

Learning in Public

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The starting point for my research in Tate Britain was *Drawing for Free Thinking* a wall mural around the Manton staircase. The work by David Tremlett explores the floor plans and architectural features of Tate Britain through abstraction, and was of particular interest to me as it was made by the artist and a group of assistants by massaging pastel crayon directly onto walls with the palms of their hands. Physical and material thinking – albeit confined within and to the geometries and formal lines of the building and architectural plans. Over the course of the day, I kept mistaking the title of the work to be *Diagram for Free Thinking*. This appeared significant in that a diagram is the externalisation or making public of a thinking process, and seemed to be what was at stake for me in this day of research at Tate Britain.

The body does not always easily fit into geometric or chronologic shapes and ideas, but these can often be the things that inform and shape both movement and thinking. As navigation of the building was well defined and controlled, I sought alternative trajectories and less valued methods and agents towards freeing up my thinking. It was difficult to find spaces not specifically designated as public. Source materials to hand included overlooked spaces and details: corridors, storage rooms, a corner of a wall and the lip of a stair.

In line with my current research into listening as a practice and mode of performance, I decided to use 'listening' as a method. I followed a high pitched sound coming from the Turner Wing, and left the building and walked the perimeters of the sound. Returning inside, I visited Susan Philipsz' installation *War Damaged Musical Instruments* in the Duveen Galleries. Although the sound installation permeated most of the building, I sourced materials to listen to in a more multimodal way. Making physical contact with and also using my voice to explore imperfect architectural details – damaged surfaces, wall stains, broken skirting corners and cracks, I 'listened to' and followed these features as an attempt to experiment with an embodied thinking through the building. This was productive and related back to my current practice and recent work, but my unusual activities attracted attention from others also present in the building. My visible, and audible, research in the context of a sound installation within an art institution became recognisable as performance and gallery visitors became an audience.

I decided to try another a method, less recognisable as performance and one which might promote a more intimate proximity and relationship not only to the building, but to the activities of others using the building. Earlier that morning in passing, a friend had reminded me of Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies*. This work consists of a set of cards in which each card offers an aphorism intended to encourage lateral thinking. By way of coincidence, Andrew, over lunch, mentioned a website that listed daily oblique strategies. The strategy for today was "breathe more deeply". This instruction connected back to a conversation that we had about a ten day silent meditation retreat that I had been on and to my research in and with groups. Over lunch we also discussed institutions such as Tate as public spaces for self-improvement. This was interesting to me in that as opposed to structured and formal learning, informal learning, attracting labels such as self-improvement or leisure, tends to imply a lack of seriousness, and is by implication often less valued. I decided to use my meditation practice, a practice commonly labeled as self-improvement and one not normally associated with thinking, to experiment with learning in public.

Not about breathing deeply, meditation involves breathing differently, paying attention to automatic and habitually unattended to processes. Practicing meditation publicly in an art institution, my intention was to sit and meditate not just with art works, but also with groups of people.

I installed myself as a type of live or performing sculpture in various rooms. I experimented with various positions and postures for meditation: for example, sitting on the floor next to a sculpture, standing in front of a painting, while also making bodily contact with a wall, a floor, or a corner. I experimented with opening and closing my eyes and how doing so might affect my practice. I paid particular attention to listening to the sounds around an artwork: for example, how the work responded to sounds refracting off its surfaces, or how my own internal dialogue affected both the art work and my breathing.

As a different strategy, I joined groups of people gathering in different configurations throughout the building. Some were groups of strangers sitting silently on couches in galleries and foyers, some contemplating works, others seemingly waiting. When someone spoke, I tried to follow the speed of their words and thoughts. The couches also had their own speeds, at times there was a restless influx of people and at other times the rate was singularly slower. The things that shape our thinking, and the shape of our thinking.

- Lisa Skuret