

# Cultural Diplomacy and Internationalism in Regional Art Institutions

## Abstract

This study posits that current cultural diplomacy practice in UK museums and galleries could be significantly improved. Indeed, cultural diplomacy is commonly viewed as nationalist propaganda. An attempt to theoretically debunk this proposition indicates that greater understanding between peoples can be engendered by unifying the ideologies of internationalism and liberalism in the cultural sector. Liberalism is viewed as the present ideology operating in Museums and Galleries whilst internationalism is considered as a nascent force. Working in symbiosis, liberalism allows for a multiplicity of discourse whilst internationalism allows for a critical reappraisal of the status quo and nation-state hegemony. Indeed, a multiplicity of dialogic discourse is essential for cultural institutions to maintain a non-hegemonic stance. This is, of course, particularly apparent in contemporary art work which can often be subversive of national governments and the very idea of a nation-state. Further to this, a form of localized cultural diplomacy can reach the public at large and question the cultural capital of world centres. Empirically speaking, the exhibition format is used as a means to render cultural diplomacy palatable for public consumption. Hence, the UK case study *Art from Elsewhere* will be introduced which has rendered the international a normative presence in local art galleries. This 2014-2016 exhibition comprised a tour of recent contemporary art acquisitions in regional permanent collections which were funded by a £5 million pound grant from the UK charitable organisation, Art Fund. Instead of monophonic exhibitions emanating from one nation, *Art from Elsewhere* engenders a multilateral dialogue catalysed by the polyphonic nature of artists from several different nations whose works are juxtaposed both in conflict, symmetry and contrast to one another.

## Keywords

Cultural Diplomacy; Contemporary Art; Internationalism; Liberalism; Regional Collections.

## Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is not limited to diplomats and cultural attachés. There are many quasi-autonomous organizations supporting cultural diplomacy, a sector in which regional art institutions are situated. Therefore, this study necessitates a more expansive definition of the term compared to certain sources. Holden et al (2007, 15) define Cultural Diplomacy as follows, 'one of the 'soft' aspects of living together on the planet, rather than the 'hard' stuff of laws and treaties, multilateral organizations and military capability.' Although this negates the inherent infrastructure of cultural organizations, it carries much more weight than the more conventional view explicated by Gienow- Hect. In *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (2010, 9) she identifies 'Three Schools of Thought.'

1. Cultural Diplomacy is Propaganda
2. Cultural Diplomacy is 'an instrument of state policy'

### 3. Cultural Diplomacy entails the promotion of 'national culture.'

These definitions imply that cultural diplomacy is simply about maintaining the *status quo*, namely, national sovereignty rather than internationalism. By proxy, museums and galleries would emulate some of these definitions as cultural diplomacy participants. As simplistic as it may sound, cultural diplomacy entails situating the cultural and the political in relation to one another and is an interdisciplinary concept. Holden (2007, 20) affirms that 'we should think of culture as providing the operating context for politics.' Indeed, cultural theorist Stuart Hall believes that culture can never be reduced to politics but admits that cultural questions are inherently political. As such, a definition of internationalism from the art world will be read in tandem with a politically focused one. In Jantjes's *A Fruitful Incoherence* (1998,159) the following definition is proposed: 'A non-hegemonic project of cultural interaction which gives equal acknowledgement to the creative achievements of all peoples within, and in the making of, a new history of art.' The following political definition is elaborated in *The Logic of Internationalism* by Kjell Goldmann (1994,2) commenting that it 'denotes a set of beliefs to the effect that if there is more law, organization, exchange, and communication among states, this will reinforce peace and security.' Further to this, the relationship between internationalism and public opinion also becomes important as politics and culture are both inherently public-facing or to use a museum analogy, 'front-of-house'. Goldmann believes that public opinion is the key to international organization (1994, 34) and, as such, in-depth analysis of Habermas will position internationalism as contingent on public opinion.

No former exploration of cultural diplomacy and internationalism in Museums, Galleries and Heritage working at local level has been conducted, a lacuna to address. Narrowing the remit, this article will focus on the regional contemporary art institutions and their burgeoning role. Content is limited to contemporary art as multiplicity of meaning is an intrinsic part of its discourse. Moreover, contemporary art has a long history of critiquing officialdom, institutions and corporations. For Joseph Nye, this can be harnessed to its advantage in the realm of cultural diplomacy through 'meta-soft power'. Namely, 'a nation's capacity and introspective ability to criticise itself that contributes to its international attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility' (Ang, Isar and Mar, 2015: 367). A recent example of this would be Jeremy Deller's *English Magic* (2013) shown in the British Pavilion during the Venice Biennale, under the auspices of the British Council. Deller's exhibition synoptically critiqued some of the more controversial aspects of British society such as the monarchy, tax havens and British military involvement in the war in Iraq. Whilst Deller's show may not have resonated with official government policy, it certainly captured the public opinion of a large sector of the UK demographic.

Contemporary art and international relations have previously been explored by Sylvester (2009, 88) who defines the former as a 'New cultural currency of western nations'. Contemporary art therefore is multipurpose, resonating beyond the aesthetic domain, metamorphosing into an effective diplomatic tool. Perhaps most importantly, she cites former British Museum director Neil McGregor who commented: 'Museums can reach very large numbers and the contacts go on despite political ups and downs' (Sylvester, 2009:169). In other words, when political relations between nations are strained, the ties of cultural



diplomacy are still binding. As such, it is of vital importance that cultural diplomacy initiatives are accessible to the largest possible audience in order to develop any form of tangible impact.

Tobele (2007), writing from a French cultural management perspective, perceptively draws attention to the move from cultural attachés towards public diplomacy. Indeed, diplomats are not the only diplomatic actors. He argues that, in a post-cold war context, since 1990 the aim of governments is no longer ideological domination, contrary to Gienow-Hect, opening up the field. Nevertheless, he highlights the ongoing hegemony of American culture. He cites the example of a local Museum in New Orleans seeking to renew ties between itself and France, commemorating the cessation from its former colonizer. The French president himself was supposed to visit the state but much reticence was expressed on behalf of the federal government of this southern (republican) territory (203). His observations bolster the local agenda of this study. For example, he proves that federal staff can snub a foreign state, demonstrating the importance of cultural diplomacy as being equally valid on a local, national and international level. Conversely, Gosnell (2008, 227) writes about the state of the *Alliance Française*, which ensures France is perennially associated with cultural exceptionalism. It is the 'largest non-profit-making cultural organization in the world.' The 'alliance' is categorized as a 'quasi-official representative' of France by Gosnell. The approach of the alliance was to devolve power to foreign enthusiasts of French culture. French culture is seen as having benefitted from this decentralized approach. This study argues, in a similar way, regional contemporary art institutions promote decentralization allowing for a greater public ownership of cultural diplomacy. As such, museums inherit the structure of national cultural organizations and their successful localized *rayonnement*.

Glossing the current stance of the UK government, cultural diplomacy in museums is intrinsically linked to those of national stature. A government response to a House of Lords select committee states (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014): 'The Government fully recognizes the role our national museums play in cultural diplomacy and their soft power value as world leading cultural and scientific institutions.' An acknowledgement of local museums' role in cultural diplomacy has yet to be made by any UK government to my knowledge. Such an acknowledgement would undoubtedly be a catalyst for the drafting of international strategies in regional art institutions. The specific role of contemporary art itself should also be acknowledged by policy-makers. Rosler (2015, 70) comments, 'not only are artists able to 'converse' in a language that transcends economic development and strategic interests, they are also willing to reach out.' This economic disembodiment needs to be harnessed so that countries can project visions beyond self-interest and metaphors for increased trade.

First of all, this article will trace the recent history of international acquisitions in regional contemporary art galleries, supported by a £5 million pound grant from the UK-based independent charity 'The Art Fund' which was initiated in 2008. Subsequently, the article will interrogate theories of internationalism and how these may be applied to the curatorial premise of *Art from Elsewhere* alongside the meanings embodied in the artworks themselves. Discussion of Cultural Diplomacy in relation to Habermas's concept of the public space will posit for a broader remit of international relations in the cultural realm,

equally in the hands of the public as well as politicians. Further to this, the exhibition and its related artworks will be read through the prism of liberalist thought and the controversial topic of 'exporting liberalism' will be discussed. Finally, a form of multi-lateral, rather than bi-lateral cultural diplomacy between galleries, the public and politicians will be espoused. Such a concept can only be brought into force if applied to the regions as well as world capitals. Of course, Joseph Nye's elaboration of the term 'soft power' is a defining concept in the field of cultural diplomacy. Nye (2004,x) elaborates soft power in the following terms:

*'What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, soft power is enhanced.'*

In order for the importance Nye places on 'legitimacy' to occur, cultural diplomacy should be within reach to as greater number of people as possible, not only those who reside in capital cities.

#### Funding Art From Elsewhere and UK cultural diplomacy

Analysis of the 2014-2016 touring exhibition 'Art from Elsewhere' will explicate theory throughout. The seeds of this project lie in a grant to the tune of £5 million, enabling multiple regional galleries that display contemporary art to purchase international acquisitions. The funding emanated from a UK-based charity entitled 'The Art Fund.' The charity is independent, ineligible for funding from any UK government sources. Originally founded in 1903, the charity was originally set up with the purpose of helping public galleries acquire works of art due to a paucity of government funding – *plus ça change*. The charity works with all manner of UK museums and galleries from National Museums that receive direct government funding, to local authority museums funded by county councils, and independent museums and galleries which are entirely self-sufficient.

Recently, the Art Fund appears to have prioritised the display of International art in the UK regions. In 2008, they inaugurated the 'ARTIST ROOMS' scheme, which enabled Tate and the National Galleries of Scotland acquire a substantial collection of contemporary art by world-renowned practitioners. Subsequently, grants were put in place to enable the collection to tour to regional museums and the project is ongoing until present.

A year earlier, in 2007, the Art Fund announced a scheme entitled 'Art Fund International.' £5 million pounds was given to five regional museums<sup>1</sup> to acquire substantial collections of international contemporary art over the following five years. The permanent acquisition of these works of art, of course, attests to an enduring commitment to internationalism, enabling it to become a normative rather than novel presence in UK regional art galleries. Indeed, the tension between temporary exhibitions and permanent collections of international art is acknowledged by Davidson and Castellanos (2019,7) who note the 'fear is that these temporary, superstar exhibitions divert resources from permanent exhibitions and other core museum functions.' This tension is somewhat alleviated by an exhibition

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, Bristol Museums and Archives, Gallery of Modern Art Glasgow, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Towner Art Gallery Eastbourne and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery/ New Art Gallery Walsall.

entitled 'Art from Elsewhere' which was devised to showcase the array of art purchased in these five galleries, touring the acquisitions to all five sites, ostensibly to catalyse a lasting interest in these new permanent acquisitions. Naturally, it is significant that funding for a project of this magnitude comes from the charitable sector and not from government sources. Interestingly, the vast majority of art selected by the regional curators is resolutely socially or politically engaged in nature. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard famously lamented that much contemporary art consisted of 'images without imaginary', (Sylvester, 2007:9) something this exhibition perhaps sought to redeem. As such, I hope to show that the exhibition *Art from Elsewhere* and the acquisition of international art in regional UK galleries, comprises a form of cultural diplomacy that has been devolved from bilateral relations between government bodies and into the hands of charities, the public and curators, 'civil society', if you will.

Surprisingly, the level of funding achieved by the Art Fund significantly dwarfs a similar project directly funded from the government purse. In a recent report by think tank *Respublica* in 2017, Blond, Noyes and Sim (2017,23) cite the:

*World Collections Programme (WCP), a scheme to establish two-way partnerships between UK and non-UK museums. DCMS provided funding of £1 million per year to the WCP between 2008 and 2011; we recommend funding be restored at no less than double this level, to ensure participation from a wide range of UK museums, including not just leading institutions but also local, regional, and less well-known establishments (supported where appropriate by larger national museums).*

It would seem that government ambitions for cultural diplomacy projects are vastly overshadowed by the foresight of the Art Fund both in terms of funding and scope. Rather than instigate bilateral projects, the Art Fund International acquisition programme was truly multilateral in scope, encompassing a wide range of regional stakeholders. As such, curator of the exhibition, Dave Elliot, ( 2014: non- paginated) astutely comments in the accompanying catalogue that 'The wider world of international art can now be considered within reach, conceptually and practically.' Moreover, this touring exhibition contains avant-garde, even subversive works relative to their source regime, for example, the feminist photography of Iranian Shirin Aliabadi which will be discussed later. Indeed, politics controls the freedom with which culture can be mobilized, her work displayed in the UK rather than her home country. This , of course, has a dual role in demonstrating to the British public that there are Iranians who disagree with their government's conservative cultural policies whilst concurrently demonstrating the liberal-pluralism of the UK due to the very fact that such art can indeed be shown.

The British Council is, of course, the UK's primary official organ of cultural diplomacy. A quasi-autonomous organisation, it receives grant-in-aid from the government, but maintains a level of operational independence. According to its website, (British Council, 2019) its remit for the visual arts team consists in 'promoting the achievements of the UK's best artists abroad.' In the financial year 2017-2018, £84 million was spent on 'promoting cultural, scientific and technological cooperation' (British Council, 2018:67). Promoting British artists abroad though, doesn't entail bringing a plethora of international artists to the

UK- a decidedly one way transaction. Indeed, the British Council, very much like a museum, owns a permanent collection, but one that solely consists of British artists. Although by now slightly outdated, the most recent financial report in 2011 valued the collection at £89 million (Shewell, 2011: 12). Yet, the range and reach of artists on show in the more modestly funded *Art from Elsewhere* acquisitions go above and beyond the remit of any bilateral relationship between two countries such as those inculcated by the British council. Indeed, in the age of Brexit, one does wonder whether it should not be a priority to sensibilise the British public in the regions, who predominately voted to leave the EU, (except Scotland) to both European and non-European social and cultural issues. Shouldn't cultural diplomacy begin with the public of its home country? Surely the British Council has some form of remit to educate Britons about other cultures or at least the relationship between other cultures and the UK.

The other core UK permanent collection held explicitly for cultural diplomacy purposes is the Government Art Collection (GAC). According to Loveday Shewell (2011, 9) the GAC is 'a collection of over 13,500 works of art, owned by the Government, to provide displays in over 400 government buildings in the UK and in 118 countries abroad; it is the largest most dispersed collection of British art in the world. These buildings include 10 and 11 Downing Street, ministers' offices, diplomatic missions and residences and offices.' Like the British Council collection, the artists are all British 'except for a small number of Government Art Collection works of art by non-British artists, which are of particular relevance to Britain.' (Shewell, 2011:6). Although in 2011, Shewell stated that the GAC collection, 'is not valued' (12), in the financial year 2017-2018 alone, according to my own calculations from cost price, it spent £310,628 in direct government funds on 32 new acquisitions which gives some idea of the collection's overall monetary value<sup>2</sup>. Yet, if a permanent collection symbolically represents the very fabric of an institution and what it stands for in the long term, then surely it should represent a mutual relationship of cultural influence between Britain and other countries such as that which Art Fund has enabled in the regions. Consequently, I will first argue for an alignment of internationalism with cultural diplomacy through the case study of *Art from Elsewhere*, led by an organisation without an official role in cultural diplomacy circles but nevertheless operating in the spirit of Joseph Nye's 'soft power', an exhibition designed to 'attract' regional inhabitants of the UK to engage with pre-eminent social and political issues on the world stage through the intermediary of art.

### Art from Elsewhere, cultural diplomacy and internationalism

This section will consider the different ways in which internationalism is conceptualized by the commingling threads of our societal fabric with reference to *Art from Elsewhere*. Journalistic, curatorial, artistic and theoretical positions will all be concurrently outlined. These four outlets of meaning all have countervailing agendas and converse conceptions of what internationalism is. Nevertheless, conflicting messages undermine the assertion that cultural diplomacy is propagandistic as propaganda contains a singular narrative portrayed as the truth. This multiplicity is further enabled by the intrinsic multiple-message discourse of contemporary art. Indeed, discord in the cultural realm is more absorbable than in the

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<sup>2</sup> Several other artworks were acquisitioned but the cost value has been omitted due to multiple sources of funding or gifts in kind.

pure political realm thus discord and debate can enable a more effective cultural diplomacy. Culture and politics combined play a role that straightforward politics cannot.

The Financial Times gives one of the most comprehensive reviews of 'Art from Elsewhere'. Wulschlager (2015) succinctly comments that the show 'draws attention to strong local strands and social engagement in current art-making worldwide'. Furthermore, she highlights the wide gamut of artwork on offer: 'All the artists here *demand a political response*, and carry documentary weight about particular experience in conflict zones, under oppressive governments or negotiating emerging capitalist economies, yet even with common subjects they are diverse in media and approach' (my emphasis). In order for cultural diplomacy to occur, a normative conception of internationalism is necessary. This is something the remit of the exhibition facilitates. Clearly, art curators are not political scientists. As such, it would appear that curators resist to espouse the concept of internationalism, despite the show's remit. Indeed, the curator David Elliot's politically-orientated comments could certainly be perceived as rather reductive and pessimistic. He resumes the global political system today as a 'capitalist-free-for-all'<sup>3</sup> (Marsden: 2015) during an interview about 'Art from Elsewhere'. This is extremely unanalytical compared to his astute comments about the art itself.

In a more analytic vein, in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Elliot comments the exhibition throws up the 'question of borders.' This is referred to as the 'dominant theme.' Elliot (2014: unpaginated) is of course, extremely aesthetically literate commenting on Shilpa Gupta's work concerning the India/Pakistan partition: 'It is telling a kind of apocryphal, mythological story about a couple who tried to join themselves together, to cut the sky in half so they could have one half each.' The installation entails non-hegemonic dialogue which clearly resonates with Jantje's conception of internationalism, there is no immediate bias towards either India or Pakistan. Instead, there is a clear endeavour to incite cultural diplomacy between India and Pakistan by humanizing the political, internationalizing the transcendence of partnership between beings instead of states, separated by the flag fashioned by Gupta. Showing this work in regions of the UK helps canonize the conflict as a part of these nations respective pasts and may hint at Britain's colonial role in engendering the partition conflict in the first place, as sort of *eminence grise*. This is because regional awareness of an international conflict equates to true canonization as the audience is wide enough to condone it. Indeed, colonialism and its legacies are only just beginning to be taught in UK schools. A visit to a contemporary art museum would complement the curriculum in a highly emotive manner and provide a potent catalyst for student discussion.

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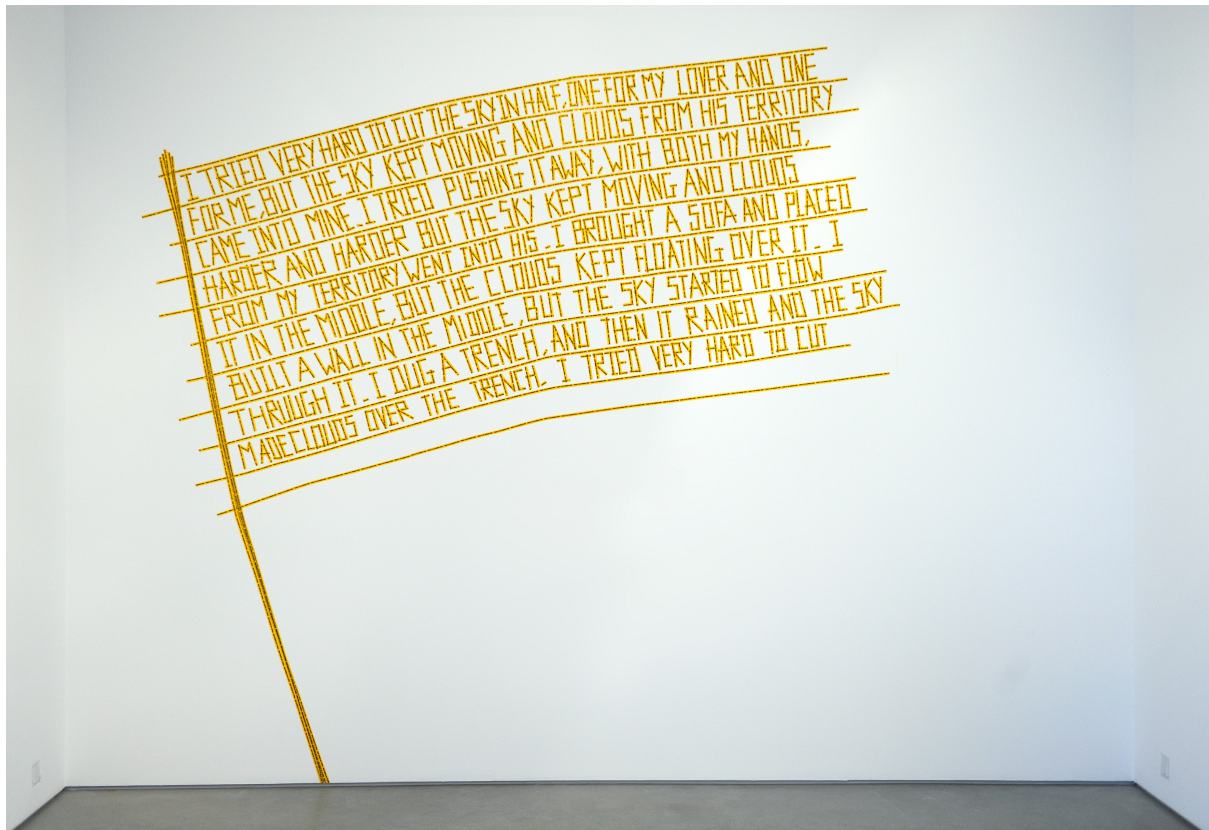


Figure 1 Shilpa Gupta (2006) *There is no border here.* (Wall Drawing with Tape) Courtesy of the Artist.

By acquisitioning this artwork, the India/Pakistan partition become part of what Habermas termed the 'public sphere.' Habermas views the public sphere as a 'sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.' (Habermas, 1989:27) This could be considered a highly apt definition of the transactions that occur within public-facing museums and galleries. Further to this, Habermas defines public opinion as the 'enlightened outcome of common and public reflection on the foundations of social order.' (1989, 96) Indeed, Habermas gradually demonstrates how the potential 'audience' of culture and public opinion increased in scope from feudalism through to democracy in Europe. If we view museums as a product of the enlightenment and Kant's famous phrase *sapere aude* (dare to know) their advent is contemporaneous with social engagement in the public sphere.

Apropos culture, Habermas comments 'the public is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non-publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical.' (1989,175) The exhibition concept counters this claim. This exhibition has definitely been designed to be debated rather than passively consumed. Indeed, cultural diplomacy implies activity and exchange. Ultimately, curation is a profession with an inherently public-facing outcome or product that encourages critical analysis, a tenet that is becoming increasingly important. In the past, 'the curator was pronounced as the barrier between the museum and the people' (Barrett, 2011:143) but curators should

now be viewed as operating in a public sphere rather than esoteric circles with shows directed towards the upper echelons of society. Curators of regional museums specifically intended the selected artworks to become part of UK permanent collections. As such, it is necessary to interrogate the significance of the works themselves and suggest the reasoning behind their respective acquisitions.

Emily Jacir's work *Crossing Surda* documents travelling to and from work across the border between Israel and Palestine. Her camera was destroyed by Israeli authorities and she was held for three hours at gunpoint. In order to circumvent this impossibility of representation, she made a hole in the bottom of the bag she was carrying and clandestinely recorded eight days of her journey back and forth. Instead of making a direct rebuke to the Israeli authorities, she publicized her work, mustering public opinion internationally, including those of Israelis themselves. This, in turn, engenders a sense of cultural diplomacy. Indeed, she has involved Israelis in previous pieces. As part of an artwork, Israelis came to sew names into a refugee tent of Palestinian villages destroyed by Israel in 1948. A cultural protest resonates in regional Birmingham whereas a bilateral confrontation would polarize views of the Israeli-Palestine situation further and complicate the works status as art somewhat, perhaps becoming mere *reportage*. By imbricating herself in a documentary aesthetic of silent subversion, she can transgress traditional political fault-lines of this conflict. It is doubtful that Habermas' rather cynically elaborated 'great mass of consumers' could rest ambivalent towards such an immediate piece.



Figure 2 Emily Jacir (2001) *Crossing Surda* (A record of going to and from work) (Video Installation)

Imran Quereshi works in the medium of miniature paintings. This medium was originally popular in the time of India's Mughal Emperors (1526-1857). Reinvigorating the aesthetic of a flattened side-profile figure, we see today an emancipated cosmopolitan instead of a regal elite. The military camouflage could be perceived as threatening but the curation guides us otherwise. It is merely a fashion statement as indeed it has been in the west, highlighting an unexpected cultural commonality. Curation, in this instance, provides a diplomatic intervention by explaining this idiosyncrasy to an understandably unaware British audience who may automatically relate khaki to conflict. By commingling an ancient, geographically-specific aesthetic with a depiction of a modern-day Pakistani man couched in the ancient trope of tree foliage, the internationalist intent lies in remoulding pre-existing public opinion towards an immediately deeper understanding of modern-day Pakistani culture. This is all achieved within the space of a small canvas in the time it takes the naked eye to process a still of information.





Figure 3 Imran Quereshi (2004) *Standing Figure in Camouflage Pantaloons* (Gouache on Wasli paper) Courtesy of the artist and the Corvi-Mora Gallery London.

Omer Fast, born and raised in Jerusalem, produced 'De Grote Boodschap', Dutch for, the big message. Visceral references abound and portray all protagonists as very mortal and very human. Eschewing a traditional narrative, this work of video art portrays cultural misunderstandings as a-temporal and indeed on a constant loop with no defined beginning or end. By traversing the whole gamut of multicultural society, from an air stewardess to a beatboxer, from a drug addict to a real estate agent there is undoubtedly a situation that publicly resonates on some level. Fast adopts a diplomatic stance depicting all echelons of society mired in the same stupidity, racism and suspicion are something endemic. Rather than blame the public he blames societal structures and less directly urban poverty which inculcates a truly internationalist message for change. Set in the protagonist's respective and adjacent flats, public and private narratives of tolerance and understanding appear to be two very distinctive notions. How then can cultural diplomacy engage with the psyche and truly change public opinion to the extent that racism becomes extinct from private communications beyond Habermas' public sphere?



Figure 4 Omer Fast (2007) *De Grote Boodschap* (Video Installation)

The work of Polish artist Alexandra Mir is a rather macabre take on the worldwide expansion of social networking phenomena. The omnipresent grey of varying shades conveys monotony and homogeneity spread across a cartographically abstract planet. This is a negative spin, sceptical of internationalism. Indeed, the dark colour palette of Mir's work depicts the homogenisation of culture as a corollary of globalisation which in turn questions the very premise of cultural exchange. Nevertheless, social networks have enabled cultural diplomacy to truly spread to the public and facilitate multilateral dialogue that was once associated with national representatives and not civil society. In accordance with Kjell Goldmann's definition of internationalism, they have certainly facilitated more exchange between states as well as created a digitised 'organisation', an infrastructure within which cultural diplomacy can operate in the public realm. Indeed, in a podcast on Cultural Diplomacy (2015) at the Victoria and Albert Museum London, former research director Glen Adamson notes that:

'It used to be that to experience a museum you had to physically go there, but of course in an age when museum collections are online, and so for example somebody sitting in Syria, if they do have internet access, can look at a million objects that are in the V&A's collection, that completely changes the picture.'

Perhaps Mir would not necessarily share such zeal for public opinion. There is still a facet of cultural diplomacy apparent in Mir's work though; it would appear that her drawing is perhaps making a comment upon David Elliot's theme of borders and the impracticality of cartography itself in relation to social networks which do not operate within nation-state parameters. It would appear that for Mir, culture in itself is more important than cultural diplomacy, the bleak landscape ostensibly gestures towards a homogenisation of culture, a lack of what UNESCO would term 'cultural diversity' (see Kozymka:2014). Undeniably, this

work negates the presence of cultural diversity, by creating a bleak vision of a same-ified world, ostensibly befallen to neo-liberal globalisation.

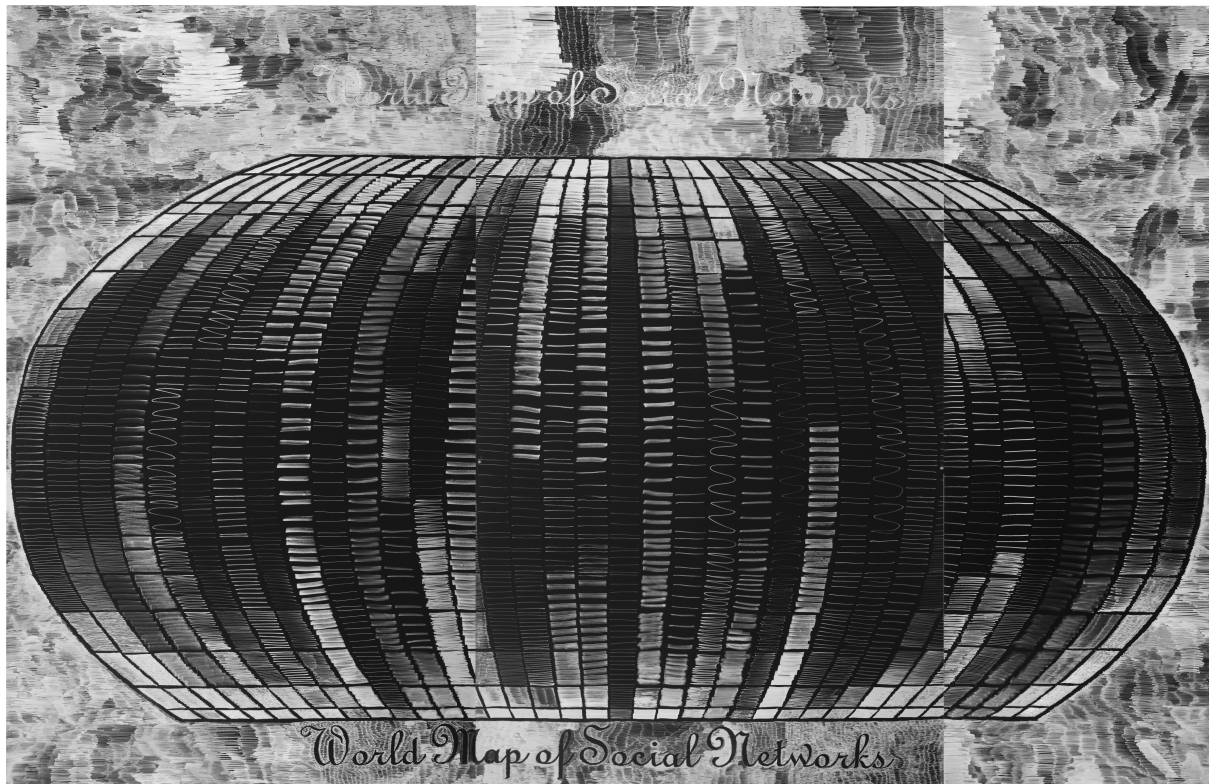


Figure 5 Aleksandra Mir (2009) *World Map of Social Networks* (Felt Pen on Fabriano Paper)  
Courtesy of the artist

Conversely, the series of four photographs by Shirin Aliabadi, *Girls in Car 1-4*, is perhaps the epitomizing image of my own conception of internationalism and cultural diplomacy in regional art institutions. Through the conduit of cultural diplomacy, Aliabadi overturns stereotypical perceptions of Iran due to the worsening of bilateral relations between many western countries and the Iranian government. Whilst embassies have closed on a regular basis and ambassadors have been recalled, art in civil society has maintained a diplomatic channel of exchange between Iran and the outside world. Indeed, in a statement from 2016, the British Council affirm: 'The history of the UK: Iranian relationship is one of mutual mistrust but strong cultural respect. This suggests that cultural and educational engagement has a vital role to play as the UK seeks to improve relations with a country of growing strategic and economic importance'. In Aliabadi's photograph, we see women driving cars and wearing full makeup. This would be a banal sight in many western nations, yet, it is considered an act of considerable rebellion in Iran. Cultural diplomacy demonstrates that relations between countries do not solely depend on relations between their respective governments. There is a staunchly humanizing aspect to this series of photographs intended to change the perception of ordinary citizens rather than politicians.

Indeed, through the medium of art, the state has indeed 'withered away' and its inhabitants have confidently transgressed its cultural mores. Given this work was intended for an international audience, the photography is not at the mercy of the Iranian government but at the mercy of international public opinion. This helps ensure the cultural freedom of both the artist and her subjects. Whilst Iran cannot be considered a democratic state *strictu sensu*, international public opinion most definitely has a democratizing effect on Iranian civil society. This international public opinion now extends beyond world centres. In this case, the art chosen to go on display is not intended as a conversation starter between Tehran and London but between the Iranian and British people. Indeed, Marx argues in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that it is civil society and not the state as Hegel presumed which is key to the understanding of historical development (Splichal, 1999:67). He even 'called for the eradication of the state because this would leave civil society in existence and the role of civil society was the universality of democracy' (Levine, 2009:357).



Figure 6 Shirin Aliabadi (2005) *Girls in Car 1-4* from the series '*Freedom is Boring, Censorship is fun*' (Photograph) Courtesy of the Third Line Gallery Dubai.

Equally, Marx elaborates the concept of a 'genuine public' (Splichal, 1999:67). For example, London- centric exhibitions of international art can of course technically be visited by provincial dwellers, but in reality, an inadvertent censorship exists due to the inability of most people to attend because of either time-orientated or financial constraints. As such, Marx differentiates between an 'imaginary reading public' and 'a living current public', in his

work *On the freedom of the Press* in 1851. Naturally, regional art institutions have a media arm that publicizes its exhibitions. The artist, in turn, requires the institution both for financial compensation and dissemination of their message. If international art cannot be viewed in a regional venue then part of the citizenry is reduced to an imaginary reading public, or in this instance an imaginary viewing public.

‘Art from Elsewhere’ democratizes the local by granting residents the status of a genuine public who access and opine over international art. That said, the multiple-messages inherent in contemporary art, including the Alibadi piece, undermine Marx’s assertion that the ruling class ‘regulate the production and distribution of ideas of their age.’ (Marx, 1974:39) Whilst the curation team collecting the artwork undeniably enact this position, any artwork containing multiple messages defies taxonomic regulation, otherwise the exhibition curator would assume the role of an ethnographer. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy in this instance is not between states but between people therefore a hegemonic meaning is unnecessary to elaborate as there is no vested economic interest, only a culturally emancipatory one for those who do not preside over trade between nations.

In short, cultural diplomacy is a conduit through which internationalism can be propagated as a political ideal. This can be facilitated through artists, art institutions and their rapport with civil society at large. It is a multilateral undertaking. I would critically posit that through cultural diplomacy catalysed initially by an artist, the opinion of local British people over a work is much more important than what either, for example, the British and Iranian government would think about it. Culture is devolved in a way that politics still is not, our formal involvement in international relations limited to a party-political vote once every four or five years. Consequently, the collecting curator will also wish to reflect public opinion in the interim. Some artists have positive whilst others have negative visions of what internationalism means empirically. Jacir views internationalism as an ideology conducive to protest and democratic freedom of expression. Conversely, Mir seems to depict internationalism as a homogenizing force whilst this study views international fora for public opinion such as social media in a positive light.

### Art from Elsewhere, Cultural Diplomacy and Liberalism

This section aims to demonstrate how the multiple-message discourse of contemporary art can liberalize relations between nations, including those under strain. In a UK context, it is argued that museums and galleries operate under a broad liberal prerogative with the curator acting as a politically neutral arbiter of meaning. The assertion that there is more creative freedom in the regions is put forth due to de-alignment from London-centric trade and economics, which will be backed up with reference to Stuart Hall. The premise of ‘exporting liberalism’ shall be explored and the freer governance structures of the regions combined with the multiple-messages of contemporary art are viewed as an under-exploited conduit of cultural diplomacy. Tensions between the artists on display will be explored alongside how the museum institution and curators, through liberalism, manage to reconcile different artistic tendencies in exhibitions. Indeed, the liberal nature of museums can help promulgate cultural diplomacy which is more effective in eliciting public empathy towards the peoples of a country than the official line of the state.



Liberal thought is often epitomized by the maxim 'freedom from constraint.' At a cursory glance, one is often unaware how radical a statement this is. In terms of the museum and art gallery institution, this study considers these institutions as empirically operating under a broad liberal prerogative. Indeed, as Murray (2004,117) comments 'a liberal state is obligated to refrain from promoting a certain moral view.' Curation appears to abide by this in *Art from Elsewhere*. It certainly adopts the criteria of neutrality of intent central to liberal thought. As a corollary from this neutrality of intent, *Art from Elsewhere* is posing liberal questions but providing no answers. We could of course view this as the self-effacing curator, endeavouring to find an answer from his audience. It seems though, that often to render exhibitions more 'accessible' to the public, curators seem somewhat to underestimate the public's intrinsic intelligence and ability to reflect upon difficult issues. Instead of a traditional private view, one of the exhibition venues, the Middlesbrough Institute for Modern Art (MIMA), held a publicly accessible garden party to celebrate the opening of the exhibition. Whilst in full concurrence with the premise of a public preview, the choice of event, a garden party, does not seem entirely fitting. The description of the garden party is as follows:

*'Join us to celebrate the opening of our new exhibition, Art from Elsewhere. Get into the international spirit with a variety of food and drink from across the globe served in our garden marquee. Live music will be performed throughout the evening.'* (MIMA: 2015)

Instead of a public lecture concerning the difficult themes raised by the exhibition, we are instead told to get into the 'international spirit.' Critical analysis is undermined by the imperative to have fun. Perhaps the musicological trope of 'edutainment' has been taken to slightly too far here. Recourse to 'edutainment' is perhaps symptomatic of a liberal cultural diplomacy that endeavours to combine politics with pleasure, a public-facing simulacra of an ambassadors' evening champagne reception rounded off with Ferrero Rocher. Indeed, the colour and vibrancy of the MIMA Garden Party (2015) jars with the politically-engaged works contained within the Art From Elsewhere exhibition. For example, Thomas Demand's *Photo-Booth* (2010) documents a political prison of the former East German state. It is believed that many political prisoners were intentionally radiated by x-ray equipment and subsequently died of leukaemia in later life. Another work by Imran Quereshi entitled *This Leprous Brightness* (2010) was inspired by the two horrific suicide attacks in the artist's Lahore neighbourhood. The garden party serves to demonstrate how much liberal cultural diplomacy can subsume different reactions to social engagement- basically it's ok to drink wine and then look at something horrific. Indeed, Stuart Hall's notion of 'the tension-managing capacities of liberal- pluralist societies' is a pertinent gloss here (Hall,1980:13). Nevertheless, events such as a garden party could be seen to demonstrate an ontological positivity, generating social cohesion out of political tragedy<sup>4</sup>.

Despite approving of contemporary art, Stuart Hall observes that many institutions couch it as a purely western phenomenon, something that *Art From Elsewhere* staunchly opposes. Hall critiques 'the museums of Modern or Contemporary Art in terms of the way they have colonized the very idea of 'the Modern', 'modernity' and 'modernism' as exclusively

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, another motivation behind hosting the garden party would of course be to raise vital funds for the museum. However, I do believe that events should match the content of an exhibition and something slightly more sober and less culturally reductive could have been more appropriate.

'western' inventions' (Hall,1999:4-5) This is indeed, the tale told in many permanent collections. Yet 'Art from Elsewhere' manages, to present a different story with contemporary art couched as a world-wide entity engaged with international relations and political issues. Referring to Museums more widely, Hall regularly cites regional examples of innovative practice. He refers to the Liverpool Museum on the Slave Trade as 'courageous if controversial' . Hall also notes of 'a few bold efforts to build the everyday concerns of migrant people into 'daily life' local exhibitions (for example by the adventurous Walsall Museum and Art Gallery)' (1999,10) One would imagine these core issues in British history should in fact be an important presence in National Museums. Notwithstanding, his observations of local courageousness can equally be applied to exhibitions of contemporary art and indeed liberalism does not presume a single power centre.

In its philosophical guise, one of liberalism's success stories has been the ability to endow revolutionary movements with creative freedom, thus subsuming them into its very fabric. Merleau-Ponty even describes movements that counter liberalism as a 'useful menace.' He couches this in the following context:

*If we speak of liberalism, it is in the sense that Communist action and other revolutionary movements are accepted only as a useful menace, as a continual call to order, that we do not believe in the solution of the social problem through the power of the proletarian class of its representatives, that we expect progress only from a conscious action which will confront itself with the judgement of an opposition (Carman,2008:176)*

Art from elsewhere epitomizes Merleau-Ponty's sense of a 'conscious action which will confront itself with judgement of an opposition.' No-one wants to overthrow the system, merely critique and better it. In this exhibition, there is a sense of non- narrative creative freedom burgeoned by thematic ties instead of a definitive political stance. Indeed, tensions persist between some of the artists on display as they do not espouse a unified political dialogue. This is a truly liberal aesthetic. Of course, liberal curatorial gestures make this sort of dialogue possible. Indeed, De Raymond (2007, 68) favouring a rapprochement of Art and Diplomacy comments:

*'L'Espace de mise en exposition me semble être des lors un espace intermédiaire qui se définit dorénavant non plus comme le lieu d'une unique vérité mais bien comme le lieu de convergence d'une multiplicité d'opinions en confrontation<sup>5</sup>.'*

For example, artists such as Jenny Holzer advocate an untrammelled Marxist message stating that 'Private Property Created Crime' in *Purple Blue Arno Erlauf* which consists of a bar of LED letters on a vertical loop. Compare this to the work by contemporary Chinese artist Yang Zhenzhong. Yang juxtaposes two video projections. Ostensibly, the work is simultaneously is a celebration of the creative freedom allowed following China's move towards free-market capitalism from 1989 onwards but also a critique of the pace of development, hence the title *Let's puff* , literally depicting a woman out of breath whilst the pace of life in Shanghai on another screen gets faster and faster. American Marxists and

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<sup>5</sup> My translation: 'The exhibition space can be subsequently seen as an intermediary zone which no longer defines itself as a place of singular truth but as the point of convergence for a multiplicity of conflicting opinions.'

Chinese capitalists serve to overturn nation-based stereotypes, yet another iteration of cultural diplomacy.

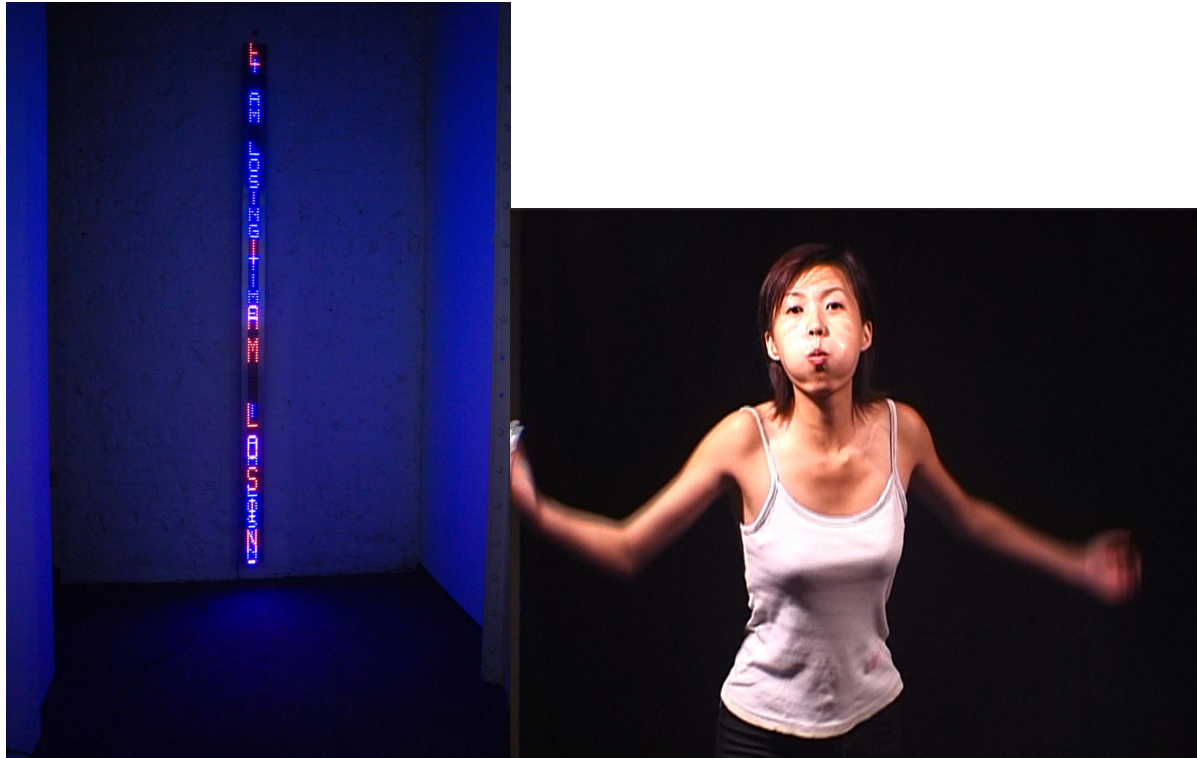


Figure 7 (left) Jenny Holzer (2007) *Purple Blue Arno Erlauf* (Electronic LED texts in metal casing)

Figure 8 (right) Yang Zhenzhong (2002) *Let's Puff* (Video Installation) Courtesy of ShangART Gallery, Shanghai.

Of course, it is necessary to consider how public opinion is couched within liberalism. Perhaps one of the differences between internationalism and liberalism is that the former seeks to change public opinion whilst the latter wants to maintain its current hegemonic stance. It is therefore incumbent on this article to analyze how and if liberalism is a force that can change public attitudes via cultural diplomacy.

Perhaps Hans Haacke is an artist-theorist to whom we can most attribute putting 'his art at the service of extending and deepening democracy' (Leger, 2011:25). He does this in compliance with the hegemonic liberal regime in operation and Museums and Art Galleries. Haacke espouses an oft-cited liberal maxim that 'One should not leave politics to the politicians.' (38) In true liberal spirit he espouses that there should be limits to how much control politicians can have over the state. According to Leger (2011,25) 'Haacke has persistently attempted to universalize the 'art of not being governed quite so much.' Further to this, he believes democracy must include 'a constant critique of itself.' Haacke



seems to adopt a diplomatic role by tempering the direct action of protest with academic critique in an authoritative institution.

Meschac Gaba operates in a similar modality to Hans Haacke. In *Brazilian Bank* (2006), the Beninese Artist makes a poignant statement about the prevailing neo-liberal economy and the vagaries of market forces. The installation comprises a market stall from São Paulo which purports to sell an assortment of devalued currency from all over the world. Indeed, hyper-inflation has affected several developing economies such as Brazil in the 1970s as well as Zimbabwe in Africa under Robert Mugabe. What Aitkin (2011,1696) has termed, the 'institutional framework of the post-war international economy' is laid bare and distilled to its most basic constituent parts ; the installation comprises bank notes, coins, suitcases, and a wooden stall. Despite Gaba's critique of neo-liberal economics, there are of course, some theorists who specifically view Contemporary art as somehow more of a commodity than its predecessors, perhaps something Gaba also surreptitiously parodies. Stallabrass (2004,90) comments: 'Thus art, a material manifestation of exchange-value, approaches the condition of that most abstract of commodities, money.' Stallabrass does however acknowledge that 'Separated from the full rigors of the market, art can flirt with consumer culture while remaining assured of its safe demarcation.' (2004,91) Regional display indeed facilitates this, truly epitomizing the liberal maxim 'freedom from constraint.' The art of 'Art from Elsewhere' is free from the economic constraints of world centres and is consequently free to be seen by a wider sector of society.



Figure 9 Meschac Gaba (2006) *Brazilian Bank* (Bank notes, Coins, Suitcases, Wooden Stall)

Can Art from Elsewhere and international exhibitions/collections in regional art institutions help 'export' liberalism and liberal ideals? Kymlicka (1989,140) comments 'There seems to

be no room within the moral ontology of liberalism for the idea of collective rights.’ Internationalism can breach this schism by foregrounding the notion of universal rights of mankind whilst safeguarding individual creativity and freedom of expression. This poses a further question about ‘Art from Elsewhere.’ To what extent is it exporting liberalism and to what extent is it exporting internationalism? Perhaps it is necessary to turn to some American inclusions to fully answer this question as the exportation of liberalism has been a core tenant of US foreign policy since World War Two.

Peter Hujar documents nocturnal street scenes in downtown New York City. His photographs convey both a collective plight against poverty as well as the minutiae of individual suffering. *Blanket* is particularly powerful in eschewing the human figure although they are still imprinted psychologically onto the lens, the collective right to an abode absent from liberal American society. These pictures are readily understood by a global audience and transcend cultural idiosyncrasies. They also highlight the social inequality present in arguably the world’s most ‘liberal’ of ‘liberal democracies.’ the United States of America. Hence, Hujar is portraying a post-hegemonic vision of America, highlighting dissent from liberalism whilst working within its structures. His cultural agency allows this alternative, ‘real-life’ vision of America to be propagated worldwide.



Figure 10 Peter Hujar (1976) *Blanket* (Photograph) © 1987 The Peter Hujar Archive LLC; Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

It is clear that liberalism always critiques itself. The most effective institutional critique of liberalism occurs in regional art venues due to their economic autonomy and distancing from formal organs of cultural diplomacy which, in turn, enables cultural output to be displayed more freely. The pluralism and multiplicity of dialogue associated with liberal thought can change people's attitudes towards different nations in a new form of publicly-orientated cultural diplomacy.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed a paucity of literature linking cultural diplomacy specifically to museums. The relationship between contemporary art and cultural diplomacy also remains a critically unexplored domain aside from Sylvester's contribution (2007). Ang, Isar and Mar (2015,377) see the field of cultural diplomacy as too complex for nationalist purposes. They comment 'the attempt to impose a unifying national narrative on the intrinsically diverse range of cultural diplomacy/relations activity may prove an elusive pursuit.' In other words, there is so much 'cultural diversity' (Kozymka, 2014) within a nation that it is impossible to impose a unifying narrative upon it for international export.

*Art from Elsewhere* has highlighted the experimental possibilities of local institutions, and the experimental nature of cultural diplomacy itself. At a UK regional level, unprecedented access to international art has been enabled through Art Fund International and their offshoot touring exhibition *Art from Elsewhere*. Ang, Isar and Mar (2015,379) argue 'cultural diplomacy is a testing ground for possibilities for the politics of recognition between and perhaps beyond nations.' This argument should be advanced further by combining the politically radical qualities of cultural diplomacy and local contemporary art institutions. Given that cultural diplomacy lies in an embryonic state in local institutions, more innovative programming can occur which is not subject to the scrutiny of national museums who have a clear mandate from their respective governments.

This study has viewed the museum institution as operating in a liberal framework and the curator being equally ensconced in a liberal status quo. Perhaps there is a growing necessity for a curator to be well-versed in political science as art to truly enable international understanding. The political and social significance embodied in an artwork is just as important as its chosen aesthetics. Nevertheless, I believe the regional contemporary art institution can concurrently facilitate discourses of internationalism and liberalism.

Ang makes the following observation:

*'Cultural diplomacy can move beyond the national interest only if this move itself can be understood as being in the national interest. Further research, including in other countries and regions, is required to finesse the implications of this understanding.'* (Ang, Isar and Mar: 2015,379)

I would go further, arguing that the ideology of internationalism is in the national interest. Ultimately, cultural diplomacy and the museum institution trade in ideology and this is what is really at stake. When change needs to be instigated, an ideology needs to be espoused. Indeed, unless cultural diplomacy is combined with internationalism the British Council Collection and Government Art Collection will forever remain, well, British.

The chosen case study *Art from Elsewhere* has highlighted the importance of the permanent collection in facilitating cultural diplomacy. Permanent collections of international art help normalize cultural diplomacy in museums both local and national. National Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2015) are one of the few institutions to acknowledge the importance of a collection as cultural diplomacy, most efforts concentrated on

temporary schemes and loans. They state: 'The V&A is an archive of cultural diplomacy with collections from around the world.' In a podcast, their former director Martin Roth viewed the role of the Victoria and Albert museum as a place of 'meeting in a free and open space, talking to each other even in times of conflict.'

Finally, the museum is a geographically ubiquitous institution that transcends nationality. As such, it is a vehicle for cultural diplomacy *par excellence*. Whilst globalization is pejoratively linked to the proliferation of multi-national companies and an accompanying homogenization of culture, the proliferation of museums is synonymous with cultural diversity. Cultural diversity should not be the preserve of world centres and interlinked to economic activity. It should emerge from political internationalism under the aegis of a liberal democracy. The multiplicity of contemporary art, works within political parameters to facilitate a more effective cultural diplomacy that goes far beyond the national interest, inaugurating local-rooted internationalism. However, Jantjes' internationalist clarion-call to the 'equal acknowledgement of the creative achievements of all peoples' will remain elusive until truly enshrined in political ideology as well as pioneering museum acquisitions. Ultimately, culture is ahead of its time and, indeed, the government departments that manage it.

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