Conference review of Contemporary Museum Gallery Education Practices: Local Communities meet Global Narratives, Nicosia, 22 and 23 May 2015.

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The 2015 conference, Contemporary Museum and Gallery Education practices: Local Communities meet Global Narratives took place in Nicosia, Cyprus on May 22-23, 2015. When the call for papers came through the themes chosen by conference organisers Evanthia Tselika and Chrystalleni Loizidou sparked my attention because of their focus on the imperative for gallery and museums to meaningfully address the needs of communities. This presented an opportunity to discuss the importance of institutional practices in defining constructive citizenship models. The defining questions in the call for papers took a social and cultural approach to gallery education and had an edginess not usually seen in a UK context, this was interesting to me as an artist, gallery educator and lecturer. The conference also provided a great opportunity to visit Cyprus, to discuss local patterns of segregation and the role that pedagogy can play in such a divided country. I have been keen to visit Nicosia following the unrealised Manifesta 6 in Nicosia in 2006 and the discussions that emerged in Notes for an Art School (2010) about the conflict that exists within creative education between the individual and the social.

The venue for the conference was the Point Centre for Contemporary Art where we were generously hosted and kept refreshed with a cornucopia of drinks, fruits, homemade breads (cooked in the traditional Cypriot oven in the Centre’s garden) and baklava. Point Centre is a non-profit organisation involved in the creative support and promotion of various fields of contemporary cultural production. The current exhibition of work produced through the Point-Eleneio programme explores contemporary critical dialogue around inter-cultural school environments and social engagement in the arts.

Our thinking was framed by a welcoming address by conference organisers Chrystalleni and Evanthia in which they situated the conference within the broader narrative of their work with diverse cultural groups in Nicosia and the limitations of inclusive pedagogies. The debates got off to a flying start with papers that addressed online education in museums through the study of Getty Games and museum based pedagogic tools through to a case study of the Circuit project. The questions and comments that followed quickly engaged with issues around gaming strategies, education versus entertainment and asked what was the point of engaging young people in the arts. Often conferences maintain a ‘them and us’ relation between audience and speakers, but this was not evident here as there were plenty of people wanting to engage in lively discussion from the start. The moderator’s open attitude to the format of response by the audience meant that the presenters offered provocations and the audience created the discussion. With the usual hierarchies already disturbed, I knew we were off to a good start.

After a break, the second session explored social responsibility with a punchy critique of incentives for museum education and a fascinating study of visitor photography in museums. More thoughtful exchanges followed about the pros and cons of taking photographs of artworks. That ownership is capital and putting a picture on instagram creates cultural, social and symbolic capital. This made me think about the impact of ownership on engaging with the arts and the ways in which a selfie taken on a smart-phone can provide a visitor with a meaningful take-away through which they can share an experience, knowledge and art work with their friends and add it to their memory bank to potentially recall and use again when encountering other cultural artefacts in the future.

A splendid lunch preceded a session in which the links between the classroom and the museum were explored from Greek, Serbian and Cypriot perspectives. For the fourth session delegates chose to either attend a gallery workshop about thinking through art with local audiences or to engage in speaker presentations reflecting on Cypriot projects that ranged from the education work of the A.G. Leventis gallery, an inflatable space for artistic experience in the city and a fascinating project, ‘Confrontation Through Art’ based in Nicosia, in which Art is used as a mechanism for addressing division, conflict and confrontation. Day one was drawn to a close with an interactive keynote address from Dr. Viv Golding in which feminist-hermeneutic strategies were explored as means to understand prejudice and stereotypes. The combination of practical strategies and images of carefully selected art works was both stimulating and rewarding after such a thought provoking day.

Day two began with a reflection on current practices in Sweden, Thessaloniki and Greece exploring theatre and cinema to work through social issues. Whilst alongside a workshop explored gender in the Cyprus Museum. A keynote presentation by Jessica Gogan, Instituto MESA, provided a glimpse into the Brazilian context for museum education from the Freirian viewpoint of exploring the world before the word. Positing an approach in which the context should be acknowledged and understood before the conversation happens.

The afternoon sessions included presentations that explored multiliteracies for inclusive museum education programmes, notions of contemporaneity and identity formation in international modern art and a survey of educational practices in Bulgarian museums. The final sessions explored the learning environments created by art museums and the pedagogic possibilities for equality aware practices.

Closing remarks and farewells demonstrated an atmosphere of kinship amongst peers in which a prevailing sense of forward action was required to acknowledge and repair the inadequacies of current political and institutional agendas that aim for inclusion and achieve nothing but greater income for the institution. It was agreed that more needs to be done as such agendas do not benefit local communities but ease the social guilt of wealthy nations, individuals and organisations. Many contacts were made and hopefully many worthwhile projects will follow.