Breaking the Code
New Approaches to Diversity and Equality in the Arts

by Hassan Mahamdallie


INTRODUCTION

Expanding equality and democratic possibilities in the realm of arts and culture can take us all – arts institutions, theatres and galleries, arts companies, artists, academics, curators, critics, audiences and participants – on a journey that leaves behind increasingly outmoded approaches to our artistic and cultural life in favour of new ways of seeing and telling and making. We can begin to overcome notions that have wrongly cast diversity and equality policies as an unwelcome obligation or burden on the artistic world, and instead turn this ‘deficit model’ into its opposite – a progressive force that can renew the arts in this country and lay the foundations for its artistic and democratic renewal.

Arts Council England is committed to developing the creative or artistic case for diversity – that recognises that art placed in the margins through structural barriers and antiquated and exclusive approaches needs to be brought to the centre of our culture and valued accordingly. The Arts Council believes that the creative case approach demands three interlocking progressions:

1 Equality

There has to be a continued drive for equality to remove barriers in the arts world, releasing and realising potential and helping to transform the arts so that they truly reflect the reality of the diverse country that we have become but still do not fully recognise.
2 Recognition

There has to be a new conversation that attempts through various means to resituate diverse artists, both historically and theoretically, at the centre of British art – whether that is the performing arts, the visual arts, music, literature or film.

3 A New Vision

There must also be the construction and dissemination of a new framework for viewing diversity, one that takes it out of a negative or ‘deficit’ model and places it in an artistic context. Diversity becomes not an optional extra but part of the fabric of our discussions and decisions about how we encourage an energetic, relevant, fearless and challenging artistic culture in England and the wider world.

The belief that there is only one way of defining taste, only one canon by which to judge what is great art and what is not, has increasingly been challenged over the past forty years. In many respects, old fashioned elitist notions of a universalist Western canon have been hollowed out by streams of critical thought that have succeeded, in part, in infiltrating even our biggest arts institutions.

However, those who have the power to define what is ‘great art’ still give the impression that their judgments are based on ‘expertise’, following universal rules traced all the way back to the Greeks and the Romans, and that only those who are trained to decipher the code can understand the true intrinsic value of the work of art, the recital or the performance.

So, although there may have been an intellectual tilt towards a more egalitarian view of history and of diverse arts practice, the reins of power, and thus authority, largely remain in the same privileged hands. In a sense a culture of middle-class entitlement still prevails. A significant shift in the access to resources, to galleries and stages and to academic legitimacy has yet to take place.
Also, there are many fields of endeavour that have yet to be fully opened up. For example, there needs to be an appreciation by policy makers and funders that much innovation takes place at the margins, yet it is this experimentation with ways of seeing and telling that reinvigorates culture and connects it to present realities, not those of past times. This is not new thinking: the innovative potential was highlighted in Sir Brian McMaster’s 2008 report to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport into excellence in the arts:

Within these concepts of excellence, innovation and risk-taking, and running through everything that follows below, must be a commitment to diversity. The diverse nature of 21st century Britain is the perfect catalyst for ever greater innovation in culture and I would like to see diversity put at the heart of everything cultural. We live in one of the most diverse societies the world has ever seen, yet this is not reflected in the culture we produce, or in who is producing it. Out of this society, the greatest culture could grow… it is my belief that culture can only be excellent when it is relevant, and thus nothing can be excellent without reflecting the society which produces and experiences it.1

We can all be enlightened by new ways of telling the story of the development of contemporary art in Britain. Post World War II immigration has forever changed the essence of British life – so why cannot this be properly articulated within the arts? There needs to be an acknowledgement that, for example, artists whose work has been marginalised through inequalities and structures of discrimination in wider society have nevertheless had a significant and sometimes pivotal influence on artistic genres, forms and styles that have developed over the years. Diversity in its widest sense is intrinsic to the development of art and culture, yet this viewpoint is often obscured by orthodox and dogmatic narratives and histories.

Rasheed Araeen of Third Text has already identified a ‘missing story’ in the context of post Second World War visual arts:

The presence of artists in Britain originating from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean is totally absent from the official narratives of art history… Although some Afro-Asian artists have been received benevolently and with admiration, there is little institutional recognition that the absence of non-white artists from mainstream art history has falsified the history of modernism.
Similar points can (and have been) been developed around the way in which women artists have been situated in the mainstream discourse. When the artist Louise Bourgeois died recently at the age of ninety-eight, obituary writers and art critics praised her for her ‘persistence’ and noted that she had not gained deserved prominence until she was into her seventies. However most did not touch on how she was excluded from the charmed circle of male artists whose work was purchased and exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the late 1930s:

Because I was French and kind of discreet, they tolerated me – with my accent I was a little strange, I was not competition – and I was cute, I guess. They took me seriously on a certain level, but they refused to help me professionally. The trustees of the Museum of Modern Art were not interested in a young woman coming from Paris. They were not flattered by her attention. They were not interested in her three children. I was definitely not socially needed then. They wanted male artists, and they wanted male artists who did not say they were married. They wanted male artists who would come alone and be their charming guests. Rothko could be charming. It was a court. And the artist buffoons came to court to entertain, to charm.²

It took MoMA fifty years to mount a major exhibition of Bourgeois’s work (and thereby the first retrospective of a female artist). According to the artist herself this finally came about in 1982 because a female curator, Deborah Wye, ‘convinced them [the trustees] that I was important’.

‘DIVERSITY LITE’ – INEQUALITY IS STILL THE ISSUE

There has been criticism that often ‘diversity’ within arts institutions and the wider art world has been confined to specific micro-policies, while the bigger policy and operational areas have failed to integrate equality and diversity into their work. So while institutions can point to their diversity policies, major inequalities in reality may still remain. In fact, diversity is not the problem. Diversity exists; it does not have to be created. The issue is inequality within a diverse society, and diverse arts community, and within its history, its practice and critical debate, some are far more equal than others. This presents the paradox of the creative process, diversity rich in inspiration, but
the distribution and consumption of the creative product being delivered in the main through a network of exclusive clubs.

The issues of diversity and equality do need to be integrated into the bigger questions that we face. For example, there needs to be more conscious scrutiny of the economic and infrastructure models that are pursued in the arts and their impact on artistic practice, diversity and creativity. The ‘creative cities’ model was outlined in the urban studies theorist Richard Florida’s book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and has had a profound influence internationally on politicians and town planners seeking to regenerate inner cities. One study summarised Florida’s argument thus:

Diverse, tolerant, cool cities do better. Places with more ethnic minorities, gay people and counterculturalists will attract high skilled professionals, and thus get the best jobs and most dynamic companies. And Florida seems to have sheaves of data to back it all up.

The study goes on to note that:

Some cities and states are already putting Florida’s ideas into practice – Michigan, Cleveland and Philadelphia have all launched ‘cool cities’ initiatives, for example. In the UK, Liverpool is now considering creating a ‘Gay Quarter’. Dundee has zoned a new ‘Cultural Quarter’ next to the city centre.

Florida argued that cities need economic policies to attract and nurture the ‘creative class’ that is the dynamic hub of the model. On the face of it, this sounds ideal – urban regeneration built around a concept of diversity. Yet as many observers have pointed out – diversity without increased equality may be seen as no more than ‘diversity lite’. Some academics and critics have argued that the meritocracy and coolness of Florida’s creative class rests upon continued inequalities at the base of society. Jamie Peck has observed that:

At various points, Florida concedes that the crowding of creatives into gentrifying neighborhoods might generate inflationary housing-market pressures, that not only run the risk of eroding the
diversity that the Creative Class craves but, worse still, could smother the fragile ecology of creativity itself. He reminds his readers that they depend on an army of service workers trapped in ‘low-end jobs that pay poorly because they are not creative jobs’, while pointing soberly to the fact that the most creative places tend also to exhibit the most extensive forms of socio-economic inequality.6

Lakhbir Bhandal, a Director of the Change Institute, who has been looking at the connections between diversity, creativity and innovation, puts it this way:

Florida is saying that people want to live in places that are multicultural and diverse and open to all sorts of people but then he says black people don’t benefit in those societies. They create a nice backdrop for the others, without benefiting themselves. It doesn’t necessarily follow from diversity that equality results.7

The creative class is drawn from the creative industries, which are themselves seen as an important driver for the British economy. Yet it is widely recognised that the creative industries have an ongoing problem with diversifying themselves. Creative and Cultural Skills points out that ‘The sector is 95 percent white and 65 percent male.’8

An Arts Council commissioned study talked to the student pressure body The Arts Group, revealing:

In a survey of its graduate members, The Arts Group found that the significance of contacts and networking was even higher. Kit Friend, the group’s communication officer, told us: ‘Networking remains the key method – around 80 percent – of finding opportunities, effectively perpetuating closed circles of contacts dominated by the middle classes. As long as there is no properly structured and accessible recruitment path, we will not be able to open up opportunities to those with talent. We appear to be heading quite willingly into a model where those who can afford to pay [by being able to undertake unpaid internships] are able to access the best paths to the creative sector.’9

An Arts Group study found that sectors that are part of the creative industries exhibit structural inequalities which go beyond crude ‘head-counts’:
The evidence also points to a clear occupational skewing of BME [Black and Minority Ethnic Community Services]... For example, in the film industry, much BME employment is accounted for at the exhibition and distribution end of the value chain, whilst BME employees are less likely to hold more senior positions.

It is clearly not the case that Black and Asian creative businesses are ghettoising themselves, and need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make more of an effort to break into ‘white’ networks. The doors must feel shut to them.

**DIVERSITY, CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION:**

**WHAT ARE THE LINKS?**

All this shows that diversity and equality cannot and should not be de-coupled. But the argument why this relationship is important needs to be properly fleshed out and articulated. In the recent past there have been many and legitimate ways in which those arguing for wider diversity and equality have sought to convince others – a moral case for diversity arising out of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (it’s good for society), an economic case for diversity (it’s good for business), a legal case (it’s the law), but the creative case (it’s good for the arts) remains as yet under developed. That is not to say that it would be a hard argument to win. We believe that most people connected in the arts ‘instinctively’ understand that the dynamic between diversity and creativity and innovation lies somewhere at the heart of the artistic act – but where exactly?

Lakhbir Bhandal from the Change Institute argues that we need to put some thought into how diversity and creativity is ‘managed’ for us to reap the full benefit:

There is research into getting a heterogeneous team together and seeing if they do better than homogenous teams. They found that yes, there is more creativity in the long run but the process is complicated and difficult to manage. It’s not a given that if you throw a bunch of people together – it’s got to be quite carefully managed. If you look at arts institutions, including the Arts Council, it’s not that they aren’t diverse, but are they getting the best out of people. Is the diversity being mined in an active way? How many people in these organizations are reaching their full potential?
Bhandal found that researchers into this area have advanced the concept that each one of us is carrying different ‘knowledge domains’ conditioned by our identities and differences. The key is how we recognise and exploit these knowledge domains:

You can have a mixed gender group but a lot of men dominating, but it doesn’t mean that the women don’t have anything to offer. Unless someone is creating the conditions and that space for that knowledge to be expressed, it will remain unused.

The question that arises is how we create these optimal conditions in the arts world. Bhandal thinks that efforts by institutions such as the Arts Council have made a start and that an infrastructure of sorts has been created, but now it needs building upon. In plain talk, there is more to do:

We are still looking at changing institutions and structures and pulling down resources to get more and more people in the game and facilitate them, and to do that you have to prove that it works. No one will argue it’s not a good idea but it will remain on paper unless people can see what it’s really all about.

Bhandal argues that the arts community is diversifying along with wider society. There is a need to make sure that the different elements are there, but also to create democratic spaces where these elements can meet on a basis of equality:

There is diversity in the sense that there are different types of arts organizations but still the interface in a way isn’t there. The policies haven’t been wrong, you need black RFOs, but it’s only been half the process. On the one hand you have been creating an infrastructure but the second phase is to bring it together and I think that process has stalled. Black artists can’t integrate into those organisations unless they [the organisations] change.11

Of course more questions follow – crucially, how is value applied to diversity and creativity? You can measure the number of ideas generated by putting the two elements together, but what is their
creative value? In short – is it worth it? Academics are starting to look at this area of work. A recent paper by cultural economists argued that diversity must be measured as a component of intrinsic value, a significant point that collapses the false opposition that has been set up in some quarters between diversity and excellence in the arts:

In the arts, perhaps above all other fields, diversity is an important requirement. Almost everyone has their own personal conception of good art. So, aside from encouraging experimentation and innovation, diversity is an important economic requirement in its own right. The arts world is as dominated by fashions and establishments as any other public sphere, and it is notoriously easy for struggling talent to be overlooked and minority tastes to be excluded. The valuation of diversity itself, as an element of rational choice, is an aspect of establishing intrinsic value that is tackled by economics. But it is entirely consistent with – and should support – artistic autonomy. [my emphasis]

Many artists seeking to relate to ‘the big fish’ in the subsidised arts sector report that an appreciation of the value of diversity in relation to artistic practice is not fully recognised or taken to heart. One barrier is how artists who offer artistic explorations rooted outside dominant practice find themselves at a disadvantage. This has been the experience of Mehrdad Seyf, the director of performance company 30 Bird Productions:

Our work is a combination of theatre, performance, visual arts, architecture, informed by where I come from – partly Iran, partly French School, and of course England.

The Western world is accessible to the rest of the world, we have access to it, but the rest of the world is not as accessible to those in the West. I was told after an experimental show, ‘the next piece you do – can you do a plot with a beginning, middle and an end and characters we can recognize?’ No, I don’t want to do that. The critics are looking for ‘content’, performances and narrative. They are looking for a cathartic experience, but it’s not about that. You can have a powerful experience without catharsis.

It’s not so much the Western canon in itself – but the way in which it is being used, is what needs to be fought.
Seyf finds that he comes sharply up against the vexed question of power. Who has the power, what are they doing with it, are they prepared to share it with others, and how do those with little or no power relate to it? He says:

The closer you get the big regularly funded companies, the more you have to bastardise your work to make it acceptable. It begs the question if they are not going to cede power to us, how do we create the work that we want, how do we challenge the establishment and have a dialogue with them at the same time?

These barriers force Seyf in one sense to make a virtue of being ‘the other’:

You are all outside of it – this outsideness is important, even mentally I think about standing outside looking in, that is the nature of the engagement. Those of us who don’t really have a country are never quite 100%. A group of people who you cannot categorise but who have access to so many references. These inbetweeners are increasing. It’s the way of the future.

For Seyf diversity is not a formal code of conduct, rather it is preparation for a step into the unknown.

Diversity is very important, I make sure it’s there by choosing the people I work with, not preaching about it. I don’t go in saying ‘I am the Iranian director’; I come in and say ‘let’s create something’. The diversity will come hopefully in ways that surprise me.

**BUILDING A TOTAL PICTURE OF THE ARTS:**

**REMOVING THE BLINKERS**

The arts world and the institutions that are there to support it need to encourage and resource new attempts through inventive means to resituate diverse artists, both historically and theoretically, at the centre of British art. The task is not to distort or add more falsifications to the burden of history, but to build a total picture of what has gone before – to acknowledge, learn from and build upon all those artists whose contribution has been up to now ignored or downplayed.
This ‘total’ approach also allows us to re-look at artists whom we consider important and uncover aspects of their lives that the establishment template cannot hold – for example the role of disability in art. If we can open up these commonly neglected areas of inquiry, there is the chance that a proper place can be given to those artists today who are fighting against their work being devalued or being exoticised, and for its true potential to be recognised.

Colin Hambrook, editor of the resource rich Disability Arts Online argues that discriminatory attitudes towards disabled artists run deep in Western culture, citing the ‘virtue’ of the body beautiful elevated by the ancient Greeks and Romans and replicated by the Renaissance.\(^{14}\)

There is a key issue we still face – if an artist has an impairment and they are open about it, they will be discriminated against, their work won’t be valued or seen in the same light as their peers. There can then be an internal suppression – a pushing away of the importance of that aspect of themselves. Historically, disability was much more institutionalised and entrenched. We can see two thousand years of western culture where there has been the ideology of the perfect human with a perfect body and a perfect mind.\(^{15}\)

This is not to go back into history and tag famous artists as ‘disabled’, or even to necessarily claim that individuals past or present have been oppressed or faced discrimination because of disablism. Many artists have been impaired. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Frida Kahlo are two examples well-known to the public. However, it is important to understand how their disabilities may have entered their artistic processes. In contemporary times the Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare has explained how the nature of his disability interacted with his artistic development. A 2001 profile of his work revealed that:

Shonibare’s developing intellectual critique was informed by his own experience of physical disability. At the age of nineteen, while doing a foundation course at the Wimbledon School of Art, he contracted a viral infection that left him completely paralyzed for a month and in a wheelchair for three years. Although able to get about, he has impaired mobility, including limited use of his left side. This, he insists, made him both more determined and more creative as an artist: ‘Historically the people who made huge, unbroken modernist paintings, were middle-class white American men. I
don’t have that physique; I can’t make that work. So I fragmented it, in a way which made it both physically manageable and emphasizes the political critique’.

Race, disability and sex discrimination have particular manifestations in the twenty-first century that demand specific strategies and measures to overcome each of them. One thing anti-discrimination measures have in common however is the tendency to equalise relations between everyone. Freedom is indivisible. The same applies in the sphere of the arts.

Theorists argue that innovative approaches generated by disability arts studies generalise outwards to the benefit of us all. So US academic Terry Rowden argues ‘disability has a special force as means of rewriting normalizing narratives because it occurs across all social groups and categories’.
Colin Hambrook is also adamant that some of the innovations pioneered by the disability arts movement reveal new approaches, in ways which by and large we have yet to appreciate. One would be the way in which galleries, seeking to meet the needs of blind people, allow visitors to use senses other than their visual capacity, such as touch, as a means of revealing the nature of works of art on display. A historical example would be the innovation pioneered by the sign language poet and playwright Dot Miles. She argued for a total appreciation of the aesthetics of her work. “The English language (albeit with a slight Welsh accent) was my mother-tongue. My poems are written from the words and music that still sing in my mind. Of recent years, I have tried to blend words with sign-language as closely as lyrics and tunes are blended in song. In such poems, the signs I chose are a vital part of the total effect and to understand my intention the poem should be seen as well as read”. 18

‘THAT WHICH IS NOT ARTICULATED DOES NOT EXIST’:

WHAT THE MAINSTREAM OWES BLACK THEATRE

The Arts Council’s Sustained Theatre initiative is a partnership with the black theatre sector established in 2005 to carry out the recommendations of Baroness Lola Young’s ‘Whose Theatre?’ Report on the Sustained Theatre Consultation. 19 One of the recommendations focuses on encouraging accessible black theatre archives and critical debates on the development of black and Asian British theatre. Baroness Young wrote:

There is now no excuse for being unaware that the history and the presence in Britain of people of African, Asian, Caribbean and East Asian descent stretches back over several centuries. Yet, in spite of that long and complex set of histories – many of which involve arts and cultural exchange and appropriation – today’s cultural institutions still feel awkward about engaging fully with the descendants of those early settlers… The artistic landscape has changed due to the magnitude of human effort made by arts practitioners of African, Asian, Caribbean and East Asian descent. But real embedded transformation has proved elusive. 20
Professor Paul Gilroy makes a similar but wider point when he argues that the arts have a lot to gain by acknowledging the rough ‘conviviality’ of cross cultural exchanges that occur at the base of society:

I want to suggest that largely undetected (and this is a good thing) either by governments or media, in ways that actually go back to the legacy of the 1970s, migrants, immigrants, their descendents in this country, might be revealed to have generated some more positive possibilities than the melancholic ones. Alongside all those usual tales of crime and racial conflict there are some other varieties of interaction here in this city [London] and in other cities particularly, that have developed in a more organic way, let’s say.

Our civic life, I think we can say, has been endowed with that vibrant multi-culture that won the Olympics, but we don’t always value it, they valued it at that moment but it was unusual to do so. We certainly don’t use that idea, or celebrate that development in ways that we should.21

We need to be able to pick out pivotal moments when Gilroy’s ‘conviviality’ produced something unique and enduring. One of Sustained Theatre’s successes has been to help fund playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah’s Black Theatre Archive project. The investigation, based at the National Theatre Studio, has so far uncovered over 400 African, Caribbean and Black British plays premiered in the UK in the last sixty years. The project is now archiving the scripts and producing audio recordings of extracts from selected works.22

Kwei-Armah is aware of the dangers of rendering the contribution of black dramatists invisible, and of the need to resituate key figures and movements inside the mainstream of British theatre. He warns

that which is not articulated does not exist – we have been really bad at articulating the links between what could be seen as a peripheral activity and its impact on the mainstream.

He gives an example from his own experience:
Mike Leigh told me he wrote *Two Thousand Years* (2005) after seeing my play *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003) but transformed it from being a black family into a Jewish one. How many other artists of stature have been to see black plays and narratives that have gone on to inspire their own art? I think there is proof of that. Even though we are small in numbers we punch well above our weight, and in ways that are far bigger than you recognize. Academics should be measuring that and putting it into the mix.\(^\text{23}\)

To make the point Kwei-Armah picks out the centrality of the work of playwright Barry Reckord to the course of postwar British Theatre. Reckord came from Jamaica in the 1950s to study at Cambridge. His first play, written at university, entitled *Flesh to a Tiger*, was staged at the Royal Court in 1958,\(^\text{24}\) followed in 1960 by *You in Your Small Corner*.\(^\text{25}\) Reckord’s contemporaries included Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond, John Arden and Arnold Wesker. Ann Jellicoe, (who wrote *The Knack*), directed *Skyvers*, Reckord’s 1963 seminal portrayal of alienated and brutalised white working class schoolboys up against the authorities.

Or was it? The play’s central figure, Cragge, was played by David Hemming in the Royal Court premiere.\(^\text{26}\) All of the characters in *Skyvers* are white. Yet originally Reckord conceived the play as having black protagonists, but apparently black actors could not be found to fill the roles. So *Skyvers* was adapted to a white working class narrative instead.\(^\text{27}\)

As it stood, *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington described *Skyvers* as

>a devastating account by a young Jamaican writer of life in what would now be called a ‘bog-standard’ London comprehensive. Other dramatists, such as Nigel Williams in *Class Enemy*, went on to explore the failure of the system to cope with those at the bottom of the heap. But Reckord got there first.\(^\text{28}\)

*Skyvers* had a huge impact at the time, but is now largely forgotten, and certainly has not entered the British theatre repertoire, unlike Bond, Churchill and even Wesker’s work. However Kwei-Armah reports that
the first play that David Hare saw at the Royal Court was *Skyvers*. Hare told me that ‘I can’t tell you the influence it had on me.’ This is our state of the nation playwright seeing *Skyvers* and thinking ‘Wow – this is what I want to do’.

Reckord played a key role in driving forward British theatre of the 1960s, showing a way – through heightened language – towards an authentic portrayal of working class consciousness. But mostly we are a long way from acknowledging and expressing such an integrated vision of key moments that switched the tracks. Kwei-Armah decries the status quo in which

‘white’ work is universal and to be preserved, whereas our work is only instrumental, to be shown once and then thrown away. That is a tenet of racism. Black plays can be universal and socially specific at the same time.

He makes the wider point that to gain authenticity those writers wanting to describe working class experience learned to see through ‘a black lens’. From his research Kwei-Armah pinpoints the 1980s as the most influential period of black theatre in Britain:

The socially political work of the Black Theatre Co-op, Temba, Talawa and those companies firing in the early 1980s – they were big works. They not only employed the leading writers of the day –
Farrukh Dhondy and Michael Abbensetts – but they were also training the best directors and designers, who are working today in the mainstream... A lot of guys who are now part of the establishment and honoured were taking a lot from black theatre at the time.

Playwright David Edgar acknowledged this viewpoint when he said of the role of Black and Asian theatre in Britain that ‘Taken as a whole... this canon adds up to a considerable intervention in British theatre, and provides a particular and perhaps unique picture of the making of multicultural Britain.’ This creative and innovative exploration of the tensions of inner city life, accessed through a ‘black lens’ can be identified in the currents running through the best playwrights emerging today. Kwei-Armah uses the example of contemporary playwright Ché Walker to make his point:

If today I look at writers like Ché Walker, white writers who are choosing to use what I would call black techniques for their rather cutting edge work – using Hip Hop rhythms and Hip Hop narratives and attitudes as a defining factor in their dialogue exchanges and how they construct narratives. Che is a wonderful example of that, using a black idiom to look at the white working class experience. Diversity is absolutely integral to the voice in his plays.

WHY ARE THERE NO GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS?

At the start of the new millennium the art historian and critic Dr Alicia Foster was asked by the Tate to write a book on women artists. Foster conducted an audit of the Tate collection and found that women made up just fewer than eleven per cent of the artists represented in the Tate (there were 316 women and circa 2600 men) and their work only represented around seven percent of the collection.

Foster was then told that, the Tate’s position on gender equality was that the collection was just a ‘natural’ reflection of art history, and that the situation would change naturally, therefore, as women became important artists in greater numbers, that no specific effort needed to be made... I was also told – and it seemed a complete contradiction – that although the statistics I had found might well be accurate, and that the
criticism of the museum that they instigated might well be merited, it was not in Tate’s interests to make my findings public.

So were there (few or) no ‘great’ women artists in art history? In 1971 Linda Nochlin wrote a path-breaking essay addressing just this question. Was it, as the art establishment seemed to infer, because ‘women are incapable of greatness’?32 Nochlin’s essay was a wide-ranging forensic dismantling of ‘the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying, and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based’.33 The idea that the subordinate position of women in the arts was a natural state of affairs, Nochlin argued, betrayed an intellectual flaw:

In the field of art history, the white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian, may – and does – prove to be inadequate not merely on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist, but on purely intellectual ones.34

Nochlin concluded that:

Using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that of ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought – and true greatness – are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown.35

*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* set in motion a new area of study of art history, complementing developing theories in the arena of black and colonial struggles. These challenges to the status quo have made substantial headway in the intervening years. However in a 2006 interview Nochlin argued that
since I wrote Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?, many things changed, but we should still be focused and work on equality between men and women, and challenge what equality means in various places and various movements.\(^\text{36}\)

The cultural theorist Janet Wolff has argued that in the field of the visual arts there is still a job to do in uncovering women artists in history and analysing their work. But there is also much work to do in challenging the ‘natural’ view of the artistic legacy that is deposited in museums and galleries:

We should also look at questions about gender made more visible and more central by new theories and by our changed circumstances. The answer to male domination of the museums is not to get rid of all early twentieth century Modernist paintings of female nudes – they are wonderful works of art after all. Instead we should try and figure out new and critical display strategies based, for instance, on juxtapositions which would dismantle the concept of a woman as a passive object of the gaze. Raising a challenging question doesn’t have to abolish the pleasure of looking.\(^\text{37}\)

Alicia Foster also argues that the conclusion is not to replace one orthodoxy with another.

Instead what’s required is an active challenge to the narrowness of past ideas of who makes culture and what forms it might take, married to an openness to the best of what’s being made now in its full variety and complexity… In terms of the area I work in, therefore, I don’t argue for a special type of ‘women’s art’, but for support and recognition of the best art, the best culture made by women in the broadest sense.\(^\text{38}\)

**CONCLUSION**

The thrust of this article is that future developments in the arts have to go beyond lip-service to vague commitments to diversity. That is especially important in an era where we face severe cuts to public spending. It would be a gross error for the arts to turn inwards, to ‘preserve’ the status quo. In fact, we would argue that now is the time to be bold, to acknowledge that those who we think of being at the margins are in fact, in many ways, the pioneers running in front of us – showing us a different, richer, more dynamic and relevant future for the arts and wider culture.
The Arts Council wants to gather together a consensus that agrees that the relationship between the arts and diversity and equality needs to find another, more fundamental axis to turn on. The Arts Council certainly does not have all the answers to the questions that a creative approach to diversity and equality throws up, but it does want to create the opportunities for people to ask profound questions, to debate them and provide convincing evidence for their assertions and viewpoints. We hope as a result that the arts community will come to regard diversity and equality as wholly integrated into its everyday thought and practice.

Ten years ago Rasheed Araeen put it to the Arts Council that the presence of artists of African and Asian origin in this country, and their historical achievements,

was a gift to this society’s struggle to come to terms with its postcolonial realities. It was a gift which was meant to enable this society to re-define itself and achieve a new identity… The gift it still there, waiting for this society to recognize and accept.39

If we are wise enough to accept this gift, and all that goes with it, we have a chance to transform the relationship between diversity, equality, creativity and arts innovation, and by so doing set in motion far-reaching changes.

1 Sir Brian McMaster, Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement, Department of Culture, Media and Sport, London, January 2008, p 11
5 Ibid

7 Lakhbir Bhandal, interview with the author, 3 March 2010


9 Ibid, p 22

10 Bhandal, op cit

11 Ibid


13 Mehrdad Seyf, interview with the author, 20 February 2010

14 http://www.disabilityartsonline.org/

15 Colin Hambrook, interview with the author, 10 March 2010


18 From Dorothy Miles, *Bright Memory*, quoted at http://www.dorothymilescc.org/level2.asp?ID=599&Ref=about

19 Historical note: The black theatre sector in London, desiring creative autonomy and permanence, had lobbied for its own flagship theatre for decades, with collective hopes raised and dashed many times over. The sense of frustration was expressed by actor Hugh Quarshie who was quoted as saying, ‘Are we having the agenda set for us by established British Theatre tradition? We measure ourselves by what has gone before. But do I care whether the three sisters get to Moscow?’ In July 2005 the Arts Council withdrew support for Talawa Theatre Company’s nine million pound project
to revamp the Westminster Theatre in central London. A protest meeting was organised and held at the Africa Centre, Covent Garden. In response ACE ring-fenced the remaining capital funds, an inquiry by Baroness Lola Young was commissioned and carried out and a report titled ‘Whose Theatre?’ followed.

20 http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/publications/whosetheatre_phpB7dYie.pdf. One of those consulted for the report said: ‘We do not just need to record our past but revisit it, to show its relevance to our current situation.’


23 Kwame Kwei-Armah, interview with the author, 20 March 2010

24 *Flesh to a Tiger* (1958) starred Cleo Laine and was directed by Tony Richardson, fresh from directing the Royal Court première of *Look back In Anger*.

25 *You in Your Small Corner*, about a mixed-race, cross-class relationship, transferred to the West End and was then adapted for Granada TV as a *Play of the Week*. Talawa Theatre founder Yvonne Brewster recalls ‘he had this incredible play, *You in Your Small Corner*… Barry was doing what no white playwright was achieving at the time’.

26 At the time David Hemming was on the brink of Hollywood stardom.

27 Cited in video interview with Barry Reckord, 22 April 1997, Blackgrounds series, Talawa Theatre/Theatre Museum production, Talawa Archive, ref TTC/7/3/5


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30 Ché Walker, see especially Be_n So Long (a soul/funk musical), Royal Court 1998, Young Vic 2009, and The Frontline, (a play based on the life outside Camden tube station), Shakespeare’s Globe, 2009
31 Dr Alicia Foster, ‘Address to Arts Council 4th Diversity Seminar on Gender Equality’, 14 May 2009
33 Ibid
34 Ibid
38 Dr Alicia Foster, op cit

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