

Preconceptions and Instabilities Within the Aesthetic Politics of Nationalist Institutions

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Whilst specifically situating this essay within a western understanding of national identity, the following shall negotiate the relationship and development of the politics entwined within such, and of the artistic practices than when exhibited within specific institutions - construct and support the predetermined politics of governing bodies. Through establishing the museum as an apparatus of modernity that objectively narrates the political agendas of the time, a reliance is evident within the relationship of aesthetics and politics; specifically through the attempts of legitimisation and empowerment of social and political agencies - such shall be negotiated with particular reference to the theorisations of Carol Duncan, Chantal Mouffe and Brian Wallis.

Through stating that there is an ‘aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art’¹, Mouffe urges that neither can be considered as separate entities, but as inseparable constructs, which when combined arguably produce an influential aesthetic experience. While initially understanding national identity in terms of the artistic politics within such, and exemplifying the controlled representation of these politics within the discursive space of the museum - the institution will be scrutinised through this understanding of being a constructed secular space establishing a political agenda. However consequently so, the museum is arguably perceived as an entity which is required to adjust accordingly so to the alterations within society, consequently contradicting the preceding aesthetics politics that are presented within itself, done so through a social obligation.

¹Mouffe, Chantal. “Art and Democracy, Art as an Agnostic Intervention” in *Public Space in Open, Art as a Public Issue, Volume 7, no 14*. Jorinde Seijdel and Liesbeth Melis (ed.). Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008. p.11

Appropriately defining identity² first through the Oxford English Dictionary³, which when applied to the understanding of *British* identity, entails a constructed product of practices that attempt to establish order in a context of contingency⁴ within the perimeters of society. Developed within ‘A Nation Made Real’⁵, Anthony Smith contextualises this understanding of the nation⁶ through defining *national identity* as ‘the reproduction and continuous reinterpretation of the pattern of values, memories, myths, symbols, and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of a nation, and the identification by individual members that pattern.’⁷ This “distinctive heritage” is determined through the observations of the ‘other’⁸ being presented through an ideological schemata as a strategic form of comparison to reinforce the hierarchal standards against contrasting national identities. Additionally, through Brian Wallis’ theorisation that the nation can be perceived as an ‘empty and elastic container into which can fit any variety of objects’⁹ - the interchangeable construction of national identity is theoretically legitimised as an adjusting entity - controlled and reinterpreted to support specifically selected values and myths for political gain, which reinforces the identity of the reigning governing body with consequences of dispensable ethics¹⁰. Within a broader articulation of such a notion of the ‘governmentalisation of social relations’¹¹, Oliver Bennett defines the management of populations by ‘means of specific knowledges, programmes and technologies – which

² 1. The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness ...

2. The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself not something else; individuality, personality.

³ 1971 edition, p.1368.

⁴ Mouffe. 2008. p.8.

⁵ Smith, Anthony D *The Nation made real; Art and National identity in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁶ “A named and self defined human community whose members cultivate shared myths, memories, symbols, values, traditions, residing in and identifying with an historic homeland, creating and disseminating a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and common laws.”

⁷ *et al* Smith.

⁸ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (1978) London: Penguin books, 2003.

⁹ Wallis, Brian. *Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy, Museums Culture*. London: Routledge Publishers, 2001, p.272.

¹⁰ Stated previously in connection to Chantal Mouffe.

¹¹ Belgoire, Eleanora, and Bennet, Oliver. *The Social Impact of the Arts, An Intellectual History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishing, 2008. p. 397.

according to Foucault, most clearly distinguishes modern forms of social regulation from their predecessors.¹² Through such, Bennett articulates the controlled representation of a nation having the ability to enable, and distinguish against the primitive predecessors of a nationhood, providing evidence of a progressive nation, creating a hierarchal ordering of nations and the first reference to power politics.

Through combining the aforementioned understandings, the projected intention to support the formation of the bourgeois society within the 19th century by virtue of the construction of the National Museums, is evident. Perceived significantly as a structure of power, the museum embodies the political virtues of national identity and presents itself as a powerful and modernised entity. Carol Duncan identifies with such a notion whilst stating that ‘having a better art museum is a sign ... of being recognisably a member of the civilised community of modern, liberal nations’¹³, specifying that the museum is employed as a political tool to obtain dominance within cultural politics and to legitimise the contemporary context exterior to the discursive space of the museum. Perceived then, as an entity that presents the secular truths of an “universal” knowledge - the museum functions as a higher, authoritative truth, and is regarded as evidence of political virtue - although being itself established as a construction.

Despite such, through the observation of selected artefacts, the museum produces a particular form of vision, and through the consideration of the museum as a prominent point of secular truth, the institution is utilised as a semiotic instrument for the creation, maintenance and dissemination of meaning; through the synthesis of objects, ideals and beliefs - the manipulated image is exhibited within such an institution, converting and educating audiences by commenting upon the fundamental

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Duncan, Carol. “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship” in *Exhibiting Cultures, The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Karp, Ivan (ed.) Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. p. 89.

organisation of society. Structured specifically to promote the national politics, and to suppress the defiant protests, the dominant cultural voice produces the museum as an entity that serves as an ontology - whilst indirectly relaying the sophisticated narratives of the social hierarchy as a conscious attempt to impose social order through coercive acts¹⁴; through such, the emergence of and reinforcement of class division is visible.

Sustaining distance, political schemas emanate from the dominant governing body, and are enforced through lower authoritative powers, and affect the population in a standardised ordering of society. Kimberly Hutchings summarises such a relationship of power, through writing that “the moral judge does not have to factor himself or herself in to the practice of judgement.”¹⁵ It is here theorised, that the systems of governance enable a possibility for the educated middle classes to distance themselves from the lower classes, and to bestow legitimacy on such differentiations. It is through the aforementioned that the impact of the arts is exemplified and considered specifically poignant when related to politics within the structuring of the museum. Utilised as a firm declaration of the politics embedded within the social context of its production and reception, and centralised within the European concept of canonicity, the aesthetic negotiates between the formal concerns of artistic practices and a set of thematic motifs.¹⁶ Held within the exhibition space of the museum, there is thus an inter-reliance between politics and aesthetics and a capacity of definitive expectations weighted upon the viewer to react “correctly” within the aesthetic encounter. Wallis further develops such a definition of the manipulation of images to create social and political agendas, as being done so

¹⁴ see Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 - 1977*. New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1980.

¹⁵ Hutchings, Kimberly. “A place of greater safety? securing judgement in international ethics” in *The Vulnerable Subject. Beyond Rationalism in International Relations*. Russell Beattie, Amanda and Schnick, Kate. (ed) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Publishing, 2013. p.32.

¹⁶ Lavine, Steven D. “Art Museums, National Identity, and the Status of Minority Cultures: The Case of Hispanic Art in the United States.” in *Exhibiting Cultures, The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Karp, Ivan (ed.) Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. p. 81.

through ‘engineered over production of certain types of images or the censorship or suppression of others, and through controlling the way images are viewed by determining which are preserved. Cultural representations can also be used to produce certain views of a nations history.’¹⁷

Through combining such with the theorisation of hegemony, artistic practices exhibited within the museum articulate the constitution and maintenance of the given symbolic order, concerning itself with what Claire Lefort calls ‘the mise en scene’, stating that the ‘mise en forme’ of human coexistence and such is where the aesthetic dimension¹⁸ is visible. Within the spatial formation of the exhibition space and through the successful combination of politics and aesthetics, the required influence of political identity is perceived as affective in terms of controlling the publics understanding of particular political notions. The aforesaid is exemplified within The Victoria and Albert Museum¹⁹ (V&A) which opened in 1852 following The Great Exhibition in 1851. With the aim to be acknowledged and respected internationally as the world’s leading museum of art and design, and through officially stating that ‘its founding principle was to make works of art available to all, to educate working people and to inspire British designers and manufacturers’²⁰, the institute exemplifies the preceded notions of dominant museum politics as an attempt to provide accessibility to the artefacts within collections for audiences by means of providing education through influence.

With the understanding of the politicisation of the cultural sphere apparent, an extension of the controlled portrayal of British identity as a facilitator between nations is enforced through comparable tactics as discussed, in order to maintain a dominance over other nations. Similar to those enforced onto the citizens within Britain through the processes previously stated and theorised by historian

¹⁷ *et al.* Wallis. p.266.

¹⁸ *et al.* Mouffe. 2008. p.11.

¹⁹ - namely so as an enthusiastic monument to the support Prince Albert had given to its foundation.

²⁰ ‘A Brief History of the Museum’, Victoria and Albert Museum. Author and date unknown. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/a-brief-history-of-the-museum>

Edward Said; within Orientalism²¹ prominent themes of knowledge and power are discussed. Said states that, ‘to have knowledge was to dominate it, to have authority over it’²² can be applied to museum politics and simultaneously to Britain’s position of political power as an extension of the exhibition space.

Exemplifying the aforesaid, with the aim to ensure that representations of Britain obtain an appropriate and distinctive appearance - The Government Art Collection (GAC) displays art within Government buildings that enriches Britain’s role in the world, while contributing to cultural diplomacy.²³ Initially beginning in 1898, the collection has expanded, now containing over 13,500 works from the 16th century to the present day. Predominantly portrayed by British artists who combine elements of British culture with political links and themes that reflect ‘a young a modern age, (one that is) fresh and challenging’²⁴. Such pieces are selected upon their appropriateness and connection to particular locals - with consideration to the architectural criteria, the environmental conditions and the functions of individual spaces.

The facilitation between European power relations subtly shown within artistic practices is clearly visible within the examination of the conscious exhibiting of Michael Craig-Martin’s painting *Lighthouse*.²⁵ Hung within the British Embassy in Moscow, the piece exemplifies the standard of appropriate political references and a solidarity that is upheld within the collection through the reiteration of the relation between the aesthetic politics. The combination of such entities provides an essential affect of subtly confirming the manufactured national identity through the combination of

²¹ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1978) London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

²² *ibid.* p.32.

²³ Johnson, Penny. “Turning the World inside out: The Art of Choosing for Government” in *Art, Power, Diplomacy, Government Art Collection - The Untold Story*. London: Scala Publishers LTD, 2011. p.13

²⁴ *ibid.* p.33.

²⁵ Michael Craig- Martin. *Lighthouse*. (1999) Oil on canvas, 524.50 cm x 193.50 cm, British Embassy, Moscow.

the dominating size and composition of the piece, and the symbolics within. The depiction of the torch proclaims that Britain is a beacon of light whilst simultaneously rhyming with the columns of the architecture of the main hall exemplifying a symbiosis with such politics and the painting's social surroundings. This balance between the space and the piece metaphorically reflects the relationship between Britain and Russia - successfully establishing political diplomacy through the maintenance of controlled aesthetics, and exceeds the limitations of aesthetic politics beyond the museum.

The positioning of the such art pieces correlates with the hierarchy of classes, and continues to contradict the notion of a united Britishness in line with the separation of privileged accessibility within the museum - with reference to the operationally entrance fee that is compulsory within museum's exhibitions, and throughout certain permanent collections. Attempting to address such issues, The GAC provides the following examples of their public accessibility procedures, identified on the official GAC website;

“We give tours of our central London building which are very popular. We currently run three tours every month for organised groups as well as taking part in the annual London Open House and Museums at Night weekends. We have published a number of catalogues on aspects of the Collection, including a catalogue of all the oil paintings in the Collection in collaboration with the Public Catalogue Foundation. In 2011, 'Art Power and Diplomacy', the first book about the history and role of the Collection, was published.”²⁶

However, such attempts reinforce the notion of separation, and continue to reflect the excluded politics that are encumbered within the museum through the restricted accessibility of the specifically selected artistic practices, and identify the structural issues within the collection. Through consciously problematising the construct within such an institution the consequential demand for the questioning

²⁶ Government Art Collection website. 'What we do.' <http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/245.html>

of the semiotics and politics within such, due to the reliance of each entity to legitimise the other within the discursive exhibition space is essential.

Where traditionally there was an understanding of a structured format of what it was considered to be British, such a classification is now not supported by genetic data²⁷ and evidently undermines the essential and determinist politics of identity within debates of multiculturalism, public morality, and postmodernism during the past decade. Identity is thusly confirmed as a salient scholarly and cultural construct, particularly in social-scientific scholarship,²⁸ which challenges the historical notion of the British national identity being anchored to a structured political agenda. Whilst discussions of the negotiation of national identity remain encumbered within the constraints established by the political, economic and social contexts of the museum²⁹, and precariously identifies the tensions between, rather than obscuring, the concept that identity is reconstructed through historical action, against that of being an essential, fundamental, unitary, and unchanging entity.³⁰ Within the critical essay entitled ‘Museum Politics’³¹, Timothy Luke submits the theorisation that it is the cultural values that are paramount in ‘forging a single country out of immigrant communities, subjugated indigenous nations, and a slave population at different turns in the development.’³² Consistent with the semiotics involved within the traditional formation of national identity; through such, Luke exemplifies the

²⁷ Smart, Andrew. Tutton, Richard. Martin, Paul. and Ellison, George T.H. “‘Race’ as a Social Construction in Genetics” in *Identity Politics and the New Genetics, Re/Creating Categories of Difference and Belonging*. Volume 6 of Studies of the Biosocial Society. Schramm, Skinner, Rottenburg (ed.) New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. p.30.

²⁸ Handler, Richard. “Is “identity” as useful cross -cultural concept?” in *Commemorations, The Politics of National Identity*. Gilis, John R. (ed) New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994. p.27.

²⁹ Wade, Peter. “Race Kinship and the Ambivalence of Identity” in *Identity Politics and the New Genetics, Re/Creating Categories of Difference and Belonging*. Volume 6 of Studies of the Biosocial Society. Schramm, Skinner, Rottenburg (ed.) New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. p. 90.

³⁰ *et al.* Handler. p. 29.

³¹ Luke, Timothy W. *Museum Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

³² *ibid.* p. xiv.

practices of extending a singular narrative of moralistic values unto “indigenous nations” to control the population within such.

The consideration of morality holding such a significance within the construction of identity is reflected within the critical evaluative writings of Alan Rew and John Campbell. Through stating that identity is the ‘meeting point of distinctly modern responsibilities - that of responsibility for one’s own actions in an increasingly complex society and responsibility for ordering one’s own life courses and careers,’³³ Rew and Campbell highlight the social expectations that weigh on the individual. Through referencing back to the established definition of the museum as an entity that is based upon modern concepts, reflecting the attitudes and policies of the governing bodies - it is arguable that the semiotics within the exhibition space are required to adapt and the role of the museum to develop. Thus reinforcing the social and ethical issues surrounding matters of self-identification, group representation, equality, stigmatisation, and discrimination,³⁴ critiquing the foundations of political identity and collected subjectivity.

Whilst reflecting and legitimising the contemporary context of such a politically discursive space, the discourse articulates new, post national and transcultural identities in boundaries of national communities and present unconventional understandings in relation to political values, challenging the preconceived notions that are upheld within the historical museum collections, producing cultural battles of representation, and freedom of expression against traditional modes of identity and political agenda. Lavine³⁵ demands that the museum is thusly responsible for the diverse cultures that reside within a country, and argues that ‘judged by the aesthetic standards of compressive art museums, this

³³ Rew, Alan and Campbell, John R. “The Political Economy of Identity and Affect” in *Identity and Affect; Experiences of identity in a Globalising World*. Campbell, John R and Rew, Alan. (ed) London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999. p. 6.

³⁴ *et al.* Smart, Tutton, Elison. p. 30.

³⁵ *et al.* Lavine.

art deserves inclusions³⁶; such theorises the debates surrounding the selection of art to be included and excluded within museums, depending upon the political values displayed within such.

Exemplified within the site specific commission entitled ‘State Britain’³⁷, Mark Wallinger engages with the alteration in personal and national identity, of historical belief, and exploring issues relating to the liberty and freedom of speech in connection to the role of politics within art whilst addressing the controversial domination of Iraq since 2001. Wallinger recreates campaigner Brian Haw’s Parliament Square protest. Expanding throughout the full length of the Duveen Gallery within Tate Britain, and consisting of a meticulous reconstruction of the six-hundred items donated by the public - Wallinger’s interpretation and continuation of Haw’s protest challenges questions of freedom of expression and the erosion of civil liberties in Britain today. Following the passing of the ‘Serious Organised Crime and Police Act’³⁸ by Parliament, which prohibits unauthorised demonstrations within a one kilometre radius of Parliament Square (which correlates with the political notion of suppressing art that protests against the dominant discourse), the majority of Haw’s protest was confiscated, and restricted to a three metre length. Taken literally, the edge of this exclusion zone bisects Tate Britain, and thus allowing for the installation to remain within this specific location. Wallinger emphasises this perimeter with a line on the floor that is visible throughout the building, positioning State Britain on either side of this radius. Considering the specifics of this locale and the examination of Wallinger’s installation in terms of politicised aesthetics, the installation adheres to previously discussed notions of a contradictory inclusions within the museum, and challenges acceptable inclusions within collections, supporting the thesis of the museum reflecting the current issues within society.

³⁶ *ibid.* p.84.

³⁷ Mark Willinger, “State Britain”, installation, 15 January – 27 August 2007.

³⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/15/contents>.

Visible then as an example of an institution that portrays the evolutionary relation of politics and aesthetics, The Tate Britain not only exhibits but embodies the multicultural and post-modern identity of Britain through the continuous extension of the architectural perimeters of the building,; enabling the permanent collection to extend figuratively and literally, and to precede the limitations of the politically accepted historical chronology within the collection. Sidney R.J Smith, designer of the original gallery which opened in 1897, created an architectural structure that included a porticoed entranceway and central dome which resembles a temple; remaining visible today as the main component of the building, and simultaneously architecturally referencing the design of a temple with symbolic representations of a site of secular education and devotion - the galleries position as being an authoritative and influential place of universal knowledge and power is reinforced. Such affirms the position of the modern museum as a continual educational institution, with the ability to shape collective values and social understandings in a decisively effective manner of leisure.

Through the obligation to present renegotiated aesthetic politics that consequently displace preceding understandings, the pieces within modern exhibition spaces, that inevitably relate to the politics of identity, hold the ability to contradict existing pieces within the permanent collections of institutions - exemplified through the discussion of Tate Britain; through undermining the imaged environment of the discursive space, the legitimacy of both the politics and aesthetics involved are problematised. However, such contradictions support a visibility of progression within society, and whilst displayed within national exhibition spaces, present comparative policies. Seeming to have developed against the traditional forms of sovereignty, and towards the display of strategic apparatuses of subtle mechanisms of domination and subjection - the understanding of national identity as an entity that has evolved throughout the last two-hundred years is reflected within the discursive spatial confines of the museum itself. Embodying the constructed politics, the museum consequently contradicts the existing agenda's within the permanent collections of such institutions - producing the concluding

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definition of the museum being reflective of the adjusting aesthetic, political and social constructs of the present time.