

The legitimacy of the cultural actions in museums since 1960

I would like to thank the organisers for the choice of this title, which is, in itself problematic. Legitimacy is a word carrying the notions of 'justice', of judgement and of being 'worthy'. Searching for proof of efficiency, looking for the scientific character in the effects, in the impacts of cultural fields on society, together with establishing their economic then social profit, characterised the utilitarian ideology from the Thatcher government onward. Yet it is difficult to speak about museum education without speaking about the function or social role of museums. These links are historical. I will introduce a few key moments in this history that determine the relationship between museum education and the specific modes of cultural action in the contemporary period from Margaret Thatcher to Gordon Brown's government. In doing so, I hope to contextualise and to shed lights on the way museum art education has been evolving, until the shift of the new elected government before we open a dialogue in this afternoon session.

The Ashmolean Museum is associated with Oxford University and was built with a research laboratory and a library in 1683, so too was the Dulwich Picture Gallery, which opened in 1814. The local cultural institutions were often associated with learned Societies or Clubs. However, progressive ideas of social improvement and education would only be brought forward by the philosophical ambitions of the nineteenth century. Henri Cole and the South Kensington Museum (1851) are often perceived as the first great examples delineating museum education policies. Museums were primarily an informal and autonomous learning tool up to the 1920s, whilst education developed and became based on an assessment system. A department delegated to school groups' visits in museums was gradually set up at the end of the nineteenth century¹. The learning process was based on and made possible

¹ The main education policies were setting up a loan collection¹, and guaranteeing a professional and museum specific teaching; whilst national museums launched campaigns to promote teaching contents based on Lord Sudely's¹ first guides around 1910¹. During the First World War, museums took over under-staffed schools, the buildings of which were often requisitioned by the army. The education departments multiplied and were regarded as useful by the general public. However, the end of the war corresponded to a decline of the education cause, the British Association became more reticent and did not wish to develop links with the LEA. Yet the LEA could finance education programs in museums since 1918. The British Association considered museums to be similar to research centres, like universities. The different functions of museums were set up. A series of studies, the Miers Report¹ and the Markham Report were written between the two wars and concluded by the Rosse Report in 1963.

by objects in museums. This theoretical and didactic articulation of education, the transmission of knowledge through an object has been a touchstone of museum education up until now, and legitimise since then the cultural actions of museums, creating an alternative to the education model designed and implemented by schools.

During the two world wars, the education departments took over from a dispirited national education system that could not meet its objectives. Yet after the war, a purely curatorial function superseded the educational one (since the 1918 Education Act)² as it was argued in the 1963 Rosse report. A group dedicated to the educational function of museums was created that same year and eventually became the Group for Education in Museums³ (1970) while in 1967, the Museums' Association published the first method for museum education officers: *Museum School Service*.

At the end of the 1960s, the education departments were branches of the LEA, offering visits adapted to schools' curriculum. A series of studies were published, rationalising the skills' management of education departments, among which were the Wright Report (1973)⁴ and the Drew Report (1979)⁵. The sector became professionalized and divided its different functions as such: curating exhibitions, publishing, teaching and conference organising⁶, while art museum and design museum separated their methodology in art education. The education department in art museum was therefore an alternative to the curatorial practise associated with art history.

From 1989 onwards, the educational function of museums was re-evaluated and reinforced. This was confirmed by the Minister for the Arts Richard Luce's speech in the Museum Association Annual Conference in York. In parallel, British education was reformed in 1988 (Education reform act); the National Curriculum was introduced. The effects of the Thatcher government gradually led to the rise of

Several types of departments were set up, and identified, such as Molly Harrison's in London Geffrye Museum, René Marcoussé's in the V&A, Barbara Winstanley.

² Managing the collections of provincial museums, whilst national museums employed guides for conferences addressing adults and occasionally children.

³ In 1963 the Group for Educational Service Museum is renovated³ and eventually became the Group for Education in Museum (GEM) in the 1970s.

⁴ On provincial museums

⁵ On national museums

⁶ They laid the bases to create a museum department dedicated to its educative function, responsible for the loan service, creating of conferences, collaborating on the realisation of publications and exhibitions, organising groups' visits, helping out students and looking into the new technologies' potentials.

entrepreneurism in museums, which now had to provide value for money. It was necessary to present scientific answers, to measure the impact of education in museums, together with its outcomes and performances⁷.

The newly elected Labour Party (1997) had a slightly different outlook on culture. To them it was a tool for social integration. David Anderson is commissioned to write a report for the DCMS. He published a first document in 1997, which would modify the relationship between governmental cultural policies and museums on a long-term basis. *A Commonwealth, Museum in the learning Age* stated the new role of museums, which was to facilitate creativity and social integration, and consequently delineated social and economic actions. The educational value was presented in it as intrinsic and following a tradition started by Henry Cole's museum project in the nineteenth century, within a British, post 1851 Great Exhibition context. The objective was then to develop a shared culture, with the public and the museum staff contributing to a common knowledge. In other words, museum education had become a concern of national policy and a tool to fill in the gap dividing, as Anderson put it, two nations, the learned whites and the marginal (the poor, the young and the minorities). The consequences of the debate on cultural diversity within the Arts Council generated an extensive research on museums' potential to fight social inequalities; an example of this is Richard Sandell's⁸ studies. The question of national identity and the necessity to reformulate a collective identity is at the centre of both government and museums cultural policies, with museums developing programs emphasising heritage with regard to the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities. Museums must facilitate the integration of minorities in British society; above all they must address the population as a whole, and not a chosen public anymore; they must represent the population's diversities in their contents and in the way they portray History (Tate encounters which tends to interrogate how narrative of Britishness are constructed and reproduced within the curatorial practices and the collection of art at Tate Britain). The cultural actions of museum education become a component⁹ of social integration.

As the discipline became more theoretical and academic, universities departments were created, in particular Leicester University's and London Open

⁷ Matarrasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact Of Participation in the Arts*, 1997

⁸ Richard Sandell, *Museum, Society, Inequality*, London, Routledge, 2002

⁹ This commitment materialised through financing contracts between the DCMS and the main national museums like the Tate Galleries or the V&A (Tate Agreements).

University's Museum Studies. Studies on different publics were carried, such as George E. Hein's in 1998, which placed the social learning process within a constructivist method. In the years 2000s, Eileen Hooper Greenhill, Tony Bennett and Richard Sandell contributed in renewing the roles of museum education and reinforced the theoretical basis of the disciplines it encompasses: Epistemology, publics' studies, knowledge's theories etc... Museum education can in this sense dialogue or compete with universities.

The legitimacy of the work of education departments depends on their capacity to question the dominant transmission models in schools, universities and curatorial departments. Nowadays, the danger and success met by these education departments hinge on attempts to incorporate their specific functions into external political objectives, affiliated to the different authorities they challenge.