THINKING IS SEEING

Practice-led Research on Tate Liverpool's *Constellations*

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1. Introduction

This article is a reflective case-study presenting and analysing the findings of 'Thinking Is Seeing', a practice-led research project we conducted at Tate Liverpool between February and April 2017 under the Tate Exchange programme. In what follows, we first outline the way in which Tate Exchange provided the framework for the design and development of the project (Section 2). In Section 3 we discuss the project's thematic orientation, its aims, research questions and structure, and in Section 4 we proceed to describe how the project was delivered,, that is, through a series of public workshops that took place at the Tate Exchange Liverpool space. Applying our findings from these workshops, we then flesh out our philosophical argument in two distinct but complementary directions. In Section 5, we show why one cannot fully understand art through a merely theoretical or analytic approach, namely in the absence of artefacts. In Section 6, we provide the reasons why one cannot make sense of art without the crucial element of reflective detachment from the concrete objects of art. We hope that this study will illustrate how the philosophical practice in which participants engaged through the project contributed to the Tate Exchange programme and ethos, and that it will help highlight the urgency of bringing closer together the practices of seeing art and thinking about art, for the benefit of individuals and communities alike.

2. 'Thinking Is Seeing' and Tate Exchange

The introduction of Tate Exchange in 2016, as a space and physical place for open dialogue and collective experimentation on the value of art and its role in shaping our lives and society, presented an exciting opportunity to co-explore the contribution that philosophy could make to this timeless and yet timely question. But such endeavour, that is, practicing philosophy *with* the public, involves an understanding of philosophy as social practice which, although not historically unprecedented, clearly runs counter to the commonly held perception of philosophy

as a complex academic subject detached from the everyday —a conception that largely holds also for theory more generally as well as art. In this sense, Tate Exchange presented for us, as perhaps for other contributors, an invitation, a challenge, to develop situated projects that would systematically address and potentially transform the dynamic in the relationship of academic research with artistic practice, the work of cultural institutions, and public engagement.

In response to this challenge, we designed our project 'Thinking Is Seeing' by taking into account three interrelated dimensions that in our view defined Tate Exchange and marked its originality: the *theme*, 'Exchange', set in 2016-17 through Tim Etchells' work; its dedicated *space*, which in Tate Liverpool, unlike the Tate Exchange space in Tate Modern, is amidst the first floor galleries; and its overarching *aim*, articulated around the question 'How can art make a difference to people's lives and society?'[1]

With reference to the 'Exchange' theme, the project was designed so as to highlight the particular and contextual nature of 'exchange'. A de-contextualised or general conception of 'exchange', no matter how important it may seem, may not be actually so for a given individual or community at a particular point of time or space. With this project we intended to facilitate a process through which participants would be able to articulate their views, actively engage with views of others, and recognise and celebrate the importance or value of their own experiences in the here and now as an essential part of the empowerment for any individual or community. As regards space, the project was designed so as to take full advantage of its central location within the gallery, which, on the one hand, allowed and encouraged direct access to art, and, on the other, highlighted the significance of Tate Exchange as an integral part of Tate Liverpool's activities. Last but not least, in planning our project we wanted to contribute to the overarching aim of Tate Exchange by facilitating the kind of open dialogue that is characteristic of philosophy: the reflective and critical interrogation of ideas and practices in a systematic and in-depth manner. In this way, we aimed to enhance and go beyond discussions that undoubtedly do take place in a

[1] For more information on these points, see https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-exchange.

gallery, but are often less systematic, isolated or private. As will become apparent in what follows, the intersection of these three dimensions directly impacted on the project's focus and the manner of its delivery by providing a general framework for our research.

3. 'Thinking Is Seeing' and Tate Liverpool *Constellations*

'Thinking Is Seeing' focused on *Constellations: Highlights from the Nation's Collection of Modern Art*, which was introduced by Tate Liverpool in 2013 as a unique and fresh way of exhibiting works from the Tate collection, motivated by thematic, chronological, or interpretative links identified through extended curatorial research; it has since been established as a central, perhaps the most distinctive, characteristic of Tate Liverpool's curatorial practice.[2] The idea of star constellations underpins this curatorial approach, both conceptually and visually. The connections between the works are mapped onto actual star constellations, and each *Constellation* is accompanied by a diagram that makes this association explicit, as well as by word clouds —word constellations, as it were— foregrounding key concepts that further bind the works together.

However, just like in the case of stars, so with works of art, the concept of a constellation has a double meaning. In one sense, it is a given configuration, a snapshot of the heavens at a given point in space and time, for example when someone is born. In another sense, it is dynamic and transient, depending on the point of view from which celestial objects are seen: a shift in perspective changes what is seen; the coherence of one configuration may be replaced by another or lost altogether.

[2] See https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-liverpool/display/constellations.

Accordingly, Tate Liverpool's *Constellations* reflect both meanings of a constellation. On the one hand, they present to the audience the curatorial perspective informing the grouping, that is, they promote a given configuration, a snapshot of art history, conceived and authorised by the expertise of the curator(s). On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, they are presented as transitory and elusive, intended for people to make their own connections so that the works may be seen from different perspectives and in new ways. To the extent that seeing the works in this context entails identifying connections, categorising objects, drawing inferences, 'seeing' seems thereby to amount to 'thinking', and audiences are invited to actively participate in this process, to consider not only why art matters, historically or artistically, but also why and how it matters to them, individually and socially. After all, to identify patterns in the stars has been a way of making sense of the heavens, but also a way of orientation for one's life and experience of the world, which although not always fully explored or articulated, holds also for art.

The aim of 'Thinking Is Seeing' was thus to investigate through a series of practice-led research workshops, each focusing on a different *Constellation*, how this exchange between art, the curatorial gesture, and the public happens in this context. What difference does it make to one's appreciation of, say, Lowry's *Industrial Landscape*, when one attends to those features of the work that make it part of a given curatorial narrative? Do members of the audience share the perspective of the curator(s) in recognising these affinities and do they see *all* of these works or *only* these works forming a constellation? What difference do responses from the public make to the suggested curatorial narrative? And ultimately, how does one's own perspective alter or enrich the understanding and experience of the works and vice versa? Differently put, the research questions animating the project where the ones that exemplified and situated the aim of Tate Exchange as a whole; to reiterate, as

reported by Hannah Wilmot: 'Tate Exchange aims […] to better understand how art makes a difference to people's lives and through that to society more widely.'[3]

4. 'Thinking Is Seeing' Workshops

The project involved three separate sessions, each one lasting five hours, and took place at the Tate Exchange Liverpool space in Spring 2017 over a period of three months; during this time, this space was transformed into a site for philosophical discourse. Members of the public could drop in and interact with philosophers and advanced graduate students in Philosophy, who had volunteered for the project, ask questions, explore themes, and offer suggestions regarding the works on display in the adjacent galleries. At the heart of these sessions, three public workshops were delivered, each one focusing on the *Lowry*, *Grosz*, and *Perlin Constellations*, respectively. The workshops were advertised widely and were free for all attending; each workshop lasted for about two hours. The number of participants in each workshop, all adults, varied between 10 and 22 and included, among others, curators, artists, educationalists, architects, designers, historians, and University students. The aim of the workshops was to foster reflective dialogue around the works included in each *Constellation* where, with our guidance as facilitators, participants would form a 'community of enquiry'.

The term 'community of enquiry' is often used in pedagogical contexts and in particular in connection with 'Philosophy for Children' (or 'Philosophy for Communities', or 'P4C'), a movement that was initiated by Matthew Lipman in the United States in the 1970s and has since been developed into a philosophical practice, championed by organisations such as the *Philosophy Foundation* and the *Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education*,

[3] Hannah Wilmot, *Tate Exchange Evaluation Report 2016–17*, 2017, https://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/115531, accessed 1 July 2019, p. 7.

from which both of us have received relevant training in delivering philosophy sessions to children.[4] However, through projects such as *Patterns of Thought* (an Arts and Humanities Research Council project we developed between 2010 and 2015), academic residencies and other collaborations with leading cultural institutions in the region, we developed the P4C 'community of enquiry' practice into a methodology for engaging audiences, be it children or adults, in philosophical reflection especially about art, which we adapted for the purposes of our Tate Exchange project.[5]

As it will become apparent in what follows, although the discussion during the workshops was structured around specific lines of enquiry, there was no particular content that we were aiming to deliver, and our role was solely to support participants in co-developing their own understanding through philosophical practice. Themes and questions were generated by the participants themselves, who embraced the opportunity to concentrate on the works, articulate their views, debate with others and ultimately develop their own interpretations of specific works or the display as a whole and, more generally, better understand their individual experience. As a project participant commented: 'Good that everyone is open here, not "listening to the teacher".' This process also prompted a further impetus for active and in-depth reflection and development, indicating a move away from instinctive, pre-reflective approaches to artistic understanding and appreciation. Compare this participant's comment: 'You have to do now some preparation before you walk into an exhibition. You have to do some homework. And I see this as necessary for every constellation.'[6]

[4] See https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/ and https://www.sapere.org.uk/, respectively.

[5] See https://lyceumprojectliverpool.wordpress.com/patterns-of-thought/. In 2014, for example, members of our team were invited by Tate Liverpool to act as academic consultants (Panayiota Vassilopoulou and Daniel Whistler) for the *Mondrian and His Studios* exhibition; we conducted three public workshops and a staff-training event deploying and further co-developing this methodology.

[6] This observation that background information and, more importantly, philosophical deliberation are relevant and helpful will be the main focus of Section 6 below.

Tate Liverpool's *Constellations* are each named after the artist whose work acts as the 'trigger' for each clustering and this work is displayed in a prominent position within the gallery: the *Lowry Constellation* featured his *Industrial Landscape* (1955), *Suicide* (1916) triggered the *Grosz Constellation*, and the *Perlin Constellation* highlighted *Orthodox Boys* (1948). Each *Constellation* also included works by other artists that were often created in different historical periods and delivered in a broad range of artistic media and artistic styles. What made these displays particularly unique for the visitor was that they also included a 'constellation map', tracing the connections between the artists whose works featured in the *Constellation,* and a word cloud in which curators had included key concepts that guided the clustering. In the case of the *Lowry Constellation*, the word cloud was interactive (on a computer screen positioned near the entrance to the gallery), so that visitors could add their own thoughts and ideas.

Wishing to fully embed philosophical enquiry within the gallery space, after registration and a brief introduction outlining the aims of the project that took place at the dedicated Tate Exchange Liverpool room, we joined participants to a visit to the *Constellation* which the workshop was going to discuss. Participants were given sufficient time to explore the collection, familiarise themselves with the word clouds and constellation maps, and we rarely intervened during that stage. For some workshop participants this was their first encounter with the exhibition, but others who had already visited remarked that this was a good opportunity 'to look more closely at specific works and pay more attention to the accompanying material'. Most importantly, regardless of the level of participants' familiarity with the works, they highlighted how visiting the exhibition as a group and exchanging remarks with each other had already started to enrich their experience.

Returning to the Tate Exchange Liverpool space, we were sat in a circle so that we could all see each other, all members introduced themselves to the rest of the group, and every effort was made to minimise as far as possible a perception of the facilitator(s) as an authority, 'expert' or 'teacher' (Figure 1). We provided participants with printouts of all the works included in the *Constellation*, sets of which we had also used when preparing the room to create miniature versions of the *Constellation* on its walls. For all three workshops, we presented the group with two

different configurations, which added to the experience of seeing the works as they were placed within the gallery: the first re-created the arrangement of works in the way artists appeared to be connected in the constellation map, while the second presented the works in historical ordering.

Building on this experience and resources, the dialogue that followed was divided roughly into three parts of equal length (about 30 minutes each). In the first part, participants were asked to observe closely their printed sets of the *Constellation* and propose to the group different ways to rearrange the works, which often involved suggestions for removing works that they felt did not belong to the cluster or suggestions for alternative works that may have been a better fit. Participants were then asked to write on a piece of paper and then share with the rest of the group, words (ideas or concepts) that best captured their thoughts about the art in focus. They were also encouraged to freely move within the space, observe the arrangements on the wall and add their post-it notes where appropriate. This part concluded with participants being prompted to reflect on the range of ideas that had become available, observe their similarities and differences, and compare them to an existing word cloud (Figures 2 and 3). As an example, we may compare here the word cloud that existed in the gallery (on the interactive computer screen) prior to the workshop (Figure 4) with the one that emerged from the *Lowry Constellation* workshop (Figure 5). We can easily observe here that the difference in volume, complexity, and depth of concepts that were generated during the workshops demonstrates a clear move from descriptive, generic, and occasionally unreflective content seen in the pre-existing word cloud to one that is more nuanced, diverse, and thought-provoking. This difference is due to successfully supporting participants during the workshops to reveal implicit connections between the exhibited works and to identify new characteristics that bind the works together, when works are viewed from within the perspective of each participant.

In the second part of the workshop, we asked participants to start interrogating their own ideas by working in pairs to formulate questions that would then allow the whole group in collaboration to engage more critically with the works and their initial interpretations. The aim was to facilitate a process whereby affirmations or thoughts that may bear particular significance for oneself or are taken for granted —

be it because they represent the authoritative voice of an expert or one's personal opinion— are distinguished from those that are less important or more ambiguous. At the end of this process, and in a way that furthered the progress made with the word clouds, we wanted the discussion to develop gradually around questions that would allow participants to move from factual or descriptive responses to ones that are more in-depth, meaningful and creative, thus uniquely illuminating experiences (with art) that may be particularly opaque or challenging. To illustrate the transition from concepts to questions that took place during the workshops, we may refer to the *Lowry Constellation* again and the 'question cloud' (Figure 6) that was subsequently formed. We have here a clear example of the constructive re-conception of inarticulate imaginings into the basic frame of a purposeful investigation involving the self and its concerns. There is variety and diversity here, with a broad range of more or less intricate questions, covering the whole spectrum of focal points from the concrete to the more general, and displaying the individual point of view of each participant's experiences and interests. A question cloud like this, unlike a more ordinary word cloud, which was perceived by some to be needlessly didactic, appears to be less so and motivates participants to further think for themselves, as it draws attention to the importance of questions and of questioning when engaging with art, rather than to concepts that must be 'understood'.

Reflecting on the suggested questions, some were merged together, new ones emerged, and finally the group decided (through voting) which questions to discuss in more detail, although in some cases (e.g., during the *Grosz Constellation* workshop) the discussion refocused midway on a question that was not initially selected. The concluding part of the workshop aimed at pulling together various threads of the discussion, but rather than attempting to reach a consensus, a concluding general interpretation, as it were, it embraced the diversity of the group by prompting participants to self-reflect and identify changes in their own views resulting from the workshop.

Although each workshop was different —there were some participants that attended all three workshops, but most were each time new to the group, and of course artists and works were different— there were nevertheless some common patterns in the

way participants engaged with the *Constellations* through these discussions. As just outlined, participants normally started by questioning local curatorial practice (the particular arrangement of each *Constellation*): Was it clear enough? Was it too prescriptive?[7] They recognised that a linear, historical arrangement would have been invariably more rigid and not subject to modification or enrichment: it is always easier to add connections when one is allowed to move into various directions than when one has to interfere with a linear structure. Participants were generally averse to the idea that somebody 'was telling them about the work'. However, in some cases participants expressed an interest in what the artists (rather than the curators) might have intended with their works, and whether or to what extent artistic intention had informed curatorial choices in shaping *Constellations*. This is of course a thorny issue: there is no overall consensus among theorists about the significance of the artists' intentions when interpreting or evaluating artworks. However, the absence of agreement can be taken as an indication that what is important here is the exchange itself, which takes place as an open debate, and not a supposed resolution. It was exactly this approach that was echoed in the views expressed by the workshop participants.[8]

Finding connections and uncovering cross-references was not easy work, but it was highly rewarding. One of our participants commented: 'This is really interesting and refreshing. Sometimes it is a struggle to make connections between some works and an overall theme. But the more you think about it, the more you discuss about it, the

[7] For instance, a view was expressed that the *Perlin Constellation* was less 'heavy-handed' and therefore it 'stood out'.

[8] For an overview of the philosophical literature on the issue, see Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. A well-known (and widely reprinted) defence of anti-intentionalism can be found in W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1946), pp. 468–488. For a recent and accessible summary of various aspects of the debate, see Derek Matravers, *Introducing Philosophy of Art: In Eight Case Studies*, Durham: Acumen, 2013, Chapter 5: 'Intention and Interpretation: Louise Bourgeois's *Maman*', pp. 85–103.

more you see the works and the connections.' When this is done as part of a community of inquiry, the rewards multiply: 'It was like heaven for me, because I like to talk about works of art and looking at how they are connected. Lovely having a captive audience.' Or, in another case: 'Eye-opening what others saw in it. The discussion opened my eyes to other works.'

Whatever the particular themes of each *Constellation*, the final reflective stage of each workshop tended invariably to focus on fundamental questions about the self, about humanity, about the passage of time, truth, happiness, and love. In this sense, the inquiry went further in its practice than a normative gallery enquiry, thus realising both the ethos of philosophical discourse and the pioneering initiative of Tate Exchange. One participant's comment was: 'I really enjoyed it; I was totally surprised. I am not really artistic at all, and wasn't really looking carefully at the exhibition. Making me look and think at each individual picture, which I wouldn't have done otherwise. But philosophy is in the background and in the end it all came together. Fantastic, thank you.' It is this 'coming together' through seeing and thinking, through art and philosophy that was so revealing and exciting. It was the sense that members of the public who might have felt unprepared to appreciate the art, or unable to think deeply about the everyday, were now experiencing a transformative experience as part of a community of inquirers within the Tate Exchange context.

5. The Impact of Seeing

Our project aim has not been of a reductionist nature: we are claiming neither that art is reducible to philosophy (concepts, ideas, reasoning) nor that philosophy is reducible to some kind of art (employing perhaps words, performances, and the like). In this sense, our 'Thinking Is Seeing' motto must be regarded as a hyperbole —but one that tries to emphasize a crucial though subtle relation, often overlooked or misunderstood.

Simply put, we are committed to a philosophy of art that does not merely analyse given objects but contributes to their meaning through action, reflection, discussion.[9] As McMahon et al. demonstrate (in their own, particular context),[10] Kant's notion of 'aesthetic ideas' can be very helpful in illuminating such a relationship. Ordinarily, ideas of things are fragmented, partly forgotten, or absent. In trying to put them together in art, and through the imagination, one must draw from one's own experience, but in a way that is communicable to others. The artist's work does not end when the art-product is presented but continues within the framework of interactions that this product engenders. Artist, audience, community come together in trying to move from the fragmentary of ordinary perception to a fuller comprehension of life and of things in it; from ideas to 'aesthetic ideas'; from frustrated thinking to more coherent thinking *through seeing*, i.e. through art. 'This was Kant's point when he argued that the expression of aesthetic ideas was a furthering of life without which culture was impossible.'[11] We need, in other words, the objects or things of art so as to think philosophically about them (and with them), with the further aim of making fuller sense of the way we are in the world. Neither art nor philosophy can achieve this on their own.

Under this perspective, our 'Thinking Is Seeing' project and its mission were made possible because of the locus of Tate Exchange Liverpool, both in terms of setting but also in terms of foregrounding the question of how art can make a difference. Participants needed to have seen the works; they needed to have had a close (and recent) glimpse of the ideas intimated therein. One may take this for granted but the importance of free public access cannot be underestimated. Ideally, participants also needed to be able to find links and affiliations between the works, because making

[9] Jennifer A. McMahon & Elizabeth Burns Coleman & David Macarthur & James Phillips & Daniel von Sturmer, 'Between Philosophy and Art: A Collaboration at The Lock-Up, Newcastle', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 5 (2+3), 2016, pp. 135–50, doi:10.1386/ajpc.5.2-3.135_1. (Here: especially p. 137.)

[10] *Ibid.*, especially pp. 138–139.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

sense of what is completely haphazard or too obscure is obviously off-putting and very hard (if at all possible). Again, the context of Tate Exchange Liverpool presented us with exactly the right opportunity to view *Constellations*. Armed with their professional expertise in art history and theory, Tate curators were able to present groups of works by telling, or suggesting, stories about them, and about how they related to each other. Naturally, the audience's agreement about links and affiliations between works is not necessary, or even desirable; in keeping with the above, such an agreement must be only the by-product of a process of deliberation. Indeed, the process is what matters, even if complete agreement is never reached.[12] There is no guarantee that we all make sense of the world in exactly the same way; and there is no joy in focusing exclusively on the destination (agreement), but not the journey (deliberation).

Thus, public accessibility and careful curatorial design mark the ethos of *Constellations* and Tate Exchange Liverpool, which has been paramount for our practice-led research. What about the way in which things unfolded in the gallery space? In her relevant report on the first year of Tate Exchange, Wilmot states: '[…] it is notable that "engaging with art" was a more frequent feature in stories from Tate Liverpool than Tate Modern, perhaps reflecting the position of TExL within a gallery rather than in a separate space.'[13] As already mentioned, at Tate Liverpool, our project took place at a Tate Exchange dedicated space in the middle of the first-floor gallery; this was a semi-enclosed space, demarcated by walls on three sides and a custom-made, commissioned drape on the fourth side. This was a very interesting set up. For one thing, it meant that there was a physical link to the art displayed right outside each one of the partitions. In our context, this made the transition between looking at the art and talking about it as seamless as possible. At the same time, it caused a minimum amount of disruption for other visitors (those not participating in our project). Of course, there was an element of uncertainty:

[12] The particular case for this was made in the previous section (4); the general case will be made in the next section (6).

[13] Wilmot, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

people would peek into our space, not knowing what exactly was happening in our little enclosure and not sure whether they were meant to join. This was not really an issue and might have meant that visitors were enticed to take part at the next available opportunity (dates and times of the workshops were displayed prominently on a screen at the entrance to the project space; see Figure 7).

All in all, we found the spatial arrangements to be an excellent match for what we wanted to achieve. We did not want to be isolated from the art, but we *did* want to have some independence of movement and interaction, without hindering that of others. We are not sure whether this setting was optimal for every Tate Exchange project that took place at Liverpool; perhaps it worked very well in our case precisely because we planned our own project with the available Tate Liverpool facilities in mind. It may well be that this is a very good example of collaboration between our two institutions; we have worked together on numerous projects over the years, and perhaps we have shaped our practices in compatible ways.[14] As such, this may serve as an example of good practice.

More crucially, for our purposes, it may serve as an example of the impact that seeing has on thinking, and of the significance of thinking *through* seeing, not just for philosophers or artists, but for everyone partaking in a community and a shared culture. As highlighted above, there is no better method (or perhaps no *other* method) towards a fulfilling comprehension of our life and of the things in it. We must delve into the concrete and search for the hidden or forgotten aspects of things through art. In so doing, we will have seen the invisible, or rather thought of it, conceived it with our minds and our imaginings, joined in with the artist's work. Norman Maclean was talking about fly-fishing, but still, he obviously treated it much like an art form: 'All there is to thinking […] is seeing something noticeable which makes you see

[14] See https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/research/collaborate/collaborations-and-partnerships/tate-partnership/, accessed 1 September 2019.

something you weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible.'[15]

6. The Impact of Thinking

To reiterate: as philosophers of art, we cannot produce any meaningful results through our discourse alone, i.e. through a purely analytical regurgitation of concepts and ideas. We need to be in touch with the art; we may also need art critics, art historians, or artistic directors and curators to tell us about it. Our aim is to grasp the thing in its irreducible particularity, rather than dwell forever in generalities. Having noted this, one must not thereby conclude that the philosophy of art is an intriguing diversion, almost like a parasite feeding off the body of art. We now want to insist that a full appreciation of art may require an environment where it is the norm to engage in philosophical practice regarding works of art. This is not merely about information, which is readily available, now more than ever; it is not merely about 'education' in the prosaic sense of didactics or 'systematic instruction'. Philosophical practice in this context is a live exchange of thoughts and ideas that surround, and are surrounded by, the artworks. To what end? To what sort of 'shared culture' are we referring, in our appraisal of seeing and thinking? During the 2013 inauguration of *Constellations*, Francesco Manacorda, Tate Liverpool artistic director at the time, was similarly declaring that his main aim was 'to empower people to come and make their own thinking inside these rooms'.[16] What sort of 'power' was he referring to?

[15] *A River Runs through It and Other Stories*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017 (=1976), pp. 105–106.

[16] See https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool-reaches-stars-unveils-5100967, accessed 4 September 2019.

Reflecting on our perceptions and our imaginings opens up an intellectual meeting-space for communities of art lovers. Without having examined one's own responses to the art at hand, one cannot begin to compare it or show it to others. But this is only the starting point. Being simply content (or not) with what we see or feel, without engaging in dialogue about it, is full of pitfalls, which hardly need pointing out. We are drawn to share and try to fit the pieces of the puzzle, the pieces of our own perceptions and imaginings with those of others, in our search for a better understanding. As seen in the previous section, this is what Kant's 'aesthetic ideas' may reveal. And this is now the crux of the matter, because we need to decide on what might validate a type of understanding as 'better'.

Anna Cutler makes a comprehensive case based on core shared values, such as trust, risk, generosity, respect, openness.[17] In a community or a culture that upholds such values, understanding is bound to be 'better' when it is mediated by a readiness to share thoughts and impressions without prejudice or fear, and to be ready to revise views, discover hidden fragments of the world of others, make fuller sense of things through art. Borrowing from philosopher John Rawls, Cutler confirms that the end-point of debate and deliberation is here the Rawlsian principle of 'reflective equilibrium'.[18] Indeed, Cutler explicitly states that this idea is taken as 'one of several theories that could help account for the development of Tate Exchange'. As an end-point of debate and deliberation, reflective equilibrium gives the impression of a more-or-less happy state of affairs, one where antagonism and injustice have been neutralised by the productive confluence of different perspectives, following the back-and-forth movement of dialogue. However, we must not confuse this with a 'happy medium', a middle-of-the-road compromise, an average sum of disparate forces. The equilibrium achieved through reflection and debate cannot even be the lowest common denominator of a coherence relation; namely, a situation where we

[17] Anna Cutler, 'The Value of Values: Reflections on Tate Exchange', *Tate Papers* 30, Autumn 2018, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/30/reflections-on-tate-exchange, accessed 1 July 2019.

[18] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1999 (=1971); see especially pp. 40–44, 102–105, 397–399.

settle for the view or the interpretation that seems to cause the least fuss. Such a result would not afford us with a deeper and fuller appreciation of art and other things in the world. A mere coherence of competing views is an unsatisfactory version of reflective equilibrium.[19] We must instead aspire to a higher sort of confluence, one where seemingly disparate views are shown to mutually support and justify each other.

In the context of *Constellations* and our workshops, these are quite suggestive metaphors. As members of a group, in putting together the fragments of our thoughts about each one of the works, we complete a whole that is arguably fuller than its parts, although the latter might have seemed initially completely at odds with each other. Of course, there is no guarantee that this process will always succeed, and that the pieces of works and thoughts will somehow fit together. That is as expected: we are not testing scientific hypotheses. However, we are doing something equally worthwhile: we are enacting the principle of equilibrium in the sense that we do not ascribe necessary priority to any values, not even our own. We focus instead, as Cutler eloquently describes, on the ways in which values are generated and content is developed. So, even in cases where deliberation seems to lead to no consensus, each one's values and ideas about the art at hand have played their proper part. Thinking about the art has led to an imaginative realisation of our place in the midst of a wholesome community.

But perhaps this may sound as too benign or indulgent. After all, '[…] Tate Exchange will not be life-changing for most people […].'[20] This is an attitude we wish to resist. We want to go further in trying to validate the impact of thinking about art, and specifically about art *Constellations*. It is Theodor Adorno who may be providing us with a way to do so, in his account of what he also calls a 'constellation': 'Becoming

[19] *Ibid.* Cutler borrows this notion of 'weak' versus 'strong' coherence from Norman Daniels, 'Reflective Equilibrium', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/reflective-equilibrium/.

[20] Wilmot, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it.'[21] For Adorno, objects contain their history as the nexus of their relations to other objects; getting to know objects is getting to know the stored historical processes within them. In this sense, thinking about objects (including art objects) is never *mere* thinking, just as seeing is never *mere* seeing. In our apprehension of a thing, we must at the same time get a glimpse of a whole host of links and presences by proxy. The absence of a constellation that a thing signifies is tantamount to the absence of the very thing itself. We are thus pushed beyond the state of a reflective, but active, equilibrium, as described above. For, 'unlocking' a constellation, just like reading or listening to a composition and aiming to decipher its meaning, requires a grasp of the subjectivity of other people, through whom meaning is born, as if this subjectivity were something tangible. 'What resembles writing in such constellations is the conversion into objectivity, by way of language, of what has been subjectively thought and assembled.'[22] This deciphering, in language and thereby thought, brings into relief the hitherto hidden reality of others. We no longer feel simply a small part of a greater whole, where fairness and impartiality are paramount, but we furthermore are forced to embrace the concrete manifestation of the life of others.

The significance of thinking and its impact have now become more urgent. One key realisation here is not that we can get along, or even support each other, but that thought and language about the concrete constellations of art is in effect disruptive. It can turn our established concepts upside-down. 'By taking such [established] concepts out of their established patterns and rearranging them in "constellations" around a specific subject matter, philosophy can unlock some of the historical dynamic hidden within objects whose identity exceeds the classifications imposed

[21] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973 (=1966), p. 163.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

upon them.'[23] In other words, and unlike Rawls, Adorno does not see the endgame as one of affirmation and conciliation (or at least non-opposition); he sees contradiction and antagonism all the way up. This is not to say that we can never come to a state of 'reflective equilibrium' but that we will always be left wanting. We will never dispel the idea that reality itself, and truth, collectively eludes us, and that no matter how hard we try, thought can never give us answers to the things that really affect us. For instance, within the framework of Adorno's philosophy, thought cannot account for suffering. The life of others, having thus become manifest through art, does not necessarily mark the happy ending of a journey of discovery, but highlights the helplessness of thought.

These two attitudes, equilibrium and contradiction, are not irreconcilable. A state of equilibrium invariably hides untold tensions beneath. But Adorno's lesson is a salutary one: the highest achievement of thought is not to provide solutions but to divest itself of the vanity of reason. Thinking about thinking, via the mediation of seeing, leads to the slightly paradoxical conclusion that philosophy must transcend itself by recognising its limits. It is not as simple as uttering the phrase that 'thought is not enough'; this must come from thought itself, because otherwise it is empty rhetoric. Likewise, reaching an informed consensus about the meaning of things, like those offered to us by art, will not always bestow greater value to our lives; but becoming aware of this limitation probably will. And this can be a life-changing lesson.

[23] Lambert Zuidervaart, 'Theodor W. Adorno', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno/ (see §5: 'Negative dialectics').

7. Aftermath

The 'experiment' that Tate Exchange was announced to be has proven a successful one, as attested by the many projects and activities that have been delivered since its inception in 2016, possibly exceeding its own aims. If for nothing else, for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and methods that it has triggered and the links that it forged between communities of academics, artists, arts professionals and the public, which more often than not stand apart, or in opposition.

As evidence of Tate Exchange's success in this respect, indicating both its immediate influence but also its longer term potential, we offer in these concluding remarks our collaboration with artist Laurence Payot, which directly resulted from conversations developed during the Tate Exchange Associate meetings and the successful delivery of our 'Thinking Is Seeing' project. Payot, a Tate Exchange artist-in-residence and associate, invited us to contribute to her project 'The Alchemy Between Us', developed under the Tate Exchange Liverpool programme later in the same year (2017). We deployed philosophical inquiry in order to explore the exchange between artists and members of the public and how this impacts on the way they develop their work and understand their role as artists, while Payot drew inspiration from the philosophical reflection that was developed during the discussion and creatively transformed it into a series of artworks. As one artist put it at the time: 'What I want to make is not a transcendental truth; I am communicating things that I want to be understood'.[24]

This hope for direct and meaningful exchange expressed by the artists in the context of 'The Alchemy Between Us' directly resonated with the views of the public articulated through our project and indeed became a concrete possibility under Tate Exchange. As a participant in one of our 'Thinking Is Seeing' workshops noted: 'there is one thing: this [philosophical reflection within communities of inquiry] might well be in the future with all art exhibitions because you communicate and

[24] See http://www.laurencepayot.com/work/the-alchemy-between-us/, accessed 5 July 2019.

learn so much more'. Tate Modern have already expressed a commitment to fully embed Tate Exchange;[25] we look forward to the stage when Tate Exchange projects, hopefully involving philosophy, are rolled out across Tate institutions.[26]

[25] Wilmot, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–90.

[26] We would like to thank a small group of enthusiastic postgraduate students who assisted us with the running of our project sessions. Also, we are grateful to Tate Liverpool for this opportunity to work on *Constellations* and for their input in the development of our project. This project would not have been possible without the general support and the resources provided by the University of Liverpool, especially the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Business Gateway.

FIGURE 1: Tate Exchange Liverpool – project space and workshop participants.

FIGURE 2: Tate Exchange Liverpool – *Constellations* project wall.

FIGURE 3: Tate Exchange Liverpool – An alternative constellation.

FIGURE 4: Word cloud prior to the *Lowry Constellation* workshop.

FIGURE 5: Word cloud following the *Lowry Constellation* workshop.

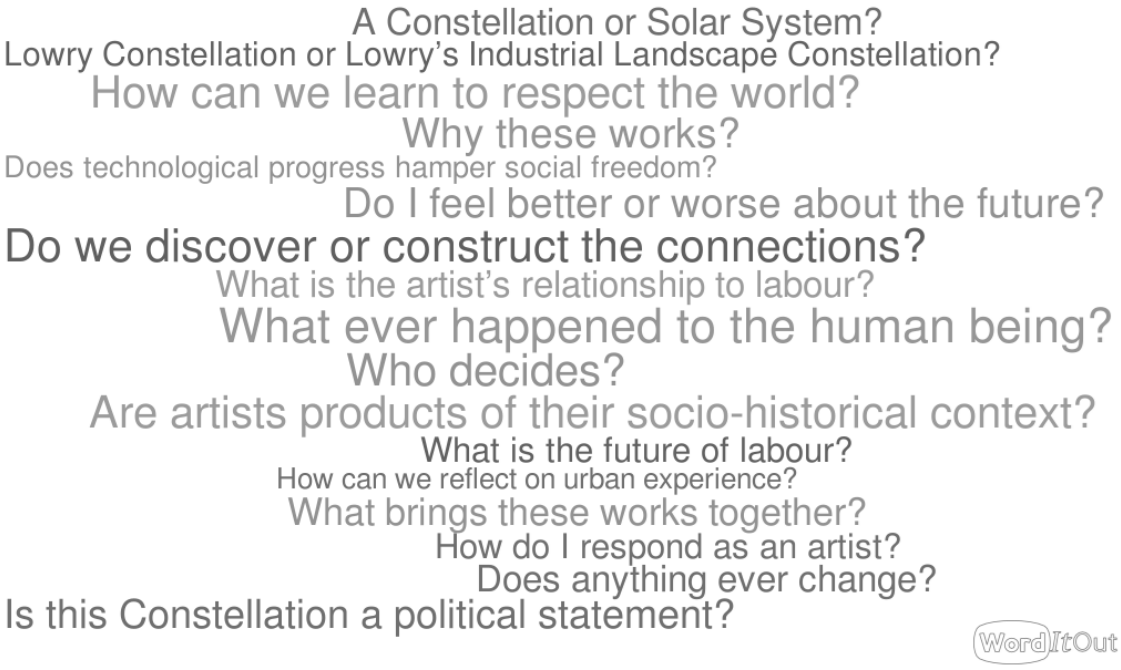

FIGURE 6: *Lowry Constellation* 'question cloud'.

FIGURE 7: 'Thinking Is Seeing' poster.