Cultural Transpractices: 
Method as Performative Tool of Change

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Abstract

This paper discusses three collaborative research projects: ‘Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture’ (2007-10), ‘Cultural Value and the Digital’ (2014), and ‘Transfigurations: Curatorial and Artistic in an Age of Migrations’ (2011-2015). Each of the projects examined the limits and opportunities of curatorial and organisational practices and knowledge-formation in the production of value within national public culture. The research highlighted the significant level of disjuncture between practice, policy and theory which continues to mitigate against the development of new models of transvaluation. The research argues for a model of transvaluation termed by the authors as ‘post-critical’. This term understands method as ‘a performative tool of change’ (Law & Urry 2002) and was developed through a collaborative, embedded, transdisciplinary and co-production research process for valuing the public’s encounter with the art museum. The paper concludes by acknowledging the work of ANT and underlining the crucial importance of translation as a means of overcoming epistemological and methodological separations.

Keywords: Post-critical, Transcollaboration, Transdisciplinary, Transmediality

Introduction

This paper is based on three research projects, each of which was brought into being by the recognition of a ‘problem’ within the institution of the art museum that existing research models and practices framed by either the consultancy research practices of the policy and organisational sphere, or theoretical critique and analysis generated by academia could not effectively address. Each of these
projects instead was framed within a reflexive relationship to the social and material practices of the production and reproduction of value in the museum. The starting position of each project was that value does not stand outside of the continuous process of its own making and remaking, with the added recognition that the making of value ‘in’ the museum involves much that is formally ‘outside’ the museum: in the art market and systems of art patronage and display, the academy, government policies, and in the minds and behaviour of audiences. Value is therefore understood as a participatory process where, in effect, there is no boundary between inside and out - only networks of connection.

What makes this period especially interesting and revealing of the processes of value making, is that it is characterised by the speed of change, indeed we might seek to define this as the phenomenon of hyper-valuation. One of the salient consequences of hyper-valuation is, as Lipovetsky (2005:32) characterises the hypermodern, that individual and social formations are confronted with and indeed live within the paradoxical present. In hypermodern times, and in hyper-valuation, the temporal horizon shrinks to that of the perpetual present creating the paradoxical outcome of the hypermodern for cultural value which is that, on the one hand, all cultural value is commodified, making it accessible, as heritage, whilst on the other, in the shrinking civic and state public sphere cultural consumption is instrumentalised when it can no longer be made to fit the market. The theoretical corollary to these practical paradoxes of the hypermodern is that modernist art and technology discourses of the contemporary and its future timeline continue, but now without any confidence in the future.

As this paper will argue, in order to understand how value is being produced and reproduced in the art museum, a new research model of transvaluation is needed which can not only reconnect the spheres of practice, policy and theory but can also engage with them in the conditions of the paradoxical present.

1. Three Projects

Tate Encounters: The Crisis of Representation

The first research project of this paper, Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture (2007-10), was a response to the first strategic funding programme of the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council titled ‘Diasporas, Migration and Identities’, and was focused on addressing the ‘missing audiences’ of Tate, and in particular Tate Britain, defined by the government cultural policy category of ‘BME’, the acronym for Black and Minority and Ethnic, (Dewdney et al. 2011). Like most museums, Tate’s response was defined by an increase in targeted exhibitions, displays, and public programmes which sought to engage with narratives of identity and journey, and contemporary legacies of Post-colonialism. Despite ten years of such approaches, accompanied by the proliferation of auditing practices of organisational reporting, and with relatively little change in the representation of ‘missing’ BME audiences, the need to account for and address this problem beyond the scope of market-based research, or the politics of guilt and representation posed by the academic discourse of post-colonialism, was clear.

A new model of research was sought by Tate that would bring organisational practice, cultural diversity policy and academic theory together in the same field of enquiry to understand what the barriers to access were for BME audiences. The subsequent project was a collaboration between Tate, London South Bank University and Chelsea College of Art and Design. To connect government policy, organisational practice, and diasporic audience experience the project developed three specific research strands: an ethnographic organisational study of Tate, a review of the formation and implementation of government cultural policy, and a longitudinal fieldwork project with students from diasporic backgrounds who were actively engaged in the research and its development as ‘co-
researchers’ over a two-year period.

To undertake the research the project assembled a multi-disciplinary team trained in the social sciences, science and technology studies, social and cultural anthropology, visual cultures, art history, and digital media. Collectively, the practical experience of the team was rooted in practice-based research, pedagogical development, curating, documentary film-making and digital design. This combination of expertise ensured that in approaching questions of diasporic audiences, a knowledge-base could be drawn upon that could trace relations between the life-worlds of project participants and the museum as part of a field of study that would recognise the specificity of the visual, not as defined by the category of art or art history, but as a practice of viewing that connected the visual of the everyday with the practice of viewing and spectatorship inside the art museum.

The key finding in 2010 of direct interest to this paper was that despite the sustained emphasis on the politics of representation and identity in policy, practice and theory there was a clear crisis of representation in relation to both national culture and the diasporic individual which was inextricably rooted in the emergence of what we identified then as the ‘transvisual’. The ‘transvisual’ being understood as the process and spectatorial outcome of the combined experience of transculturalism and transnationalism under the new conditions of transmediation. That is to say, the transvisual was the default viewing conditions of all visual culture, connecting and de-differentiating the everyday with the museum art object brought about by the expanded use of personal digital technology and the ever-increasing level and circulation of images and remediated imagery. The key conclusion of Tate Encounters was that the museum’s inability in 2010 to recognise the impact of digital media on audiences rendered them unable to identify the new value systems by which audiences were encountering the spaces, places and works of art of the museum.

**Cultural Value and the Digital: ‘Resolutely Analogue’ Institutions**

The second research project, Cultural Value and the Digital (2013-14) was also initiated by Tate and was a response to a targeted call of the AHRC this time centred on ‘Cultural Value’. Building directly on the collaborative methodology and findings of Tate Encounters the project’s starting point was that most contemporary professional practice, policy-formation and understandings of cultural value remain ‘resolutely analogue’. In addition, that most accounts and concepts of cultural value were and are predominantly based upon representational systems and forms which were originally developed in relationship to analogue technologies and their institutions. In contrast, network culture is defined by a distributed and networked system of communication and exchange of value based upon non-representation forms, but recognition of these new forms and conditions of cultural value is significantly lagging behind at the level of policy, practice and theory.

The key problem this project aimed to address was that despite substantial amounts of data-gathering and research analysing the impact of digital technology and the rise of network culture, these findings have yet to easily translate into the professional practices or policy fields of new media, nor the acquisition or display cultures of the art museum in relation to cultural value. Continuing the method established in Tate Encounters practitioners, academics, artists, curators, theorists, museum professionals and policy-makers were brought together in series of public research forums in order to trace the connections and disconnections between the theory, practice and policy discourses in culture and digital domains based upon an analytical matrix of their inter-relation.

As these research forums highlighted, not only is there a general confusion within the public cultural sector about what constitutes the digital and hence its relation to culture, audiences, and cultural value, but also that a false binary opposition persists between the concept of culture and the concept of the digital; an opposition rooted in the historical separation of art from technology and
underpinned by the traditional distinction between high and low culture. Furthermore, museums predominantly understand and employ the digital as a ‘tool’ and continue to adopt the analogue broadcast model of one-to-many transmission based on traditional models of institutional cultural authority and marketing forms of communication. Although cultural institutions such as Tate are trying to adapt to the two-way, many-to-many model of digital networked communication through which new collectives and collectivities are redefining the idea of the social and publics, they struggle to identify and find ways to work with these new users / visitors. While cultural heritage continues to be understood to hold exceptional national cultural value, there is an increasing anxiety about the status and knowledge-base of curatorial expertise, the conditions under which cultural authority can be maintained. Finally, the ever-expanding field of historically comparative ‘immaterial’ practices of performance, sound, digital media, and post-internet art presents challenges to the traditional modes by which cultural value is attributed to the art object within the systems of the art museum.

Transfigurations: Programming, Commissioning, and the Paradoxical Present

‘Transfigurations’ (2013-15), part of the major, multi-partnered EU project Museums in an Age of Migrations’, (MeLA) took up two specific lines of the preceding research: the rise in public programming as an expression of hyperproduction, and the emergent concern and strategies of the contemporary art museum and gallery to commission, rematerialise, and archive (as contemporary and future heritage) the process-based, durational, and ‘immaterial’ practices of artists from diasporic (‘missing’) backgrounds, geo-culturally located outside of the historical canon of Western modern art. This was based on two further understandings: firstly, that the rise of art commissioning had been instigated to offset at the representational level the collection deficit of works from artists outside the western modernist art canon, and secondly, that the rise of public programming, however well intentioned, had to a large extent been used as a form of cultural and intellectual compensation in response to critiques of collection and display generated by post-colonial theory - a quick win of ‘the discursive turn’. In relation to both of these, core curatorial practices of display and collection had remained unchanged and dominant models of cultural value intact.

To examine what was at stake in these models of curatorial production and cultural value formation within the European art museum and how they could be reconfigured without recourse to the exhausted conditions and narratives of representation, the project developed a series of joint commissions based on the reflexive collaboration of both the artist and curator, rather than the conventional model of curator commissioning artist. As the project findings highlighted, while the museological drive towards the materialisation of an object was as informed by the physical and temporal conditions of exhibition practice as much as the representational demands of collection display, the paradox of the present was made manifest in the funding policy demands of the research project itself whereby the exhibition as research was continually being re-formed into ‘research as exhibition’.

2. The Politics of Value and the Crisis of Representation and Knowledge-Production

The question of why the cultural sector and the academy are focusing upon cultural value at this point in time immediately locates discussion within the politics of value. It is a question that the conference has already provided a provisional answer to, when it notes the rise of audit culture and its imposition upon a range of practices whose traditions modes of transaction have not hitherto been subjected to systematic account.

At the root of the current politics of value lies the crisis of representation which has been given expression in a number of fields - politics, economics, visual culture, public culture, linguistics, psychology and sociology – since the late 1980s, as a radical disjuncture between the intellectual and
formal means of value registration and the realities such systems are intended to recognise and communicate. The causes of such a crisis have been given numerous iterations, but most agree that a combination of increasing and relentless technological functionalisation, the movement of global capital and labour, together with the commodification of personal life are responsible. (Baudrillard 1985:129) In museums the crisis of representation is expressed in the struggle between older definitions and organisation of public culture and the new private and marketised conditions. A struggle which is producing hybridity within the museum in terms of meaning and value, but which the museum finds hard to express in the older terms of representational practices which guaranteed both curatorial authority and the audience to appreciate it. The crisis of representation in public culture is compounded by the changed conditions of public intellectuals, whose independence was once guaranteed by the academy. The historic organisation of public education, of which the university is the apex, has been reconfigured by changes in the production and distribution of knowledge. The crisis of representation has its corollary in education as a crisis of knowledge production and in the commodification of education.

This situation was acknowledged by Irit Rogoff’s recognition of the exhaustion of the politics of representation, as she wrote in 1994:

‘Criticality’ as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one’s thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure … the ever increasing emphasis on allocating blames and pointing out elisions and injustices has created alliances between critique and such political projects as “identity politics” and diminished the complex potentiality of occupying culture through a set of productive dualities and ambiguities. (Rogoff 2006)

For Tony Bennett, one of the key founders of critical museology, the crisis of representation was also exacerbated in the academy by academia’s retreat into theory and its policing of the disciplinary boundaries and insistence on maintaining a ‘critical’ distance far removed from the object of study. For Bennett, the need to reconnect the spheres of practice, policy, and theory was noted in the same year when he observed:

For there is no cognitive, or indeed, ethical gulf separating intellectuals working in government and industry centres of cultural management from those working in universities … To approach them productively, however, will require that we review our sense both of where public spheres are and the nature of our relation to them. (Bennett 2007:150)

Twenty years on, however, the crisis of representation has been joined in the academy by the crisis in location and nature of knowledge-production, brought about by two further conditions: the impact of the digital and the marketisation of education and knowledge-based practices, leading to the demise and displacement of the traditional public sphere; consequences of global neo-liberalism and the condition hypermodernity. As both the Tate Encounters and Cultural Value and the Digital project demonstrated, the separation of academic knowledge from its object of study, policy formation from lived experience, and museum practice from its audience / ‘user-consumers’, and the lack of connection between all three has led to limited capacity of each and all of the institutions to navigate and resolve the problems and challenges each and all are being confronted by in the contemporary moment.

It is within this set of knowledge-based practices and crisis conditions that the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has attempted to reform its approaches to research criteria and funding policies of collaborative research based on the principle of ‘knowledge-exchange’, itself superseding its earlier model of ‘knowledge-transfer’. As a response to the changing condition of
knowledge anticipated by Lyotard (1971) and the changing locations of knowledge-production and use, the AHRC’s strategies to support and develop Arts and Humanities research culture has increasingly focused on interdisciplinary collaboration. The AHRC identified what can be seen as the practical effects of ‘reflexive modernization’ (Beck et al 1994) that shifts in the policies, funding and management of research would inherently raise questions and implications for the very subject-specialisms and disciplinary boundaries which defined the organisational structures of the university. As the AHRC report into innovation in 2007 noted, new types of research were emerging in progressive areas of the Arts and Humanities in response to complex ‘real-world problems’ which demanded new forms of interdisciplinary collaborative research to resolve. This was understood in direct opposition to the traditional model and work of the ‘the lone scholar’ which, as the AHRC report unequivocally stated, ‘is a severely outdated model of the arts and humanities researcher’ (Bakhshi et al 2008). However, the AHRC’s efforts to reform the structures of knowledge authority in the sphere of research policy is countered by the policing of specialist subject-domains and disciplines in the academy.

Breaking with this obsolete binary between pure and worldly knowledge in the reconceptualisation of knowledge production will involve a more radical embrace of uneasy relations and fluid movement across and outside intellectual fields in order to reframe the object(s) of value within networks of association. Changing the actual conditions of knowledge production requires a new set of practical, economic and organisational arrangements, ones which neither the AHRC, nor university research departments seem prepared to make. At the purely analytic level one of the consequences of such a change brings subjectivity and its objects of interest into a new relationship with institutional positions and intellectual labour.

In considering how the cultural sector and its research community is responding to the new conditions sketched here the research projects show that in general there is a defensive retreat to positions of cultural authority rooted in the persistence of analogue institutions and processes. In the academy there is a notable body of resistance which has assumed the position of defender of disinterested knowledge and holds the government funding agencies responsible for what is seen as the instrumentalisation of knowledge. In the public cultural sector, museums find it difficult to engage with the new redistribution of knowledge preferring instead to see online networks as extensions of marketing and as a channel for broadcasting, rather than new collectivities.

3. Post-Critical Methodology and The Practices of Translation: Transdisciplinarity and Transcollaboration

Confronting both the crisis of representation and the crisis of knowledge-production and having developed a research model that can be defined as collaborative, situated, practice-based, and which was theoretically underpinned by ‘bottom-up theory’, Actor-network Theory, and critical reflexivity, the Tate Encounters project concluded in its analysis phase that in producing what was acknowledged as a series of original and significant findings, it had also arrived at a significant and hard-won new position of ‘transdisciplinary’ practice. For, although the research started from an interdisciplinary model, through the sustained and often highly challenging reflexive practices of reporting and analysis of each team member’s different epistemological and paradigmatic reporting and analysis of the fieldwork a new transdisciplinary space and practice emerged.

In the Tate Encounters project the research practically demonstrated modes of risk management in Tate’s organisational behaviours, deployed to contain as well as exclude that which it could only
recognise as ‘other’, whether human, nonhuman, embodied or virtual. The research was able to identify and trace such modes and their associated behaviours precisely because the methodological perspectives and practices crossed disciplines and extended beyond the operational knowledge networks of the institution. What is more, the transdisciplinary methodological position adopted was also able to reveal the various forms of knowledge separations used to maintain the boundaries between the categories of theory, policy and practice.

In the early development of the transdisciplinary method the research recognised the explanatory value of the critical theoretical tradition that had articulated the socially reproductive functions of ‘distinction’ in Bourdieu’s work (1986) and of ‘difference’ in Lyotard’s (1971). As the research progressed, however, in the conditions of working collaboratively within Tate and conducting the collection of data through embedding researchers, the limits of critical analysis were also reached. It became apparent that critical theory was itself the product of an epistemological separation between theory, practice and policy and that its own self-guarantee as independent knowledge production was flawed by its lack of reflexivity towards its separation as theory, and increasingly its lack of practical strategies to counter the commodified conditions of its own production. Guarding against the dangers of data-orientated methods of ‘theory-verification’ (which characterized both critical museology and critical sociology), the transdisciplinary method entails the adoption of a highly reflexive-interpretive approach to its research design and analysis through enhanced participant modelling and dialogic data-gathering during the fieldwork period. In contrast to the project of critical museology, the project identified itself with what Alvesson and Sköldberg have described as ‘R-reflexivity’ or ‘reconstructive reflexivity’, as opposed to ‘D-reflexivity’ which seeks to deconstruct its object of attention (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2001: 313).

Subsequently, it was in Latour’s work that the research discovered a new and fruitful analytical and practical position. Latour’s critical project to understand the reification of the social within sociology, led him and his collaborators to construct a new empirico-theoretical methodology in actor-network theory (ANT). As a method ANT contained both an epistemological and ontological critique of established social and scientific knowledge formation. ANT is a hybrid of theory and practice. It can be used as a practical toolkit for empirical study as well as a reflexive discourse on knowledge production, one which counsels against its own conditions of formation and reification. This is evident in Latour’s 1998 comment that there are four things wrong with ANT, the words ‘actor’, ‘network’, and ‘theory’ and the hyphen in between. The use of Latour to practically understand the reproduction of cultural value through the organisational behaviours of the established art museum in practice focused upon the task of tracing networks of association in order to identify the agency of audience, diversity and the aesthetic as key cultural value terms. Not surprisingly given the project’s acceptance of the theoretical embrace of Latour’s critical analysis of the foundation of the modern (Latour 1993:11) we extended the analysis of Tate’s organisational strategy of risk management, to see the work of the separation of theory, practice and policy as a process of expunging knowledge/practice hybrids.

In Latour’s terms hybrids are proliferating knowledge practices routinely recognised in the world, which cross the foundational separation of scientific and political knowledge and which, have to be purified to maintain knowledge itself. Another way of saying this is that the art museum has to exclude all that which it does not understand within its own self-monitoring and self-managing categories. In this sense it can be noted that the art museum maintains a large category of ‘non-value’. Within the Tate Encounters research the import and impact of this category of ‘non-value’ was first seen in Tate’s inability to see the value practices of non-museum goers in their encounter with the museum, and this way of thinking extended more widely in policy and practice to seeing ethnic minority and working
class non-visitors as having a cultural deficit.

In contrast the transdisciplinary method saw this ‘non-value’ as constituting a source of new knowledge production and in the research participants who were invited to be co-researchers. The co-researchers produced documented understandings of the museum encounter, participated in public research forums, and were reflexively engaged with the politics of the research itself. In terms of the crisis of representational systems, of which Tate Britain itself was an example, the project came to see the co-researchers as producing transcultural knowledge which begins to reverse the flow of cultural value from the starting point of ‘non-value’, or in the hybrids of lived practices, towards the established and purified knowledge of the museum.

In the subsequent research, ‘Cultural Value and the Digital’ (2014), it was a transdisciplinary perspective which enabled the demonstration of a non-recognition of value in online cultures as a consequence of the separation of theory, practice and policy. In particular, the evidence given by participants drawn from media academics and museum professionals showed how the non-representational hybrids of online communications were unrecognisable in the framing of the object of digital media. For media academics, the objects of new media demanded their own ontological framing within a discipline, whilst for new media practitioners in the museum online culture was synonymous with analogue broadcast media. Both of these framings of the object worked to maintain knowledge authority and both had the consequence of consigning the non-representational to the realm of non-value. In contrast, the transdisciplinary sought an account and practices based in the transmedial, which would open the museum up to the non-representable practices of online culture, whilst eroding the disciplinary boundary between aesthetic and media theory.

Transculturalism and Transmedialism are research strategies that enable new objects to come into view and to trace new value chains. Both entail a high degree of practical collaboration in and beyond institutionally framed goals and boundaries. In this sense it is possible to add a third term to transdisciplinarity, that of ‘transcollaboration’, which might at first sight appear oxymoronic. ‘Transcollaboration’ is the crossing of different experiential as well as intellectual cultural practices that are based in problem-identifying, but not instrumental problem-solving. By this we mean that research addresses real world problems and needs to be embedded in the same conditions of cultural production in which the problem has been shaped as a collaboration across different divisions of the production of cultural value. In a sense it is a rejoining of certain division of labour as well as a process of hybridisation. At its most practical it is a para-practice of ‘normal’ cultural production which enables new cultural formations and groups to emerge. At its most abstract it represents a reflexive engagement with the paradoxical present that attempts to bridge the contradictory and co-presence of apparent extreme opposites. Transculturalism, transmedialism, and transcollaboration are examples of the attempt to reverse engineer representational modes of cultural authority and knowledge production in an engagement with the non-representable, which is to say that it is a means of engaging with the hybrids which traditional cultural authority continues to purify in increasingly unhelpful ways.

Crucially, the research methodologies pursued in Tate Encounters, Cultural Value and the Digital, and Transfigurations also established a set of working conditions for the means to solve the problem of its own object of enquiry i.e. the transdisciplinary method of the project’s problem-solving research became a performative tool of change and effect in and of itself (Law and Urry, 2002). As each project was informed by the findings and methodology of the previous, the move from a position of ‘inter’ to ‘trans’ became integral to the method of problem-solving research, termed by the authors as ‘post-critical’ and has continued to help highlight further the problems surrounding the relationship between individual and professional reflexivity in institutional contexts, looking at the problems of what to do with theory in practice, whilst looking at the conditions in which theory is practiced.
Conclusion

Whilst transdisciplinary methodologies cross disciplines in framing a research problem, topic or object, that is they follow questions beyond their origin within a discipline, they also cross between the subject and object of research. In reality this puts the researcher in the position of subject as well as object and visa versa with whoever or whatever might be the object of research. In Tate Encounters this meant a series of collaborations inside and outside of the organisation as the research sought to understand the agency of audience from those defined as a missing audience as well as professionals inside whose practices were in some way bound to engage with audience. In the case of the Modelling Cultural Value research the same methodological imperative led to setting up a series of public forums based upon the research problematic and inviting identified individuals across disciplinary and practice domains to define their own research questions. The overall point to make about transdisciplinary methodologies is that such understandings are the outcome of the theoretical position of relational knowledge.

The problems articulated in this paper require at least joined-up thinking - if not meta-thinking - and the market logic adopted by cultural organisations leaves little time for critical reflection, indeed, it structurally excludes it from its common sense heritage discourse. So, how can scholars, policy makers, cultural practitioners working in the public sector begin to overcome the many separations in modes of thinking and doing? The project’s methodological challenge lay in recognising that over the course of the development of the Internet the production of social and scientific knowledge no longer conforms to institutional hierarchies in which universities, research laboratories, and think-tanks generate and then disseminate forms of universal objectified knowledge. As a consequence we have come to recognise the situated, provisional and relational nature of knowledge production.

The winning of the conditions for transcollaboration necessarily involves negotiation across the three separate purified constituencies of theory, practice and policy, which in practice means winning arguments with policy-makers, research councils, and the managers of universities and museums. One of the strongest arguments that can currently be made is to insist that transdisciplinary research fundamentally engages with real world problems and is capable of delivering solution in the world, but not as defined by utilitarian measures, which have proved so mistaken in cultural policy and practice, but to the world as the paradoxical present, which really does stand in need of strategies for progress, if not solutions.

What then can our examples of research offer as a more general prescription for progressive cultural knowledge practices? Within the increasingly hollowed-out shells of the systems of representation academics, policy makers and museum professionals remain gatekeepers of cultural authority of one separated kind or another. Paradoxically, however, far from being under-employed as the functions of cultural value are relocated to the non-representational spaces of the market, the labour of knowledge professionals is being functionalised in an orgy of hyper-production expressed in terms of more research, more students, greater audiences and more programming. It is our contention that transcollaboration can reconfigure the spaces of cultural production in order to win the conditions, including a ‘slowing’ of time, in which new goals for the future can be set. In this way research is an integral part of all cultural production.
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Cultural Value and the Digital:

Tate Encounters:
http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/tate-encounters
http://process.tateencounters.org/

MeLa / Curatorial and Artistic research in an Age of Migrations: