Experiments in Practice: Museums, Art Institutions and Social Change
Monday 5 June 2017, Tate Modern

About the research event:

Experiments in Practice was organised by Tate Research Centre: Learning and was part of the Tate Exchange Research, Reflective Practice and Evaluation Programme. This research event focused on knowledge sharing and generation, it was a discursive event with speakers giving short provocations that were further explored through working groups in the afternoon sessions. The event was invite only and included curators, artists, academics, educators and museum professionals within the UK and internationally. The aim of the event was to draw on a variety of experiences, to share approaches and to create an open space where collaboratively we could work towards affirmative strategies and methods. To this end, speakers were invited to share experiments in practice, forms of social and institutional change, challenges and responses to this.

Presentations, first session:

In the first session, invited speakers delivered 20 minute presentations about the affordances and challenges of initiating institutional and social change through the arts, in the context of art institutions and museums.

These presentations responded to the following questions:

- What can museums and art institutions do in the 21st century to address issues of social change and how can they be most effective?
- What are the limits of what they can do and what can they meaningfully take on?
- How are they responding to and experimenting within current social, political and economic challenges?

Speakers in this session included:

Miguel Amado, Senior Curator at mima, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough

Marijke Steedman, Independent curator and consultant, London

Melanie Keen, Director of Iniva, London

Anna Cutler, Director of Learning, Tate, London

The questions and provocations addressed in these presentations included:

- What is the value of learning within art institutions and museums, who is this learning for and how can we make visible and sharable this value?
- How can museums and art institutions share knowledge in order to nurture healthy relationships between artists, cultural organisations, local authorities and other strategic bodies?
- How useful is the term diversity in the context of the visual arts when sector

transformation is needed?
- What are museums and art institutions responsible to and what are the limits of this in terms of social change?

Presentations were followed by a Q & A chaired by Emily Pringle, Head of Learning, Practice and Research, Tate.

Presentations, second session:

The second round of presentations included speakers working within and outside the arts sector. This included Tate Exchange Associates who gave 10 minute provocations that addressed issues of social change and responded to the following questions:

- Is social change possible through arts and if so how?
- What are the challenges of working with art and social change, what are the limitations?
- What are the key barriers to initiating social change through the arts?

Speakers listed below, were invited to share how they engaged with art and social change:

Aine O'Brein, Co-founder and Director, Counterpoint Arts, London

Helen Shearn, Consultant, facilitator and producer in arts, mental health and wellbeing, London

Gary Stewart, Independent Artist and Trustee of 198 Gallery, London

Ronda Gowland Pryde, Head of Education at John Hansard Gallery, Southampton

The questions and provocations addressed in these presentations included:

- The arts are not a 'magical salve' for change
- How can museums and art institutions build bridges with sectors beyond the arts to affect social change?
- How can museums and art institutions forge connections with peripheral communities and those excluded, how might they function as spaces of social, political transformation?
- How can museums and art institutions support vulnerable young people, what do they need to do in order to support positive change?

This session was followed by a Q & A chaired by Fiona Kingsman, Head of Tate Exchange.

Working groups, session 3

In the afternoon attendees were organised into nine working groups, each addressed a different question or provocation raised through the morning presentations. Following the discussions a nominated speaker fed back to the wider group.

Key points noted during feedback:

SOCIAL CHANGE:

- There was a need to define what is meant by social change, that we should not all assume that we agree on this, it needs to be unpacked. One group defined 'social change' as a way of changing the relationship between people and power dynamics and exploring how the social relates to the political and vice versa.

- In terms of barriers to social change; language came up as a stumbling block. There was a call for new terminology and a new lexicon. One group highlighted that to affect social change there was a need to shift to a continuity model rather than a pop-up model (so longer durational projects that can be better evaluated in terms of registering change).

- Addressing the question of how we make visible and shareable the value of learning, one group commented that it would come down to how the institution values learning. There was a call for being clear about what we mean by learning vs education, teaching, and engagement. A key point was the need for evaluation, evidence, documentation, practice as research, and more investment in time for reflection on learning so this can feed into future practice.

WORKING WITH SECTORS BEYOND THE ARTS

- This kind of collaboration requires being transparent with knowledge sharing and having an openness about processes, time, labour and budgets in order to nurture healthy relationships between artists, cultural organisations, local authority and other strategic bodies.

- In order to build bridges with sectors beyond the arts more clarity of intention is needed. Ethos, vision and values should be clearly articulated at the beginning of any collaborative project. Institutions may be required to give up their role of neutrality in order to act within the notion of equality and rights (especially within a heightened geopolitical context).

- One group highlighted that in other sectors there is often too much emphasis placed on art as a quick fix, filling gaps in governmental and social programmes. There was criticism that art engages in social work but often overlooks the knowledge base of this work, and there was concern about where expertise fit in.

AUDIENCES, PEOPLE, PUBLICS

- In relation to diversity one group asked how we create alternative identities that are not prescribed by the state. There was a foregrounding of cultural democracy and social justice that all cultures have the right to be represented equally. This group stated that the notion of 'diversity' is too often held by learning teams and needs to move across the institution. There was a point about how the institution listens to different points of view and then restructures/rebuilds from this.

- In terms of supporting vulnerable young people one group saw value in considering differently how we measure the success. How we might focus on individuals and

not projects. How can we place more emphasis on long term engagement and let vulnerable young people decide what positive change looks like.

- In terms of supporting peripheral communities: one group suggested a change in perception from public/audience to people. A need to consider who is excluded because of the government's attitudes, and questioning how and why people are stigmatised. There was a proposition for small scale projects (local and DIY) and for strategies that transform the rhetoric of government expectations: for example- short term vision, own agenda, box ticking, photo opportunities.

Next Steps

Over the next 3 months Tate Research Centre: Learning will be reviewing findings from the conference and identifying key areas and priorities for follow up activity.