through the Gallery starting with Room 1. This is the result of two main factors: confusion over what New Displays are; and weak directional signage.

Visitors do not understand the New Displays Policy. The term "New Displays" does not convey the meaning of the policy *even to those who are aware of the rehanging process*. When it is explained to them, visitors are supportive, even enthusiastic, about the New Displays policy – despite a concern about not having important works on permanent display. Many of those interviewed believe that this problem can be overcome by improved information.

The study recommends reduction of congestion in the Rotunda and main entrance by designating and using the Clore entrance as a group entrance and an entrance for families with young children as well as for disabled visitors. The orientation to "New Displays" could then be improved by posting the Tate Gallery Statement of Intent in both entrance halls and at strategic points in the building. It is recommended that terms such as "special displays" be replaced with other less confusing terms like "Tate Perspectives."

Meeting Visitor Needs

All research methods indicate that visitors enjoy the Tate, and that a very high proportion of them consciously appreciate what the Tate is, what it does and the fact that admission is free.

The Survey provided visitors with an opportunity to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 "How satisfied are you with your visit to the Tate?" Ninety-seven percent responded within the "satisfied" range, with 57% being "very satisfied," 28% being "reasonably satisfied" and 11% being "satisfied."

Some understanding of the importance of visitor amenities to the overall level of visitor satisfaction can be gained from the fact that visitors made almost twice as many suggestions for improving amenities than for either displays or information. There is a pressing need to improve both the gift shop and the café.

For most museum and gallery visitors, human communication is an important factor in the success of a visit. The Visitor Audit did not include a review of staff performance, nor did it ask visitors to rate gallery staff. Visitor comments reflect a broad range of experience; with warders, information officers and staff in the shop and café ranging from excellent levels of service to poor. This points to the need to clarify the role of staff working in the galleries, the types of information different posts are responsible for providing and training in customer care to raise the standard of performance for all staff who are in contact with the public.

13. If the Tate wishes to facilitate visitors to follow certain paths through the Gallery, it should indicate these pathways on the TatePlan or on a separate leaflet or Broadsheet: For example, a highlights tour could be indicated as an arrow from Room 1 to Room 30 on a plan at the beginning of the New Displays booklet. Shorter pathways (for example, the British Contemporary displays) could be illustrated on a Broadsheet.

III Information and Interpretation

14. The Information Desk should be redesigned to be more conspicuous. Its role and functions should be clearly defined in the design brief and communicated to the public through the design and presentation of the Desk.
15. The Tate should establish an Information Centre where the public can, for example: access information on the collections; learn what is on display; see reproductions of what is not on display; consult current exhibition catalogues; and obtain more information on Tate exhibitions. The Information Centre would be staffed by Information Officers who could conduct their office information activities (research, and responding to telephone and written enquiries) while supervising the Centre.
16. The Tate should develop a systematic method of providing the public and all departments that serve the public with information on what is and what is not on display, and where specific works are displayed. At present, this information is kept up-to-date by the Information Officers who disseminate it to various departments. The public can access this information only by asking. This is ineffective since visitors do not know whom to ask. A Micro-Gallery approach should be considered because it would allow visitors to find out where a specific painting is and how to get there; and it could provide a visual image and information on works not on display.
17. Because staff and volunteers who work in the public areas of the Gallery report to different departments, opportunities for providing information through human communication are likely being missed. The Communications Department, advised by the Visitor Audit Group, should co-ordinate the provision of information by staff and volunteers already working in the galleries. This role would include: training staff (including warders, shop staff, and Friends desk volunteers) in customer care and in providing wayfinding and other appropriate types of information; and communicating to the public that they are welcome to ask staff for information.

18. Room titles should be consistent with two-part headings that first present a stimulating theme (such as "*The Geometry of Fear*") followed by a descriptive art historical title ("*British Art 1945-55*"). Wall texts should be placed at both entrances to rooms.
19. The Tate should develop displays and in-gallery programmes that focus on the challenges and debates in art creation and art criticism.
20. A video or slide show should be produced to illustrate, by making the roles and voices of the staff more evident, what the Tate does and what Tate staff do.
21. Consideration should be given to curators signing wall texts.

IV Visitor Care

22. The Tate should commission a study into revenue-generating services such as the shop, café and restaurant to determine what visitors want, how these needs can be met and how meeting these needs can contribute to the revenue stream.
23. The Tate should develop programmes to involve young children and parents. Consideration should be given to establishing a special "activity room" where children and parents can participate in "hands-on" activities that enhance children's enjoyment of art. This "activity room" could be an adapted classroom since it would be used during half term and on weekends. A "creche" service could be offered for a small fee so that parents could enjoy the gallery together as an alternative to the current practise of one taking a turn with the children while the other looks at the art.
24. Consideration should be given to providing more outdoor amenities including places to sit and an outdoor café.
25. Subsequent phases of the Visitor Audit should include studies on: "non-visitors", with the objectives of identifying the opportunities and constraints to increasing the number of first-time visitors and making recommendations on how the Tate can involve potential adult and youth visitors who are not familiar with visiting galleries; and on school party and community programme visits with a view to investigating opportunities and challenges in audience development starting with children.

Appendix D

THIRTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ART HISTORIANS

28-30 MARCH 1987

'ART AND TRADITION'

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST

(112) MUSEUMS, GALLERIES AND EDUCATION : BRIDGING THE GAP

6. CURATORS, CULTURAL CONDITIONING, AND THE MYTH OF THE
SELF-EVIDENT ART WORK.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I must begin by stating that in this paper I am expressing a strictly personal view, not that of the museum for which I work. I should also say that I have not assembled a great deal of detailed evidence to back some of the assertions I shall be making, but that I am speaking from almost twenty years' experience as a fine art museum educator and that in that time I have come to certain conclusions. For example, that senior curators controlling display in art museums are specialists who in many cases will have spent a quarter of a century or more first being educated in and then practising their speciality. By the time they reach positions of power, curators are conditioned by their education and by their experience of the art history and museum sub-culture into ways of responding to works of art which, I suggest, are utterly remote from the responses of the overwhelming majority of museum visitors - everybody in fact who has not had some formal training in art or art history. This curatorial cultural conditioning might not be so disastrous in its effects on museum display if curators possessed greater self-awareness; however I

suspect that the problem is not simply one of self-awareness but a willful refusal to break out of the mould of systems of displaying works of art which au fond are simply aimed at those who share the same knowledge and assumptions - other curators and academic art historians. The present display at the Tate Gallery, for example, with some exceptions which I shall come back to shortly, consists overwhelmingly of numbered sequences of rooms, not identified by school, movement, theme or individual artist, in which works of art are presented with a standard label giving the artist's name and dates, the title of the work and its date, if known, the date and method of acquisition and the museum accession number. Medium is not stated. On the evidence of this system of display one can come to only two conclusions about the attitudes of those responsible. One is, as stated, that curators essentially make displays at each other ('darling, you must come and see my new hang') the other is that they believe works of art to be self-evident or at least sufficiently self-evident for non-specialist members of the public to obtain from them an experience commensurate with their contribution to the museum's running and the curator's salary from the taxes they pay. This myth of the self-evidence of art works is deeply rooted and in recent internal discussion on this topic that I have had in my own museum has been repeated to me at the highest level. But of course since for the gorse or geese who daily walk through the doors of our art museums is not same for the curatorial ganders and when one examines what it is that curators themselves want served up with their art works a very different picture emerges. (slide)

This is the latest Tate Gallery catalogue of acquisitions which, as I hope you can see from this slide, is an admirably fat volume. In the Daily Telegraph of 25 February 1957 Richard Dorment gave it a rave review

concluding 'Every entry is approached differently. That on Sicket's 'Miss Earhart's Arrival' (1932) uses newspaper accounts of that event to help us understand the immediate, documentary quality of that marvellous painting and an entry of Christopher LeBrun, (slide) (approved by the artist as are all entries on living painters) made me realise how completely I had misunderstood the technique of an artist I greatly admire' (emphasis added). Now, Richard Dormant is a professional art critic, and if he needs nearly two thousand words of explanation in order fully to take possession of a work of art by an artist, he already knows enough about 'greatly to admire' what hope is there for Joe Public? But the most important point here is that this catalogue entry, not annotated incidentally, represents the kind of apparatus of facts that curators and art historians themselves need and want and spend a great deal of time researching in order, as I said, to take possession of a work of art. So is the thing self-evident or isn't it? And if it isn't, why is the necessary information not made more accessible to visitors than in a 215 and 2 1/2 lb 10 oz (2.2 kg) professional publication which most visitors I suspect do not even know exists.

One answer to this question is that of course a great deal is done to provide information to visitors and that in many art museums responsibility for this provision is primarily vested in Education Departments. We all know the sorts of thing that museum Education Departments do and basically it all boils down to talking to people, writing at them or showing audio-visual programmes at them and all these things are valuable ways of helping to 'bridge the gap'. I was originally invited by the organiser of this section of the conference to talk specifically about some of the printed materials the Tate Gallery Education Department has produced in recent times and since the invitation

implied some flattery from a quarter, the National Gallery Education Department, that I greatly respect, I shall comply.

Adult

What is Cubism? 1985
What is Pre-Raphaelitism? 1984
Bacon 1985
Poetry Comp. 1985
With a Poet's Eye 1986
(Voices in the Gallery 1986)

Children

Pre-Raphaelite Study Pack
Holiday Trails
Study Packs

As I say, these sorts of things are all useful planks in the bridge across the gap, together with lectures and audio-visuals and not forgetting currently fashionable things like concerts and theatre performances in galleries. But these things are not available to, or taken up by every visitor, or in the case of lectures are not available continuously. Clearly what is needed as a key part of the gap-bridging apparatus is information as a permanent, integral part of display, not in leaflets which also require furniture, which run out and which get left around, not in free standing frames or lecterns which create visual clutter, get tripped over and are hard to read, but on the wall, at eye level, where it can be directly related to the works of art. Corsetrial reluctance to put anything on the wall but pictures is profound and deep seated and is

usually rationalised by the argument that the museum has an overriding duty to the public to display as many as possible of the works in its collection. But what is the good of cramming works onto the wall (or even hanging them with lots of space in between - 'letting them breathe') if the non-specialist public i.e. most visitors - simply walk straight past? A recent survey carried out in the Tate in May-June 1986 by students of Christie's Fine Art Course showed that of 228 visitors observed in one particular room, 49, or about 22%, walked straight through. Of 165 visitors observed in another gallery 96, around 60%, spent less than 10 seconds in front of any work of art. The summary of results characterised the behaviour of the average visitor observed as 'aimless'.

A much older survey done internally at the Tate in 1976, also in June, asked visitors first what kind of information they would like and second in what form they would like it. Visitors were questioned both entering and leaving the gallery. Only 4% going out said they required no information at all, out of six other types of information offered them by the interviewer the overwhelming majority, 40%, opted for 'biographical details of the artist with a note of his intentions in the creation of his work'. Only 9% said the existing notices on stands were quite sufficient.

I mentioned earlier that there were exceptions to the Tate's generally uninformative displays. The most notable up until today (and I mean today) has been in the William Blake room which is admirable as far as it goes and certainly provides a model for thinking about the display of the rest of the Tate collections, although of course it is a 'special case'. Also a special case is the Turner Collection in the Clore Gallery which so

T speak is being shown to the press for the first time. The installation was only finally completed yesterday so I don't have slides but there are four points in which it corresponds more or less and in principle to my basic needs: 1. The contents of the galleries is clearly identifiable to the visitor, i.e. the works of J.M.W. Turner.

2. The display is a carefully thought out blend of chronology and theme - an overall chronological structure broken down into thematic sections where called for.

3. Each section is clearly identified with a wall panel giving title and a summary of the theme or chronological phase.

4. Each individual painting has an expanded label of information and commentary.

Once the principle of such policy is accepted there are of course interminable arguments about the content, literary style, comprehension level, length, type size, design, placing and what sort of labels and wall panels and not least arguments about who should plan and write them - should it be Education or should it be the curator and if the former, how do they relate to the latter? My own view is that the ideal relationship between information and the display it refers to is such that the two functions cannot be separated so either collection curators or the writing or Education Departments take over the display of the collections. Either way, to conclude, I believe that the educational function of an art museum should first and foremost and above all be inherent in the whole manner in which its collections are displayed and I further think that in 1987 it is no longer acceptable for large tracts of national art collections to be displayed in a private house or commercial gallery, for the delectation of connoisseurs and the cognoscenti. It seems clear to me that this must change if we are to serve our existing audience better and especially if we hope to bring about any real and substantial expansion of that audience.

THE TATE GALLERY: AN EDUCATION DEPARTMENT PERSPECTIVE

1. PURSUE AND INFORMATION

1.1 Some of the most immediate and acute of the Education Department's problems lie in this area.

1.1.1 Signing, and the provision of information within the Gallery is inadequate to the point of being a disaster.

1.1.2 This has particularly been the case since the removal early in 1988 of the information display boards from the front entrance hall and the substitution of a video screen display. The Information Desk staff and the Education Department staff are united in their opinion, based on experience, that the video system is largely ineffective. Attendance at Education Department lectures, films, videos and tours have all been noticeably affected: the voluntary Guides, who carry out the four daily tours of the Gallery and the twice weekly Picture of the Month talks, were so disturbed at the drop in their audience that they made a formal protest to the Director. Discussions of the problem between the Education Department, the Head of Information Services and the Director had no satisfactory outcome, the Director taking the view, vigorously disputed by the Education Department, that the principal audience for the daily lectures, tours and other events in the Tate came from people on our mailing list who then made a deliberate journey to attend. We know from experience that there is also a substantial audience to be picked up from the daily flow of visitors who have no prior information. If the resources of public money that the Tate devotes to its Education events are to be justified these must be properly advertised within the Gallery so that all members of the public at least are aware of the choices they have.

1.1.3 The specific problem of providing information about Education Department events is linked to the provision of information generally. The abolition of the information boards in the entrance Hall appears to us to have deprived the public of any remotely adequate orientation at their point of entry to the museum. The Information Desk staff currently spend much time repeatedly answering the same questions: 'Where is the Picasso exhibition?', 'Where are the toilets?', 'Where are the Turners?', 'Where are the Impressionists?'. Three of these questions imply some prior knowledge of the Tate, but what of those who have none? And in any case what of all those other aspects of the Tate that those who have heard of Picasso or Turner may or may not discover for themselves?

We are not for a moment, of course, suggesting that there should be no programme of loan exhibitions, merely that their relationship to the display of the permanent collections should be given very careful consideration.

We would also like to mark here one way, at least, in which we think present display practice could be improved, which is that obvious 'star' works should be prominently hung or placed so that they are both drawn to the attention of the public and are optimally accessible for teaching purposes (important pictures placed in corners is our main bugbear).

- 2.1.4 Since the foundation of the Education Department in 1971 there has been sporadic discussion of the provision of written information in the galleries. Recently this discussion has focussed on the issue of wall texts, expanded labels and room titles. The current policy, only recently adopted, is that there should be in any gallery a single wall panel of not more than 150 words. The first example to be installed is in Gallery 35. This policy, and the Gallery 35 text, were compromises between the Education Department, Modern Collection and previous Director and both the Education and Modern Departments believe that the debate should be reopened. The Education Department view, in a rather extreme form, is contained in a paper delivered to the AAM Conference 1987 (copy attached).
- 2.1.5 The Education Department is strongly in favour of carpeting in certain galleries notably the large old style galleries and particularly those that form major circulation routes such as 3 and 33. The uncarpeted galleries are noisy, cold in feeling, uncomfortable to walk in and for women in any kind of heeled shoe, dangerous: there is a long history of women falling over in the galleries. (A straw poll of the Tate Guides taken at the last meeting revealed that of 13 present 9 had fallen in the galleries at some time.) The difference in comfort and atmosphere brought about by carpeting can be experienced in the Tate in the lower galleries and the Clore Gallery. The contrast is particularly dramatic when one walks through Galleries 33 and 32 and then enters the Turner galleries.
- 2.2 It appears to the Education Department that over the last decade a variety of future projects have been managed in such a way that they have been permitted to pre-empt resources required for the maintenance and development of the existing building, collections and services of the Tate. The Clore Gallery and the Tate Liverpool are now history but at the time of writing the Tate is about to go out to contract on a project, the Nomura Gallery, now costed at £2 million but for which the donor gave £1.4 million. The balance, which will probably grow over the period of the contract, will have to come from the Tate's own resources. Meanwhile, rainwater leaks onto Matisse's 'Snail', the dome over Gallery 28 is in a dubious structural condition and other galleries need more or less urgent refurbishment. The allocation from Grant-in-Aid of the additional funds needed for Nomura will also presumably have a knock-on effect on funding

available to other departments. The building of the Nomura Gallery will be very disruptive, not least to the Education Department. Whether the potential disruption nor the potential cost appear to have been fully taken into account in the setting up of this project.

3. VISITORS

3.1 The Education Department, of all departments of the Tate, deals most directly and continuously with the public, mediating between the public and the collections. Our view of what the public wants or needs is implicit or explicit in the earlier sections of this paper and is based on our experience. We fully acknowledge of course that the museum also has needs, which are not always compatible with those of the visitor, but in general we would urge that the comfort, convenience and satisfaction of the public should always be the first consideration in the taking of any decision. That said, it is also the case that we have no scientific knowledge of our visitors nor of our potential audience among the population at large and what measures might transform the potential into the actual. Is it time for the Tate to undertake some research in this area? The last visitor surveys were carried out in 1975 to 76 by Michael Compton. (On file in Education Dept.) The Tate's high attendance figures in the past year have been the cause of some complacency. The question we ask is what is the quality of the experience offered to our visitors?

3.2 Of the Tate's basic public facilities we think that consideration should be given to the Restaurant: it is wonderful to eat in, especially for lovers of fine wine, and it generates considerable revenue for the Gallery. But is it the right type of operation for a large international public art museum?

3.3 Many of the issues raised in this paper are the subject of current thought and debate in the museum world. Known to us are unpublished discussion papers by Evelyn Silber (Birmingham Art Gallery) and Sara Holdsworth (Manchester City Art Gallery) and a published essay 'Counting Visitors or Visitors Who Count' by Eilana Hooper-Greenhill (University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies) in 'The Museum Time-Machine' (Ed. R. Lumley) 1988. The first Annual Christmas Lecture in Museum Studies (in reality a one-day conference) at University of Leicester on 15 December 1988 will also deal with these issues.

Other museums have already adopted some practices relating to display and information which at least should give us food for thought: the National Gallery is extensively carpeted and has explanatory labels; in some rooms it has furniture and decorative sculpture. The National Gallery of Scotland has recently been spectacularly refurbished with carpets, decorative objects and explanatory labels and a similar treatment had previously been given to Manchester City Art Galleries. Birmingham City Art Gallery has explanatory labels

MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 Until October 1987 the Education Department was in principle managed by the Keeper of Museum Services who also in theory represented us and the other Museum Services departments (Exhibitions and Technical Services, Library, Archive and Photography) on the various committees which constitute the senior management system at the Tate. He was reporting officer for the heads of his departments and countersigning officer for their senior staff. Since the Keeper of Museum Services' retirement heads of the above mentioned departments have reported directly to the Director who has been able to give them more or less time. The Education Department has on the whole found the new situation advantageous, not least in being able directly to represent what we take to be our interests to the Director. However, it seems to us that the long term implications of the present situation for all affected departments and not least for the Director need to be given careful consideration.
- 4.2 We note that the Tate has no formally constituted senior management team (the practice has been for the Director to call together the full Keepers and Head of Administration when necessary) and that the monthly Heads of Departments meeting is presently very prematurely constituted purely as a reporting meeting and not as a forum for discussion although in the past it has been the scene of outbursts and sniping from frustrated heads of departments.
- 4.3 Managers have a right to be managed. In order to function fully and effectively we need to know that what we are doing is the positive stated policy of the organisation, that we have the support of Director and Trustees and that everyone else is clear as to this.

Simon Wilson
Head of Education Department
9th September 1988

THE READABILITY OF TATE GALLERY TEXTS

A REPORT BY

SIMON WILSON, TATE GALLERY EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

MAY 1991

1. Introduction

The systematic use of explanatory texts placed on the walls of the Tate Gallery was first introduced as part of the complete re-display of the collections which opened to the public in January 1990.

Texts are of two kinds : panels giving a room title together with a general account of the contents of the room, and ~~labels~~ for *captions* individual works.

Panel and label size is standardised.

Texts are written by the curator responsible for the selection of the works displayed. They are edited first within the curatorial department and then passed to Education for approval or further editing.

The experience of the first two cycles of writing and editing these texts suggested that an attempt should be made to analyse the readability of existing texts and to produce some guidance for curators writing in the future.

2. Acknowledgements and Sources

One starting point for this report was an undergraduate paper by Mary-Anne Edwards, a communications student at University of Leicester Museum Studies Department. The basis of her paper was an analysis of the readability of a small sample (6) of labels from the 1990 Tate Gallery re-hang. She used the Fry Test of readability, the simplest of many such tests, devised by Edward Fry, an American academic, and first published in the Journal of Reading, April 1968. For this report the Fry test was applied to a much larger sample of Tate Gallery texts. The testing and tabulation of results was carried out by Fiona Bradley for the Tate Gallery Education Department.

The Edwards paper also led me to Sorsby and Horne, The Readability of Museum Labels, Museums Journal December 1980, and to Helen Coxall who teaches English at Oxford Polytechnic, and Communications for the Museum Studies course at University of Leicester. She has a background in art history as well as English and is preparing a doctoral thesis on the subject of museum texts. I have referred to two papers by her, Museum Text as Mediated Message, Women, Heritage and Museums (WHAAM) Newsletter 14 October 1990, and Museum Text: Accessibility and Relevance, Journal of Education in Museums August 1991. Helen Coxall also now advises Tate Gallery Liverpool on its label texts. The Economist Style Guide, The Economist Books 1991, embodies a number of principles that the Tate Gallery might adopt. Keith Waterhouse, Daily Mirror Style, Mirror Books 1981, gives insight into communicating with a very different audience. Both these books and Helen Coxall cite the authority of George Orwell, Politics and the English Language 1946.

3. The Fry Test

The Fry Test uses three samples of one hundred words to find an average sentence length and average number of syllables per 100 words for any given author. These are plotted against each other to obtain a measure of readability. There are many other factors affecting readability, notably paragraph length, sentence structure and of course, the degree to which the reader comprehends the vocabulary, references and concepts embodied in the text. However, it is widely accepted that sentence length and word length are of fundamental significance.

All readability factors are particularly important in the context of museum labels and wall texts. It is much harder to read standing up looking at a fixed text than sitting down holding a text in the hand. The difficulty may be compounded by distractions

Captions Diagnostic Chart

Undefined technical terms	
Untranslated foreign words/titles	
Evaluative language (subjective)	
Names unexplained	
Dates unexplained	
References to other work	
References uncrossreferenced	
More than 1 idea per sentence	
Active voice constructions	
Passive voice constructions	
Concrete nouns	
Abstract nouns	
Long sentences	
Long words	
Story told	
Obscure adjectives	
Obscure artists' statements	

Interpretation at Tate Modern

Overview

Interpretation is integral to the education programme, but is also key to acquisition policy and practice, display styles, and architecture of the museum. Interpretation and Education is therefore seen not as single discipline within the museum, but as a collaborative part of a wider whole. For the purposes of this overview, however, the focus is on the range of activities, including explanatory texts, audiotours, multimedia content, and reading rooms, that provide information to the public about the works on display at a given Tate site.

Why interpret?

1. Interpretation is at the heart of Tate's mission - to promote an awareness, understanding and appreciation of art
2. It reflects Tate's belief that works of art do not have self-evident meanings and that Tate has an obligation to provide accurate, accessible and stimulating information about its collections and displays
3. Tate believes that works of art have a capacity for multiple readings and that interpretation should make visitors aware of subjectivity of any interpretive text
4. Tate views interpretation as playing a key role in the origination and planning of projects, exhibitions and displays

What does interpretation cover?

5. Interpretation encompasses the physical, intellectual and virtual experiences of visiting a gallery and engaging with works of art
6. The purpose of interpretation is to provide a multi-layered key to understanding works of art through a variety of media ranging from wall texts to catalogues, audio visual to virtual which are not confined to the physical confines of the Galleries and which cover a wide spectrum of visitor expectations
7. Interpretation embraces a willingness to experiment with new ideas that engage the public with Tate collections in different ways - e.g. multimedia projects, the Internet, innovative exhibitions and displays

Who do we interpret for?

8. Tate recognises the validity of diverse audience responses to works of art

9. Tate's interpretation will reflect an awareness of the range of abilities and interests of its audiences, reinforcing Tate's commitment to access for all.

Who produces our interpretation?

10. Tate interpretation should incorporate a wide spectrum of voices and opinions from inside and outside the institution
11. Tate views the form, content and delivery of interpretation as a collaborative activity that will involve cross-departmental and cross-site consultation under a clearly set out and agreed process
12. The ongoing research and evaluation of visitors' needs and responses to interpretation within and surrounding projects is essential

[The above principles have been agreed by Tate Trustees]

The Interpretation Process

Tate Modern has a Curator of Interpretation, who is responsible for the interpretation at the gallery. The Interpretation Curator and their team both author and/or edit all forms of interpretation, working with exhibitions and displays curators and with individuals outside Tate (artists, cultural commentators, external curators etc). They are a member of the Collection displays delivery team, and work from inception on displays.

Interpretation Tools Currently Used:

Text:

Wall Texts

Wall texts give an explanatory overview of the contents of the room, introducing the ideas behind the selection of works. Wall texts are written by curators involved in the display, or by the Interpretation team, appearing with the writer's by-line. Including the writer's name is a way of avoiding the idea of a single authorial voice for the Tate, and also of underscoring the fact that the selection of works and their interpretation reflect a particular viewpoint.

Captions

Captions address an individual work in a particular context and are written by curators involved in the display, or by the Interpretation team. They might identify the artist's sources, elucidate symbolism, present pertinent quotations or supply contextual information directly relevant to the work.

Extended Captions

A number of additional captions for works are commissioned from artists and cultural commentators outside the Tate. The intention is to bring 'other voices' into the dialogue with gallery visitors. Opinionated, provoking, and insightful, these captions have a by line and are given a title to differentiate them from curatorial texts e.g.: 'The Bigger Picture'.

Labels

Each work in the exhibition has a label. This includes the name and dates of the artist, where they were born and where they worked; the title of the work in English and foreign title if applicable, the date, medium and lender/acquisition details, and audioguide number where appropriate.

Leaflets

Leaflets vary depending on the role they are required to fulfil. In a Collection display they might offer additional, more in-depth information about a display theme; while for an exhibition they might take the form of a room-by-room guide (presenting the information generally carried in wall texts), or they might offer a timeline, or other contextual information (in the form of both text and images). In addition, they often include floor plans, public events and general gallery information.

Audio:

Audiopoints

Static points where visitors can listen to focused discussion of individual works in the gallery, or to programmes about broader cultural themes: e.g. Art and Dissent, Collections and Collecting.

There are currently around 40 audopoints at TM, located in the galleries, reading spaces and concourse areas. Each 30 minute audio programme is broken into short sections, and mixes scripted commentary with interviews that offer plural readings of the work in focus or explore a particular theme.

Audioguides

Appendix E

Unpublished paper: 080923 23.09.2008

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING LABELS

Overview

Wall texts and captions should be seen as the primary level in a continuum of interpretation. (More detailed discussion of works will be available in the form of catalogues, books in reading spaces and through lectures and films etc). This primary level should be easily comprehensible to most visitors.

Given that wall texts and captions are read whilst standing up, often in a crowded situation, and that the first-glance attention span of a visitor is only a few seconds, texts need to be short, uncomplicated, and immediately engaging.

Rules of thumb:

Sentences should be short, simple in structure, and should ideally present only one idea. Specialist terminology should be avoided; where it must be used, it should be explained. Texts should address the work on view, and generally avoid reference to other specific works, unless they are in the same room, and the visitor can easily be directed to them.

Quotations can enliven texts, but should be short, and carefully chosen for their lucidity. Starting with an interesting fact or detail is more likely to entice the viewer to read on than beginning with a dry statement. Active voice constructions, a sense of narrative, familiar vocabulary, the use of concrete, rather than abstract nouns, will all aid clarity.

It is preferable to present a few key points that will fuel the viewer's interest rather than trying to cram too much in. If texts are closer in tone to journalism than a catalogue entry they are more likely to be read and understood.

Wall texts: Wall texts give an explanatory overview of the contents of the room, introducing the ideas behind the selection of works - they make the argument for the exhibition. Complex ideas need not be avoided in wall texts, but they should be presented in a simple, non-academic manner. Though many of our visitors are well educated, only a very small percentage are art history specialists. We are not writing for this specialist audience (who are addressed elsewhere, through catalogues, art historical conferences etc), but for a broad public. We need, therefore, to make a conscious effort to avoid vocabulary, references and knowledge assumptions peculiar to art history. The first sentences of the wall text should summarise what is to follow, rather like a standfirst in a newspaper, that sits below the headline, introducing the article. Paragraphs should be short, and clearly separated in the finished design.

Labels: Label captions should be written in an engaging style, and will often reflect

the theme of the room in which the works are shown. They should be quite different in register from a catalogue entry, and the information presented should be carefully selected. Far better to choose one or two interesting points that address the work directly, rather than trying to cover too much ground. Leave more complicated ideas to the wall texts.

General guidelines:

- Focus on the subject and on what can be seen
- Avoid biography unless absolutely pertinent
- Don't mention other versions in other museums
- Don't make reference to other works unless they are directly adjacent

Some guidelines on style

- Keep sentences short
- Try not to start sentences with a subordinate clause
- Be positive in comments, not negative. It is best to avoid comments like 'Neither the artist nor the location is known'
- Use active rather than passive constructions wherever possible
- Keep the tone informal and like speech
- Keep the length to about 55 - 100 words
- Use 'about' rather than 'circa' and in general, avoid Latinisms
- Bible quotes in King James version but kept to a minimum

Sample caption, before and after editing

Piet Mondrian 1872-1944

Tree about 1913

Original caption:

This is one of a series of paintings of trees developed from Mondrian's earlier, more naturalistic landscapes. Influenced by the Analytic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, Mondrian condensed the image of a tree into a network of straight lines while retaining an atmospheric colour scheme of greys and ochres. In this network a tendency towards horizontal and vertical arrangements can be seen. Mondrian came to believe that the interlocking horizontal and vertical lines had an important symbolic significance, representing the union of opposites and the material and spiritual forces governing all of life. From about 1920 he made his pictures only from these elements with the primary colours and non-colours.

New caption:

A young Dutch composer who knew Mondrian remembered going to his Paris studio and finding it full of 'Trees, nothing but abstract trees!' Mondrian had arrived in Paris in 1911, and quickly absorbed the ideas of Cubism. Here, he condenses the image of a tree into a network of straight lines, painted in earthy greys and ochres. 'Nature inspires me ... but I want to approach truth as closely as possible; I therefore abstract everything until I attain the essence of things' he wrote in 1914.

Unpublished paper: 081107

TATE BRITAIN INTERPRETATION WRITING TEXT:

The key to successful communication is being **inclusive** as opposed to **exclusive**. You can talk about any art work or subject in an accessible welcoming way. You can start by asking these questions¹:

- **Who** is it for? What are my audiences for this particular text?
- What are the **key points** I am trying to put across? Are these the most important & useful point?
- What **style** am I using? (academic, didactic, conversational, narrative, poetic, quotes)
- What have I **left out** and why?
- Where will the text go? (Think of the location of the wall text/caption in the space and its proximity to the art work)

Useful tips to keep in mind when writing text²:

1. Write for your audience.

Most of the visitors that read wall panels text are non-specialists.

2. Start with the most important idea first and then support it with your argument. An interesting fact or detail is more likely to entice the viewer to read on than beginning with a dry statement.

3. Bring in the human element by:

- Including people - real people that visitors can relate to. When you give examples, think about who you might be excluding.
- Including shared experience of a familiar event or place. Use humour with caution as it is not universal.
- Evoke the senses, references to smells, tastes, sounds
- Including quotations
- Relating the work to everyday life

4. Build the text around the display/artwork. Text should be quite general as people tend to remember themes, subjects and big ideas. Avoid biography unless absolutely pertinent. Don't make reference to other works unless they are directly adjacent and don't mention other versions in other museums.

5. Write as you would speak – or almost. Use a lively and expressive vocabulary that shows enthusiasm and engages readers.

It helps to listen carefully to the radio or the TV and reflect on how things are explained.

6. Write with clarity, using:

- Familiar words, that engage a wider audience
- Mainly short sentences, having one idea to one sentence
- Proper paragraphs
- Active rather than passive verbs

Avoid:

- Long sentences with more than one idea per sentence - often uses subordinate clauses
- Technical terms - language from a specialist field of discourse - without explanation
- The passive voice which avoids identifying who did what to whom - '*It was decided*'
- Cliches and street jargon - cause difficulty to people with English as a second language
- Repetition and redundancy - make it longer than needed and digress unnecessarily

¹ Based on the work of Dr Helen Coxal (museum text expert)

² Adapted from a 2007 AMA presentation by the V&A Editor

- Lexical fillers - *you know what I mean*
- Evaluative terms - *fantastic! fabulous!*

Guidelines on wall texts and labels³

Wall texts and captions are read whilst standing up, often in a crowded situation, and that the first-glance attention span of a visitor is only a few seconds, texts need to be short, uncomplicated, and immediately engaging.

Wall texts: Wall texts give an explanatory overview of the contents of the room, introducing the ideas behind the selection of works - they make the argument for the exhibition. Complex ideas need not be avoided in wall texts, but they should be presented in a simple, non-academic manner. Though many of our visitors are well educated, only a very small percentage is art history specialists. We are not writing for this specialist audience (who are addressed elsewhere, through catalogues, art historical conferences etc), but for a broad public. We need, therefore, to make a conscious effort to avoid vocabulary, references and knowledge assumptions peculiar to art history. The first sentences of the wall text should summarise what is to follow, rather like a stand first in a newspaper, which sits below the headline, introducing the article. Paragraphs should be short and clearly separated in the finished design.

Labels: Label captions should be written in an engaging style, and will often reflect the theme of the room in which the works are shown. They should be quite different in register from a catalogue entry, and the information presented should be carefully selected. They should not repeat what visitors can see. It is far better to choose one or two interesting points that address the work directly, rather than trying to cover too much ground. Leave more complicated ideas to the wall texts.

“What information consumes is obvious. It consumes the attention of the recipient. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

Herbert Simon

³ Written by Tate Britain Interpretation team (prior 2006)

Gina Koutsina - based on previous guidelines by the interpretation team November 2008

WRITING GUIDELINES FOR DISPLAYS (by Jane Burton)

Overview:

Wall texts and captions should be seen as the primary level in a continuum of interpretation. (More detailed discussion of works could be made available in the form of audioguides, books in reading spaces and through lectures and films etc). This primary level should be easily comprehensible to most visitors.

Given that wall texts and captions are read whilst standing up, often in a crowded situation, and that the first-glance attention span of a visitor is only a few seconds, texts need to be short, uncomplicated, and immediately engaging.

Rules of thumb:

Sentences should be short, simple in structure, and should ideally present only one idea. Specialist terminology should be avoided and where it must be used, it should be explained. (Even relatively straightforward terms can cause problems to the uninitiated, as, for example, 'frontality', 'planes and volumes', 'free faceting', 'the return to order', 'analytic Cubism', 'formally'). Texts should address the work on view, and generally avoid reference to other specific works, unless they are also in the room.

Quotations can enliven texts, but should be short, and carefully chosen for their lucidity. Starting with an interesting fact or detail is more likely to entice the viewer to read on than beginning with some dry statement. Active voice constructions, a sense of narrative, familiar vocabulary, the use of concrete, rather than abstract nouns, are all elements that will aid clarity.

It is preferable to present a few key points that will fuel the viewer's interest rather than trying to cram too much in. If texts are closer in tone to journalism than a catalogue entry they are more likely to be read and understood.

Wall texts should not be longer than 300 words. Captions should not be longer than 90 words.

Wall texts: Wall texts give an explanatory overview of the contents of the room, introducing the ideas behind the selection of works - they make the argument for the display. Complex ideas need not be avoided in wall texts, but they should certainly be presented in a simple, non-academic manner. Though many of our visitors are well educated, only a very small percentage will be art history specialists. We are not writing for this specialist audience (who are addressed elsewhere, through catalogues, art historical conferences etc), but for a broad public. We need, therefore, to make a conscious effort to avoid vocabulary, references and knowledge assumptions peculiar to art history. The first sentences of the wall text should summarise what is to follow,

rather like a standfirst in a newspaper, that sits below the headline, introducing the article. Paragraphs should be short, and clearly separated in the finished design.

Captions: Captions should be written in an engaging style, and will often reflect the themes of the displays in which the works are shown. They should be quite different in register from a catalogue entry, and the information presented should be carefully selected. Far better to choose one or two interesting points that address the work directly, rather than trying to cover too much ground. Leave more complicated ideas to the wall texts.

Some before and after examples of captions

Piet Mondrian 1872-1944
Tree circa 1913

Original caption:

This is one of a series of paintings of trees developed from Mondrian's earlier, more naturalistic landscapes. Influenced by the Analytic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, Mondrian condensed the image of a tree into a network of straight lines while retaining an atmospheric colour scheme of greys and ochres. In this network a tendency towards horizontal and vertical arrangements can be seen. Mondrian came to believe that the interlocking horizontal and vertical lines had an important symbolic significance, representing the union of opposites and the material and spiritual forces governing all of life. From about 1920 he made his pictures only from these elements with the primary colours and non-colours.

New caption:

A young Dutch composer who knew Mondrian, remembered going to his Paris studio and finding it full of "Trees, nothing but abstract trees!" Mondrian had arrived in Paris in 1911, and quickly absorbed the ideas of Cubism. Here, he condenses the image of a tree into a network of straight lines, painted in earthy greys and ochres. "Nature inspires me ... but I want to approach truth as closely as possible; I therefore abstract everything until I attain the essence of things," he wrote in 1914.

Bridget Riley
To a Summer's Day 1980
Original caption

Riley's work has progressed in cycles of activity. Certain motifs and concerns are pursued, put aside, and then taken up again at a later date. 'To a Summer's Day' is one of a number of works, made between 1974 and 1981, in which Riley returned to using a wave form. She had previously explored this motif at various points in the 1960s (see 'Fall' 1963 also displayed here). The development in Riley's use of colour are apparent in this later work. Here, the wave form presents four colours - blue, violet, pink and ochre - in combinations that are variously 'warm' and 'cold'. This formal device is thus used to provoke complex interactions between the different colours.

New caption:

Despite its abstract form, the evocatively titled *To a Summer's Day* seems to invite comparison with our own experiences of the natural world. For Riley, the connection between her art and the natural world is elusive: "If I am outside in nature, I do not look *for* something or *at* things. I try to absorb sensations without censoring them, without identifying them. I want them to come out through the pores of my eyes, as it were - on a particular level of their own."

Bridget Riley
Deny 11 1967

Original caption:

Between 1964 and 1967 Riley painted a number of works which explore the expressive potential of a range of 'warm' and 'cold' greys. 'Deny 11' is the second of two related paintings which mark the climax of this phase. Its theme of denial is implicit in the relationship of the oval forms to the ground. Where tonal contrast is denied, for example in the dark ovals on the dark ground, then colour becomes more pronounced. Conversely, where tonal contrast is greatest - between the white ovals and the ground - the effect is to diminish or 'deny' the colour. In addition, the smoky area across the canvas is intended to screen the image: 'obscuring, denying it.'

New caption:

The title of this painting, *Deny 11*, refers to Riley's decision to turn away from the clear, black and white contrasts of her earlier work, and to explore instead a range of 'warm' and 'cold' greys. The painting's optical effects are also a kind of denial. Where the grey oval shapes are brightest against the background they appear almost white and their colour is diminished or denied. But where the ovals are darkest their blue-grey colour and the reddish brown of the background becomes much more pronounced.

Good examples of Wall Texts

Jan Svankmajer: Dimensions of Dialogue

Ordinary objects take on a sinister life of their own in this animation by Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer.

From a motley collection of fruit and vegetables, household utensils and lumps of clay, Svankmajer conjures human-shaped figures that touch, mingle and finally devour one another or tear themselves to pieces. The 'dialogue' referred to in the title is notable by its absence. Instead, the three sequences that make up the film are essays in communicative breakdown and intolerance.

The first section features a series of disembodied heads that turn cannibal, vomiting up the remains in a savage game. These are followed in the second by two clay figures who come together in apparent harmony, only to erupt into a frenzy of

destruction. In the third part, another set of heads play a version of the scissors-paper-stone game, which devolves from co-operation to chaos.

In 1972, the Czech Communist government banned Svankmajer from making films, believing his work to be critical of the state. After seven years, he was allowed to resume, providing that he stick to literary adaptations. Then in 1982 he made this animation, which, despite international acclaim, was banned in his homeland.

Svankmajer calls himself a Surrealist, and in keeping with the revolutionary aims of the pre-war movement, believes that art should be an irritant, satirising the oppressions and complacency of modern society. Though it was vetoed by the Czech Communists, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, with its all-consuming figures, can be seen at one level as a barbed rejection of Western-style capitalism. Svankmajer has commented: 'This civilisation eats everything. It eats nature, whole cultures, but also love, liberty and poetry and it changes these into the odious excrement of the society of consumption and mass culture.'

Jan Svankmajer was born in Czechoslovakia in 1934. He lives and works in Prague.

Sarah Lucas

Coarse visual puns are a Sarah Lucas trademark. But her in-your-face approach masks a serious concern to examine stereotyped representations of sexuality and gender.

'I use sexist attitudes because they are there to be used. I get strength from them ... With only minor adjustments, a provocative image can become confrontational ... I'm dipping into the culture, pointing a finger: directing attention to what's there,' says Lucas. Her sculptures are constructed from everyday items, such as pieces of domestic furniture, clothing and fruit, which she combines to make crude approximations of the male or female form. In other works she photographs herself or takes casts of parts of her body, subverting the conventions of self-portraiture by adopting an aggressive, and often sexually ambiguous stance.

Much of her work explores the stereotyped gender representations prevalent in the tabloid media and in street slang, as well as in the visual language of art. At times, she achieves this by scrutinising her own identity as a woman and as a female artist. Her witty, down-to-earth style ensures that the effect is never sermonising.

She rarely alters her objects extensively, preferring the traditional sculptural approach of 'truth to materials', in which there is no attempt to disguise the elements from which the sculpture is made. Lucas has commented: 'I like the handmade aspect of the work. I'm not keen to refine it: I enjoy the crappy bits round the back. When it's good enough it's perfect.'

Sarah Lucas was born in London in 1962, where she lives and works.

Alberto Giacometti and Wols

In different ways, Alberto Giacometti's fragile, elongated figures, and Wols' delicate etchings reflect the precariousness of life in the inhospitable landscape of war-scarred Europe.

The Swiss artist Giacometti and the German artist Wols worked in Paris after the Second World War. Both were admired by the existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre. In Giacometti's figures, each isolated in its own space, Sartre saw a visualisation of his own ideas about the loneliness and ultimate absurdity of the human condition. Wols' chaotic microcosms of tangled lines project a similar aura of uncertainty and instability, which Sartre described as expressing the 'universal horror of being in the world'.

Giacometti often reworked his sculpture over long periods before casting them in bronze, building up the clay model, then stripping it down, rebuilding and stripping again and again, as he gradually eroded the outline of the body to its essential core. The pitted textures of their surfaces reveal the constant movement of his hands, paralleling the restless marks in Wols' etchings.

They were also both influenced by Surrealism, though Giacometti had abandoned the movement in 1935. Wols was fascinated by the natural world, and suggestions of body parts, distant galaxies or microscopic life are woven into his drawings. The ease with which his images seem to emerge echoes the Surrealist technique of automatic drawing, in which the artist attempts to put down lines spontaneously, without the intervention of the conscious mind.

Alberto Giacometti (1906-1966) was born in Switzerland. He spent most of his working life in Paris.

Wols, Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, (1913-1951) was born in Germany. He moved to Paris in 1933. He remained in France for most of his short life.

Helen Coxall

Some observations on writing accessible, relevant and inclusive interpretive text

When you write interpretive texts, you are not just writing down the results of academic research – you are communicating. If you are interested in reaching a wider audience, your role should be that of an enabler. The words you use, what you choose to say – and especially what you choose to leave out – determine how accessible and relevant the displays are to your audiences.

The key to successful communication is being **inclusive** as opposed to **exclusive**. Some interpretive information written about museums and galleries and their collections tend to exclude many people because it is seen as too grand, too difficult and too formal. It is not seen as friendly, welcoming, relevant or even as understandable. But this does not have to be the case. It is perfectly possible to talk about any subject in an accessible welcoming way – it is just a matter of style and imagination.

If you really want to write about your collections in an accessible welcoming way, ask yourself these four questions:

WHO is it for?

HOW am I doing it?

WHAT are the key points I am trying to put across?

WHAT have I left out and why?

WHO is it for?

Formal, technical, impersonal language may be appropriate for textbooks or published conference papers, but it is not appropriate for reading while walking round a museum or gallery.

Consider the register you are using (e.g. is it academic or everyday)

Use familiar everyday language – write the way you speak

Use personal address – welcome the visitors and address them personally

Use active language – not passive (Don't say 'It was made' - say who made it!)

Consider the readability of your language

Not everyone has a college education and not everyone has English as a first language

Keep sentences short.

Don't assume prior knowledge –explain any necessary technical or unfamiliar terms.

HOW am I writing?

Didactic style

Tells people how it is – it say '*listen to me, I know and I am telling you*'. It leaves no room for questions and can make people feel stupid or at least over-awed.

Dialogic(conversational)style

Is the opposite – it engages visitors, asks questions, uses personal address, and admits it does not know all the answers

Narrative style

Everyone loves a story. Human stories make things relevant – we can all relate to personal experience.

Quotes

Quotes bring a text to life. It is interesting to hear what people thought and how they spoke. Again, the human angle makes it relevant.

WHAT are the key points?

All objects have their own life stories – a painting is not just a series of brushstrokes, a silver chalice is not just a hallmark. Objects have their own biographies rather than the fixed meaning given them once they have reached the museum. They have gathered their biographies from the different circumstances of their use; from the various social, economic, political and cultural environments through which they have passed. It is not

just the authenticity of the object that is of value, but the object's potential for retelling events, people's stories and practices from the past. What is crucial is how curators use the objects – whether they choose to listen to their stories or to silence them.

All collected objects of any kind and the buildings in which they are housed are there because people needed, made and used them. Tell the people's stories – and don't forget the makers. The buildings may have been commissioned by a rich landowner, but the stories of their servants who were part of their lives will have relevance to many people too. History is not just the story of wars and of the rich - although that may be the impression from some history books. There are many histories waiting to be told.

WHAT has been left out and why?

Ignoring these biographies can result in damaging gaps that misrepresent people from the past and have serious implications for people in the present. Ignoring, servants, women, and people of ethnic origin other than white, is insulting and misrepresents history.

This sometimes occurs because of adhering to set ways of doing things or putting things into strict categories. Thus the story of a historic house for example could be told from the point of view of the architect, the owner, or the precious objects it houses. However, it could also be told from the point of view of the social and political situation at the time that enabled such a house to be built or the lifestyle of the many people who built it and worked in it.

Beware the bias of historical source documents and avoid reproducing their attitudes in your choice of language, your choice of what you say and what you chose to leave out. You will not know if your choice is likely to offend anyone unless you ask. Work closely with your local communities and be guided by their experience and cultural perspectives.

Dr Helen Coxall

Museum language consultant

Endnotes

ⁱ Distinction by Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002) focuses on empirical research undertaken in 1963 and concluded in 1967/68. The original publication in 1979 was in French. It was subsequently translated into English, and appeared in the United States in 1984 under the title *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

ⁱⁱ 9226 questionnaires were collected from French museums and divided into two sub-populations, one consisting of individuals of an educational level below that of the baccalaureate (M1), the other of individuals of a level to or above that of the baccalaureate (M2).

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Under Thatcher's government the sum of money set aside for the Tate did not grow at the rate it had done before 1980 and it bore less relation to the Tate's needs and ambitions' Spalding, F. (1998), *The Tate : a history*. London: Tate Gallery.

^{iv} These issues were discussed at a conference at the Musée du Louvre: Les institutions culturelles au plus près du public in a paper. Lahav, S. (2002), *Free for All: A Five Year Correspondence*. Paper presented at the Les institutions culturelles au plus près du public, Musée de Louvre.

^v Session at the Association of Art Historians Conference: *ARTiculations*: Birkbeck and University College 10-13 April 2003: Session Convenor: Sylvia Lahav (The National Gallery). *Falling Apart at the Themes: Mourning the Particular*. Tate Modern, New Art Gallery Walsall, The Lowry, and more recently, the Baltic have all attracted huge interest and visitor numbers have far exceeded expectations. For these new galleries, the days of a white-cube culture have passed. Methods of interpretation and display have been re-evaluated and a wider range of text, audio and visual guides are now standard for their visitors. Education departments meet a seemingly ever-growing need for lectures, gallery talks, seminars and courses for both general and specialist audiences, while fund raising sponsorship and marketing has become an essential arm of the museum's activities. But while increased visitor numbers may be used to justify government's grant in aid and national museums are free, not everything in the garden is rosy. Lottery distributors are regularly criticised for failing to anticipate how capital projects would create greater revenue costs. Financial crises are common, building and maintenance costs are mounting and a continued emphasis on increasing visitor numbers is putting a strain on resources, financial as well as personnel.

^{vi} See Rachel Mason: *Critical Studies in Art and Design Education* by D. Thistlewood, *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 190-192 (review consists of 3 pages) Published by: [National Art Education Association](#)

^{vii} In an article by Anthony Dyson, quoted in *Style, Technique, Context: Art and Design History in the General Certificate of Secondary Education*, (JStor, Art Education/January 1989) the following is stated, 'Most pupils are likely to relate Criticism and History of Art and Design to practical work but there seem to be good reasons, although these cases may be exceptional, for allowing and encouraging those with an enthusiasm for it to concentrate on Criticism and History as independent study. Few teachers preparing pupils for the GCSE will wish to adopt a traditional approach to Critical and Historical studies. To many of them, and to their pupils, the term 'History of Art' may well be intimidating, and may conjure (sic) up a caricature of the art historian as an inhibitor of creativity and as inimical to the notion of 'personal expression' in art education. Perhaps it is the chronological dimension, in particular, which repels...[however], some notion of historical sequence and coincidence is essential to a proper understanding of the evolution of art and design, (though) this should be seen as an enabling framework

rather than a crushing burden of facts to be memorised. The article goes on 'Teachers are urged to ...give pupils opportunities to study particular works and also, complementarily, to help them towards an understanding of broad contexts 'Dyson, A. (1989), 'Style, Context: Art and Design History in the General Certificate of Secondary Education'. *Art Education*, 42 (1), 12-19.

^{viii} This proved to be the result of the way in which teachers were interpreting the requirements of the new GCSE examination.

^{ix} At one point in 1988-9 the education department was organising over 15 taught gallery talks per day.

^x Angela Rumbold would have challenged this criticism of lack of consultation, stating in a speech in 1987 that she had sent out 60,000 copies of the document Rumbold, A. (1987), *Opening Address*. Paper presented at the The National Curriculum: Implications for the Arts, London.

^{xi} The core target for the numbers of school children visitors quoted in Tate on line for the years 2003-2004, 2004-2005, 2005-2006 remain static at 0.7 million of an overall total of 5.1m and for those in organised educational programmes a consistent 0.14m.

^{xii} Tate biennial report 1986-1988 states that 'fitting out the new Schools entrance was completed for the start of the new school year in September 1987. Almost immediately we were nearly overwhelmed by an unprecedented number of school groups wishing to visit Tate'.

^{xiii} In a conference held at the Royal Geographical Society in 1989, there was a striking difference in the way in which Neil McGregor and Serota saw the role of a museum display: Serota expressing his desire for the public to walk into the galleries, not know where to find anything and be amazed and astounded at its fresh approach. McGregor on the other hand wanting the public to visit paintings like 'old friends' to be familiar with their positioning and feel secure in the knowledge that this was unlikely to change.

^{xv} See full statistics regarding Tate on line at <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/pressoffice/pressreleases/290801.htm>

^{xvi} <http://www.chart.ac.uk/chart2001/papers/noframes/lahav.html> for report on Tate Modern's on-line course, An Introduction to Tate Modern

^{xvii} Despite McGregor's stated ambition of making sure that public spaces like the National Gallery should be open and freely accessible for all, the issue of charging appeared many times on the government's agenda between the years 1987 and 2007. In 1974, there was a re-instatement of entrance charges for a number of national museums (including the Tate where the charge for entry was 10p except in July and August when the charge rose to 20p with children over three and under 16 paying 5p. (Gainsborough, 1974)

^{xviii} Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups.
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/>

^{xix} The quantitative research instrument comprised an hour-long questionnaire of 511 questions administered to a main representative sample of the UK population of 1564 individuals and to an ethnic boost sample of 227 individuals. The design of the questionnaire was informed by the evidence of cultural tastes and practices derived from a prior discussion of 25 focus group involving 143 participants. Follow-

up household interviews were conducted with 28 respondents from the survey, 2 focus group participants and, in some cases, their partners, yielding a total of 44 interviews in 30 households, for which participant observation notes were also produced.² Interviews with elites comprised the last phase where 11 individuals occupying prominent positions in business and politics participated.

^{xx} This 'map' offers a visual plotting of the relations between cultural practices. Each symbol represents the statistical mean point for the members of the survey who either do or do not like or take part in the activity indicated. The black symbols refer to cultural participation – to things that people do or do not do. A zero indicates nil or very low levels of participation; the number 1 indicates occasional levels of participation; the number 2 indicates very high levels of participation. The red symbols refer to tastes: a plus sign indicates liking, a minus sign indicates dislikes, and an 'equals' sign indicates neutrality. The size of the symbol indicates the number of people engaged in, or not engaged in, liking or disliking, the activity concerned. The key point, finally, concerns the degree of proximity or distance between the practices that are represented in these ways. The greater the degree of proximity, the greater the degree of overlap between the members of the sample engaged in or liking the activities concerned. Where the distance is greater, the likelihood of such overlap is correspondingly lower
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/bennett.shtm>.

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^{xxii} The purpose of this study was to empirically investigate that question as well as to look at the relationship that age, gender, and group size have on viewing times. Visitors to The Metropolitan Museum of Art were observed as they looked at six masterpieces in the Museum collection. A total of 150 individuals looking at six paintings comprised the sample for the study. The observations were of naturally occurring stops at the works of art. The gender, group size, estimated age, and time spent at the work of art were recorded for each encounter. The mean time spent viewing a work of art was found to be 27.2 seconds, with a median time of 17.0 seconds. Viewing time was not related to gender or age, but was strongly related to group size, with larger groups spending more time. There were also significant differences among paintings. Results are discussed in terms of how different types of looking patterns may be related to the amount of time spent in front of works of art.
<http://baywood.metapress.com/link.asp?id=5mqm59jhx21rjn5j>

^{xxiv} The focus of the research project has always been paintings as opposed to other media. However, in the filmed interviews one interviewee chooses an artwork that does not fall into this category.

^{xxv} See Lahav 2004 Minds Eye paper presented at University of London conference 2004
ies.sas.ac.uk/events/conferences/2006/MindsEye/AbstractsFinal.do

^{xxvi} In 2010, Tate Learning was described as follows: 'Learning department develops education programmes, events, professional development training, learning resources and interpretation which aim to widen participation in the arts
<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/theorganisation/structure/departments/>'.

^{xxvii} Preziosi's published paper states: There is a particular uncanniness about museums of art: their ways of staging and framing their contents are so closely related morphologically to the visual effects of works of art themselves as to seem at times virtually invisible, like the tain of a mirror, which is effaced by

attending to the mirror's image or apparent content. Yet as an object of interpretation – as a social, cultural, and historical phenomenon presumed to elicit or serve as a catalyst for such activity – artistry itself occupies an ambivalent position relative to what is conventionally distinguished from it. Art or artistry, in other words, is both the content of and the technology for framing and foregrounding what are framed as instances of artistry. Museology is caught up in this conundrum by an oscillating ambivalence about its aims and methods that echoes fundamental ambivalences within other discourses on the arts, and especially art history, about which I have written elsewhere.

^{xxviii} A broader issue to address is: how does one craft the potential for fostering civic and civil space – a social domain of dialogue, negotiation, critique, interpretation, growth, and moderated change – in a museological *mode* of using things? How can one possibly design or foster such openness? <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/preziosi.shtm>

^{xxix} Bennett's published paper states: Rónán McDonald, endorsing this proposal, argued that 'it is precisely by being "useless" that art can be most useful to society', and urged the need for the public sphere 'to rediscover the language [of uselessness] to engage with this paradox'.⁶⁶ My endeavour in this paper has been to engage with this challenge by disclosing some of the uses to which aesthetic discourses of uselessness have been put. I have done so, however, precisely with a view to undercutting the ground that informs the opposition between the aesthetic, on the one hand, and that of the procedures of bureaucracy or calculations of social or civic utility on the other. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/bennett.shtm>

^{xxx} In viewing a museological artefact, does the viewing subject attribute *agency* to the object, or attribute some simulacrum of agency? Is agency an artefact, then, of the encounter itself? Are we dealing here, then, with a certain subtle *simulacrum* of idolatry; an artistry of idolatry and fetishism? Does one simultaneously believe *and* disbelieve that the work of art is alive? And what, if anything, would be different if one were to imagine artworks not only being able to *speak*, but also able to *think* and even *desire*? <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/11spring/preziosi.shtm>