

# The Story of a Visit: Instrumentalisation and the Social Uplift Model of the Museum

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This article comes out of a seminar series given at UCL in 2011. It deals with the notion of the 'voice' within the museum. The article addresses a particular story of the discovery of the author's own individual voice through being socialised by the museum. The author details the means and results of this socialisation and then claims that his biography, an inspirational story about the museum, is being co-opted. He argues that those who believe that the museum should act as a mechanism of social inclusion and rescue for the disfranchised use a story of personal transformation to support policies of social intervention by museums.

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## Introduction

In May 2011 I participated in the seminar series 'Voices in (and around) the Museum', organised by UCL Mellon Programme Fellows Sarah Byrne and Antony Hudek. My presentation consisted of two interrelated but distinct components: one, a narrative about my own process of socialisation in and through the museum subsequent to my exposure to it as a young adult, and two, an analysis of the social and economic context in which such a story becomes understood as an 'uplift narrative', and as such is instrumentalised to support the notion that, as Nicholas Serota has argued, art galleries have 'fundamentally helped to change the way in which people see their place in society' (Sabbagh 2000: 41). What underlies this statement is a view of the museum as an instrument of social change. My talk sought to use my life story as it relates to the museum to question the unexamined assumptions that support this viewpoint.

I attempted to do so by placing my own story in sharp relief against the UK's New Labour government's cultural policies and those policies' assumptions about culture. I then sought to compare the underlying model of the museum presumed in these policies to models put forward by influential museum and cultural studies scholars. Ultimately my aim was to formulate an argument that would free up the museum from its increasing instrumentalisation by government agencies seeking to use culture to mend holes in the social fabric. This policy is a kind of deflection: the desire to press museums and other cultural institutions into serving the social domain is a way to avoid addressing the root of social exclusion, namely economic inequality (Bauman 1991). As my own experience testifies, the notion of being 'saved' by a cultural institution is an attractive but analytically knotty one. This presentation intended to question how we think about redemption by cultural means by revisiting a narrative – my own – set against what we have come to understand the museum to be.

The principal ideas that found a social uplift museum model are: a) as an institution of significant cultural authority and 'reach', museums at the community level can help fulfil social and economic policy objectives; and b) in the course of meeting these goals, individuals can have experiences in museums that help them achieve moments of affective and intellectual self realisation. The pervasiveness of these expectations has made the museum subject to what Carol Scott calls 'the dominance of an instrumental/utilitarian paradigm' (2009: 195). Though these expectations have been shown to be supported by tenuous evidence, they are widespread (Levitt 2008). They can be found in cultural policy statements by government agencies (DCMS 2000, 2000a), arts survey reports (Keaney *et al.* 2007) and reviews of funding schemes for museums and galleries (McMaster 2008; see also Gee 2007 and Tait 2008). These reports and statements evidence a fervour to use the museum to address the situation of those who are socially marginalised or at risk of marginalisation. In my presentation, I proposed to examine how and under what conditions the narrative of a life changed by the museum is regarded as representative of the museum's social potential in light of what is currently known about the museum visit.

The instrumentalisation of museums as agents of social rejuvenation has been contested on other grounds. Since its incorporation into New Labour's cultural policies, it has been attacked as a coercive approach, which wilfully ignores artists' freedom and art's historical tendency to provoke and sow disagreement rather than create consensus (Ross 2001). The validity of measurements of social outcomes, and the attendance and use of museums by its intended audiences have also been contested (Burns Owens Partnership 2005; Selwood 2006). Finally, the 'instrumental' value of the museum has been considered less able to recognise intangible individual and community benefits such as mutual respect and fostering trust in public institutions. This has led some cultural critics to substitute notions of 'intrinsic value' and 'institutional value' for instrumental value (Holden 2006; Scott 2009).

To interrogate this instrumentalisation, I briefly examined historicised versions of the museum, and proposed

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to evaluate the role of the social uplift museum in comparison to other models that appear in critical discourse on museum and visitor studies. These models, based on distinctly different analyses of the museum (sociological, historical, anthropological, art historical) suggest different social actions for the museum, different purposes for the museum space, and different sorts of visitors. Taken together, the models show that the public art museum has been instrumentalised by various forces since its inception in the nineteenth century. However, the form of the museum emerging today is one that does not easily lend itself to manipulation by the state to address social causes.

There are four main types of museum/visit I looked at to suggest that a relatively new type of visit is coming to prominence. The roles for the museum outlined in these four types do not conform to an instrumental/utilitarian paradigm, and challenge the fundamental notion of the social uplift museum as a viable model. The historicised models of the museum are briefly: the museum as a screen for class conflict (Bourdieu 1984); the museum as staging ground for ritual (Duncan 1995); Tony Bennett's conception of the museum as a tool for social discipline (1995, 2006); and the museum that Donald Preziosi views as a means for the constitution of the modern person (2006). By contrast, I suggest that a personalised form of the visit is coming to prominence, one that is, I argue, instrumentalised *by the visitor* to realise and enact her or his agency.

### A Personal Museum Experience

I want to talk about the significance of the artworks I first encountered in the museum. However, this significance only becomes clear once I talk about my background. I grew up in the Bronx, New York, the son of Jamaican parents who had immigrated to the United States when I was seven. My family was industrious and deeply religious; both these factors contributed to my lack of exposure to much of the city's cultural life (although I watched a lot of television). My parents – my father was a plumber who went on to become a landowner and the manager of several housing estates; my mother, who was a teacher in Jamaica, returned to school to become a registered nurse when she arrived in New York – were either too busy with work, thought that the 'things of the world' (that is, secular culture) would be a bad influence on me, or were simply not curious about whatever lay outside the cultural areas they inhabited. As a child and young adult I never went to the cinema or attended sport games, or any sort of public performance outside of our church. I did not miss these activities, or was not aware of missing them, until I encountered the museum.

About the time I went to university, I began reading literature and poetry. (I had always loved to read as a child, but mostly science-related magazines, science fiction and 'fantasy'.) As a first-year undergraduate I also began studying fine art. Among the field trips to museums and galleries that we took, the only one I can recall in detail is a visit to the Museum of Modern Art. There, for the first time, I entered a world of objects intended for contempla-

tion. These objects were meaningful. They were not utilitarian tools to be used to pry open, or wedge between, or fix together other objects, but were made and placed in a museum, to evoke something. I felt their call – to look closely at them, to take the time to ponder them – as if each artwork addressed me by name. I was mesmerised by what they said to me.

I saw Louise Bourgeois' *Sleeping Figure II*. At the time it appeared to me as a kind of African sculpture caught between representing a human figure and a boat. Next was Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, a piece that still fills me with wonder. Although it is sculpture, a piece of inert material, it seemed to be in motion at MoMA. The work of painters connected to Abstract Expressionism – including Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and Ad Reinhardt – came next. I particularly loved Newman's work because he made the introduction of the line to the canvas a definitive act. The canvasses were so smooth and placid but for the shocking interruption of the line. It was as if he was separating one reality from the other. Still on the other hand made viscerally rough mountain ranges, with surfaces so palpably rugged that his paintings looked like one could step onto them with hobnailed boots and leather gloves and scale them. Reinhardt, by contrast, was subtle and nuanced in his versions of colour-on-colour paintings, creating intersecting bands like small countries of intermingling populations. These painters produced what seemed to me like puzzles requiring time to unpack, visual versions of Zen koans. I loved these works. They triggered in me a process of thinking deeply about objects as a way to both discover and depict ideas.

Beyond this intellectual gift, going to museums gave me access to a whole new social world. I began talking to people while at museums, taking friends and dates there. I became aware of other cultural venues, such as the worlds of poetry and literature readings, and, some years later, of modern dance. I tried to soak up everything cultural I possibly could, so as to be filled with stories – stories compelling and insightful. Growing older, I took on the habit of using a passage in literature or an image of visual art to translate my experience. Following this custom, here is part of a poem by the American poet Mark Doty, entitled *Ararat* (2008), which helps to explain what my life looked like to me:

Any small thing can save you.  
Because the golden egg gleamed  
in my basket once, though my childhood  
became an immense sheet of darkening water  
I was Noah, and I was his ark,  
and there were two of every animal inside me.

On reflection, this quote does not seem precisely right, although it goes some way to relating the feeling of holding inside me a life-altering collection of stories, histories and great works. Art, this personal collection, became the pivot around which my emotional and intellectual self began to define itself. I discovered I loved to tell stories, as I loved to hear them. I learned that transformation of the

self is possible, albeit as a slow and haphazard process. I understood that the life I had had before the museum was not the life I wanted to have.

### From the Personal to the Communal

I would like to turn to the nature of the assumptions made about the museum's ability to affect other visitors in the way it affected me. Expectations of social redemption through the museum are founded on the assumption that issues of social and economic marginalisation might be addressed through the mechanisms of culture. The most authoritative governmental versions of this claim made in the UK have been by New Labour officials, particularly in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. These claims belong to two separate but equally important registers: at the individual level, and at the level of the community. It has been suggested that exposure to art can give the visitor/participant a clearer sense of identity. This process of identity-formation is somewhat simplistically understood as developing a personalised sense of self through understanding the latter as linked to a powerful and collective heritage. In the DCMS report *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All* (2000: 3), the New Labour government's first Secretary of Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, writes:

Combating social exclusion is one of the Government's highest priorities, and I believe that museums, galleries and archives have a significant role to play in helping us to do this. They are often the focal point of cultural activity in the community, interpreting its history and heritage. This gives people a sense of their own identity and that of their community.

Here Smith articulates the focus of New Labour cultural policy at the time: to prevent people from being left out of the mainstream civic, economic, and social processes. 'Social exclusion' is a term used to signify a process through which those who are undereducated or unemployed move towards the margins of society, particularly when this drift manifests itself in criminal behaviour. The basis of this policy is the notion that institutions can foster social cohesion by showing individuals at risk that they share a history and cultural heritage. They are made aware of these ostensibly enlivening connections through narratives told through objects in museums. Such a sense of shared heritage is imagined to lead to emotional and spiritual uplift, as well as to investments of energy in and attention to self-improvement by the participants. Institutions and individuals mutually reinforce a consciousness of being constituent parts of a larger, shared project.

In *Culture and Consensus* (1997), Robert Hewison takes further the ramifications of this argument of developing society through culture. He asserts that culture in post-World War Two Britain is *the* fundamental aspect of a society, arguing that it is culture that shapes our social forms, moral attitudes, and even economic policies. Culture is said to be the part of daily life that bestows a sense of

identity. Here, the underlying idea is that an identity (what Hewison precisely means by 'identity' is not entirely clear) equips one to shape social policies with the goal of creating a consensus. However, the interrelation of culture (either as a set of organised activities or particular ways of life) and identity is extremely complex. It remains unclear how this tandem development of the personal and the communal is made possible through cultural activity, and how we may recognise it when it occurs.

The other way that the cultural is seen to beneficially affect the social is by way of making changes in the infrastructure of areas in economic decline. Tessa Jowell, Smith's successor, argues in a report titled *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration*: 'Most people now accept that you cannot breathe new life into cities, towns, and communities without culture. Sometimes the cultural element alone becomes the driving force for regeneration' (2004: 3). Similar arguments have been made for the valuable effects on the Bankside area of London brought about by Tate Modern (Sabbagh 2000). These arguments are based on the reported influx of businesses and the creation of jobs for those who live in the community. Here the claims for museums as agents of social benefit are on stronger footing. Simon Tait (2008) finds numerous examples of museums economically anchoring poor communities, particularly post-industrial ones, where shops and cafés are encouraged to upgrade themselves, or new ones enticed to move in. The question that begs to be asked in the face of this evidence is how the museum as a cultural institution differs from other businesses. If the museum is a staging ground for consumption and a partner for other businesses interested in procuring customers, how can it retain its unique status as emotionally and spiritually empowering?

What I have outlined thus far are some of the arguments for regarding the museum as an institution of social uplift for marginalised populations. (For a more exhaustive survey, see Sandell 2002.) These perspectives assume that the museum may be mobilised by community and government agents to confront social issues; but they do not take stock of the history of the museum as an institution that scholars have found to be instrumentalised for other purposes. In what follows I highlight the most significant models of the museum – and the museum's functions within those models – to suggest other ways of regarding the museum.

### Four Models of Instrumentalisation

The significance of the contributions of Bourdieu, Bennett, Duncan and Preziosi to the literature is that they offer distinct, historicised, well researched versions of the museum visit, showing how it has been instrumentalised, respectively, by the conflict between economic classes, a disciplinary state, a managerial state and the modern individual.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) survey the museum-going public in several European countries in the 1960s and use the data to formulate a view of the museum as a screen for an underlying relationship of dominance between

social classes. A sociologist by training, Bourdieu is particularly interested in the question of social reproduction, that is, how power relations between classes persist and are reproduced. Armed with the notion of habitus, developed in *Distinction* (1984), as a set of dispositions internalised but socially expressed by the individual, Bourdieu argues that the necessary tools to appreciate art do not occur 'naturally' but are taught. The works of art displayed in museums are bearers of specialised messages, coded in a way that may only be decoded by those who possess this habitus (Merriman 1989). The latter have absorbed the habitus through middle- or upper-class family training and schooling. Bourdieu describes this decoding ability in terms of distinct forms of looking, or the gaze. He describes the 'Kantian aesthetic' as consisting of a 'pure' or 'disinterested' gaze that allows for reserved contemplation of art. Bourdieu opposes this gaze to a working-class or popular aesthetic that responds to images on the basis of 'norms of morality or agreeableness', such as colour, size, subject matter (Bourdieu 1984: 40-42). Those tutored in the Kantian gaze look for ideas presented in the artwork, taking it as the point of departure for considering what is being symbolised. Bourdieu concludes that this aesthetic appreciation naturalises and thus causes the social misrecognition of a set of inherited privileges, which are the conditioning and education that produces this type of appreciation for art.

Bourdieu contends that the dominant class seeks to conserve its position of dominance symbolically through the museum, securing that dominance by representing precisely these middle class aesthetics, aesthetics conversant with the dominant class' disposition:

Finally for the ideological circle to be complete, it is sufficient that they derive the justification for their monopoly of the instruments of appropriation of cultural goods from an essentialist representation of the division of their society into barbarians and civilized people [...] museums betray their true function, which is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion (Bourdieu 1984: 112).

Those who feel that the museum is not for them consent to this dominance and therefore exclude themselves from the museum (Fyfe 2007). Thus the museum is seen as reifying social divisions that render the working class as inferior visitors, because they lack the skills to appreciate art in the ways of the dominant class, and the middle and upper classes as monopolising a set of symbolic tools by which they reproduce the social order. In this regard the museum becomes an arena in which fundamental social divisions and competition among the classes are manifested. The museum is instrumentalised by the dominant classes to render their dominance euphemistically. Here the museum does not operate as a means of social redemption, but rather as a means for social domination misrecognised.

For his part, Bennett reads the museum as one of the mechanisms through which the state exerts control over

its citizen subjects in its effort to maintain social order. Bennett is a cultural studies specialist who apprehends the historical nature of cultural institutions and seeks to understand them via their histories. His views on the relation between the nineteenth-century public museum and its social and political context are most clearly articulated in his book *Birth of the Museum* (1995), where he explains how state power is mobilised to discipline the population, an understanding influenced by Michel Foucault's historiography of modern European society (Foucault 1973, 1995). According to Bennett's reading of Foucault, as monarchies give way to liberal governments, the primary means of social discipline – spectacular displays of the sovereign's power and mutual surveillance – change, and are replaced by those acting on behalf of the state to inculcate the population with the desire to manage themselves. Culture, in other words, is enlisted as a tool for teaching citizens to discipline themselves. Bennett takes the museum to be a key institution in this scheme, as an experiential space of coercive power. He describes the museum constituting such a space in three ways: a) a space of emulation where civilised conduct can be learnt; b) a space of representation of principles of order, categorisation and hierarchy; and c) a space in which people observe and regulate their own bodies as well as the bodies around them. For Bennett the museum is a place in which the gaze is employed to teach the visitor to introject habits of self-management in relation to normative middle-class standards of behaviour (Bennett 2006).

Ultimately Bennett makes a case for the museum operating as the handmaiden of the modern, liberal state. To answer the question of how control is exerted, he argues that the state, working through the museum, forces newly constituted, free individuals to internalise the regulatory impulse. A corollary effect is that social difference by way of class is marked out in the museum, with middle-class values and behaviour manifested through a certain kind of disinterested gaze (similar to Bourdieu's Kantian aesthetic) and bodily comportment. These bourgeois values are actively opposed to an untutored gaze and vulgar behaviour associated with the poorer classes. Thus, for Bennett, the museum is a tool for the maintenance of social hegemony, and his outlook on the museum does not envision it acting as a means for social uplift.

Duncan (1995) reads the museum visit as a scripted performance and thus understands the museum to be a staging ground for the enacting of a ritual, an idea and practice that she borrows from the discipline of anthropology. The ritual analogy rests on two main aspects of the museum visit: the 'setting' of the museum space and the 'performance', that is, the actions taken by the visitor: 'Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention' (1995: 10). The marking off of this space, as Duncan demonstrates, may be observed in the kind of architecture that often characterises museums, whose monumental effect makes it clear that the museum space is a distinct type of social space. However, it is the interior of museums that creates for Duncan the setting for the enactment of

ritual. She focuses on the installation design of museums, finding in the illumination and isolation of objects an attempt to create a 'sacralised' space (Duncan 1995: 17). In this kind of space, according to Duncan, a liminal experience is possible, privileging a mode of consciousness. She describes this liminal possibility as 'some kind of revelation or transformation' (Duncan 1995: 14). This might sound like the 'social uplift' museum, except that the experience Duncan describes is limited to the individual and is essentially scripted to offer the visitor a kind of spiritual fulfilment. Though she acknowledges that visitors may deviate from this path, she asserts that a valid visitor is the one who reaps the benefits held out by the enacted ritual.

The second aspect of her formulation of the museum is the performance of the visitor. For Duncan, the valid visitor is similar to the medieval pilgrim: he would have had his sense of connection to his faith reconstituted and renewed by following a narrative trail through the biblical story as laid out in a cathedral, just as the modern museum visitor is reconstituted as 'a self-improving, autonomous, politically empowered (and therefore male) individual' by following a path laid out for him (Duncan 1995: 49). The visitor is led to this reconstitution by the sequences of galleries and the lighting and display schemes for objects (Huyssen 1995; Blazwick and Morris 2000). Following this path designed by the curator makes one a valid visitor and, as such, eligible for the psychic rewards of recognising oneself as a valid citizen. A key element in Duncan's construction of the museum is that the visitor is made to benefit from the visit, and thus mediates the idea of the museum as hegemonic force. Nevertheless, her argument does not regard the museum as being subject to recruitment by the government to fulfil social objectives. Rather, the museum is a force by which the state confirms the validity of one's citizenship and subjectivity.

For Preziosi, the relation of the visitor to the museum is articulated in art historical terms centred on the relation of the visitor to the art object. In this relation he argues that the modern subject is able to realise an unprecedented degree of agency in the visit, because the museum offers the visitor a plethora of choices of who to be. As Preziosi argues in 'Art History and Museology' (2006) and 'Brain of the Earth's Body' (2004), the contemporary museum offers an experience in the visit that incites self-constitutive psychic processes. He attributes this function to the museum, describing it as an 'autosopic' function, whereby the objects inside the museum are deployed as 'optical instruments' that provide 'external organs for the perception of the individual subject and its agency' (2006: 56). In other words, he argues that in the museum space one sees objects that are not oneself. By being in one's gaze and not oneself, these objects make one aware of one's own agency. This is enabled in particular by the art historical discourse around objects that almost makes them the equivalent of subjects, able to communicate revelatory information. As a visitor able to interact with these other objects, one finds meaning about oneself in them.

The visitor's agency is made all the more recognisable that each art object holds out a subject position available

to the visitor. As Preziosi writes, the seeming availability of these positions confer upon the visitor a sense of being in control:

Museums became places that enabled subjects to become masters of their lives by providing both the raw materials (the master pieces) and the technology, the methods of constructing templates or scaffolds on which to build one of another form of the new socially sanctioned selfhood or subjectivity, according to a class or station in life (2004: 79).

Preziosi's main contention is that museums have historically created a museological stagecraft around these core object 'lessons'. The museum then becomes a place for the visitor to actively construct and negotiate subjectivities, while also understanding what subjectivities are recognisable as socially valid. Thus in Preziosi's conception the museum is not a tool of the state mobilised for social aims, but an institution mobilised by individuals, which is part of a discourse constituted around the reflexive, self-aware individual.

### The Personalised Visit

My own model of the visit is informed by these researchers. It takes the position that the museum and visitor are key elements of the visit, which must be historicised and contextualised in terms of the particular set of social, economic and cultural factors. I have also taken from the four models an appreciation of how the visit has been instrumentalised since the inception of the public museum. In turn, I examine the museum visit with a particular concern for how the visit has changed over the last few decades. What I have found is that the museum visit is now being institutionally constructed around the personal needs and personality of the visitor, who is primarily defined by her or his power to choose. In this scenario, the visitor is able to realise her/his consumerist agency in unprecedented ways, as museums and curators seek to construct displays that give the visitor intellectual access while creating the means for him/her to construct a personal narrative of the visit. I call this type of visit the 'personalised' visit.

The personalised visit began to become apparent at the time of the opening of a second London site of the Tate Galleries, Tate Modern, in May of 2000. The moment was a crucial one, because in the critical reception of the museum, in newspapers, journals, and other areas of public discourse, opposing versions of the valid visit came to surface, exposing conflicting expectations of the visit, each representative of distinct museologies. The criticism around the opening of Tate Modern showed a transition between museologies, the old museology replaced by a new one where a different sort of visitor is recognised as valid (see Vergo 1989). The older museology maintained a conception of the visitor as subject for whom the museum is responsible. In this museology the emphasis is on the educative roles of institutions, most often embodied by curators. Here the museum is understood as creating categories of art historical relevance, which may be conveyed

through didactic means to the visitor in need of instruction. By constructing hierarchies or chronologies through which historical material may be made comprehensible and conveyed to the visitor, the visit becomes valid. In this scenario, the visitor is understood to be a passive, teachable subject.

In contrast to this didactic/legislative visit, the visitor in the new museology becomes an agent empowered to author her or his own experience. She/he is understood to be on equal footing with the curator, who supplies the visitor with raw materials for the construction of her own connections and historical, or aesthetic conclusions. Here the visitor's intellectual agency is paramount, and the validity of the visit depends on her/him being able to exercise it. Thus the experience for the visitor – understood to be a self-directed agent – is uniquely *personalised*. The personalised visit, as opposed to the deterministic, autocratic visit, holds out the promise of freedom and the visitor's expression of intellectual agency.

Evidence of this personalised visit comes to the surface upon closer scrutiny of Tate Modern. The latter is distinguished from other institutions by its emphasis on creating the means for visitors to enjoy creative, intellectual agency. I have called this kind of museum 'interpretive', and one of its key characteristics is the conscious strategising of display arrangements by the lead curators, who envision a museum that would fracture the received narrative of the evolution of modern and contemporary art, displacing the notion of inexorable progress with one of contradictory efflorescence (Blazwick and Morris 2000). The new direction and vision of Tate was expressed by its administrative head, Nicholas Serota, who saw the museum of the future as giving over the process of constructing meaning to the visitor, privileging the latter's experience over the curator's interpretation of the work (Serota 1996). These developments towards a new museology were accompanied, as an official Tate Report indicates, by a radical restructuring of departments, posts and nomenclature (Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre 2004).

Data from this report shows that the Tate galleries, as marketised institutions, segment or differentiate visitors as consumers based on their needs. Since the interpretive museum regards its mission as engaging visitors, and believes that the visitors' needs must be understood in order for them to be engaged, the valid visit becomes a function of what the visitor-as-consumer desires. One effect of this consumerist recalibration is that as the visitor is differentiated by the museum, she or he will find pleasure in having her/his consumerist agency ratified. It is also surmised that the visitor achieves pleasure in creating the experience of the visit that generates a personal meaning and affirms the narrative of the self that she or he aims to cultivate.

### Conclusion

It should be clear by now that the instrumentalisation of the social uplift model of the museum/visit as outlined in the Tate's cultural policy statements is difficult to reconcile with the four models of the museum visit quoted

above. This is not to say that the imagined uses of the social uplift model are not feasible or realisable, but that they are at odds with what researchers have uncovered about the museum and its place in society. Yet, in at least one respect, the four models do correlate: they presume that culture, as a set of institutionally organised activities in which varied groups participate, is pliable, able to be instrumentalised by other societal forces. Culture is still imagined to be hollow. It is taken to be a conduit through which the state and other forces may act on the individual. This confronts us with the question of individual agency, of whether, or under what conditions, we might be able to take part in an arranged encounter with art, poetry or song, which – as I experienced it on my own visit the museum – opened a door to an ocean.

The idea of a personalised visit requires a reconsideration of the visitor's 'voice', especially in contemplating the voice as teller of stories. The personalised visit suggests that the 'voice' can be 'heard' through the self-authored visit. Moreover, how the self-authoring visitor makes meaning for her/himself in the visit fits into a narrative of wider access to culture and the erosion of an elitism that has long persisted in the world of art museums. Thus examination of the self-determining visitor may help address that question at the heart of visitor studies: why are museums not more representative of the population at large?

At the heart of the idea of a self-determining visitor is the issue of agency, which is particularly pertinent since the museum has been consistently critiqued, as we have seen, as a hegemonic power subordinating the visitor to the institution's (or the state's) agenda. It would be hasty, however, to interpret a more vigorous agency on the part of the visitor as a kind of democratic empowerment. There is a trade-off with consumerism in the contemporary visit, whereby the most robust and pervasive expression of individual agency is to be found in the consumer relation. In the process of making a purchase, the visitor is made to feel in control of her or his visit. However, this act of purchasing makes the museum yet another venue in a list of sites where one buys one's agency, reducing the museum experience to yet another consumerist transaction. For this reason, it is crucial that the museum visit remains free. The encounter with art may well be subsumed under some agenda, instrumentalised for some purpose beyond the individual, but it can still resonate in ways this visitor-author cannot fathom or predict.

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