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# **Manifesto Club**

**Artistic Autonomy Hub  
May 2007 Report**

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A large, red, starburst-shaped graphic with a jagged, sunburst-like border. The text is centered within this shape.

# **BOXED IN**

**How Cultural Diversity Policies  
Constrict Black Artists**

# Manifesto Club

## Artistic Autonomy Hub

[www.manifestoclub.com/hubs/artistic-autonomy](http://www.manifestoclub.com/hubs/artistic-autonomy)

We are a network of artists, arts administrators, researchers and students who want to defend artistic autonomy in all its forms. A vibrant artistic culture is founded upon artistic freedom. The only limits for artists should be the limits of the discipline and limits that they choose for themselves.

We criticise and oppose pressure on artists to work towards the targets of politicians. We also oppose restrictions on freedom of expression, which ultimately affect all artists who seek to address the experience of contemporary life. We seek to encourage an experimental artistic culture, which is not afraid to make mistakes in the search for truthful forms of expression.

This hub is coordinated by JJ Charlesworth, an art critic and lecturer.  
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## About the author

Sonya Dyer is a London-based artist and arts consultant. Sonya has over five years experience in arts administration and artists' professional development, through working for Artquest, the advice and information service for London-based visual artists; and as artists' advisor at Turner Contemporary, Margate. Her projects include the recent talks series 'Current Thinking' at Tate Modern. In addition, she has worked on a freelance basis for clients including Arts Council England, the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Enterprise (LCACE), and ACME studios. Sonya is a graduate of Goldsmiths College, London, and was a 2006 artsadmin bursary recipient.

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# Introduction

*'Art is Black – culturally diverse artists on show'*

Headline on Arts Council England leaflet to promote decibel (2004)<sup>1</sup>

The first time I read this headline, I felt sick. There had been plenty of hype in previous weeks among my artist peers about decibel, the Arts Council's new flagship programme for promoting 'diverse' art, and much talk and excitement about who was and who was not going to be included in this promotional leaflet. Many of my non-white artist friends featured in the interviews, but the decibel scheme itself remained an unknown quantity. Working for an arts organisation meant that I was privy to details about decibel that most other artists were not. Its stated aim was to fund a series of events, projects and platforms to showcase the work of 'diverse' artists. From the beginning it seemed rather tokenistic to me, but the absurdity of the leaflet was still a surprise. It reminded me of an advertisement for a circus – 'Roll up! Roll up! Culturally diverse artists on show!'

The leaflet perplexed and enraged me in equal measure. On the one hand, it was great to see so many of my peers being given recognition for their work. Yet, on the other hand, I could not help wondering, why are non-white artists being paraded around like this? Is the general public supposed to be surprised that so-called 'culturally diverse' artists exist? More importantly, what is meant by 'culturally diverse' art or artists? Does art made by someone who happens to be non-white automatically count as 'diverse?' Can't we (non-white people) ever just make *art*?

Today, the art world abounds with funding programmes like decibel. It appears that British African, Caribbean, Asian and Chinese artists have multiple options open to them (and only them) to enhance their career opportunities and get their work seen. Many people would regard this as a positive gain.

However, in the past few years, while working in the arts sector and talking to friends and colleagues, I have come to believe that programmes like decibel are creating more problems than they solve. They are in danger of ghettoising black artists by creating a separate system of funding and

exhibition. These kinds of official diversity policies patronise black and minority artists by treating them as if they are incapable of making it into the artistic 'mainstream'. They also deny the existence of non-white artists, administrators and curators who are successfully making their way in the world without the help of such policies. There is huge talent out there among British artists and curators from non-white backgrounds. Cultural institutions should be working with and engaging these people as individuals, who are judged on their merits, rather than ticking ethnic boxes and funding by target.

What I aim to do with this provocation essay is to question the presumptions about non-white artists, curators and administrators that shape the current diversity landscape, and to suggest alternative ways forward. In particular, I want to challenge the weak arguments promoted by the government, via the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and through its funded clients, Arts Council England (ACE) and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), about the supposed lack of non-white professionals in the arts sector and how best to address this 'problem'.

Many of the ideas developed in this essay have come from talking honestly with friends and colleagues who share similar concerns. I have long wanted to make public these private conversations that have been taking place among both white and non-white artists, with a view to encouraging more open debate in the arts sector. Where possible, I have attributed quotations to named individuals, but inevitably, many people I spoke to (who may rely on public funding or work in the 'diversity' sector) were only willing to speak off the record.

I am not claiming to have all the answers. Nor do I wish to disparage artists or curators who privilege their ethnicity above all else in their art. What I am interested in is how we ('non-white' artists, curators and arts administrators) can achieve greater autonomy than is possible in the current situation. At the very least, we need to question what we are constantly told about ourselves. Let's start a real public debate. We have nothing to lose.

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1 The decibel leaflet can be accessed at [http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/div\\_artisblack.pdf](http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/div_artisblack.pdf)

# The Scope of Diversity Policies

The government has made a serious commitment to promoting ‘diversity’ and encourages its funded bodies to do the same. DCMS proudly states on its website that it ‘holds cultural diversity at the heart of all of our work’,<sup>2</sup> and ACE’s strategy document, ‘Ambitions for the Arts 2003-6’, listed ‘cultural diversity’ as one of its five priorities.

Traineeships, bursaries and pots of funding are regularly made available for non-white artists, curators and administrators to promote their career opportunities. At the same time, substantial pots of money have been earmarked for black and minority ethnic-led arts organisations. In 2002, ACE designated £29 million to black, Asian and Chinese-led organisations from its lottery-funded Arts Capital Programme. ACE has committed 10 percent of its Grant for Arts awards to black and ethnic minority artists and arts organisations.

There is not always agreement on what constitutes a ‘diverse’ artist or arts organisation, although so much of arts policy is based on these terms. ‘BME’ – the acronym most commonly used at present – stands for ‘black and minority ethnic’. ACE specifies that ‘BME’ includes British groups with black, Chinese or Asian ‘ethnic descent’ (‘For Asia, we mean Turkey in the West to Japan in the East’). On the other hand, *diversify*, the MLA scheme, supports individuals from any minority background. Most diversity schemes tend to privilege those with Afro-Caribbean, (South) Asian or Chinese backgrounds, with little reference to individuals from other regions of the world, such as Latin America or the Middle East, for example. (For the purposes of this paper, I shall use the terms ‘non-white’ and ‘black and minority ethnic’ interchangeably to refer to people from African, Asian and Caribbean cultural backgrounds.)

ACE has committed 10 percent of its Grant for Arts awards to ethnic minority artists and organisations, and has also established diversity programmes in the publishing industry (Diversity in Publishing Positive Action awards, launched in 2005) and theatre (Eclipse Report, published in 2002).

## Fig. 1. Diversity schemes – Aims and costs

<i><b>Decibel:</b></i>	<i>Arts Council England, 2003-8</i>
<i><b>Aim:</b></i>	<i>'to support and raise the profile of artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent in England.'</i> <sup>3</sup>
<i><b>Initiatives:</b></i>	<i>Performing arts showcases, sponsorship of decibel Penguin short story competition, sponsorship of events at Cheltenham Literature festival and Edinburgh book festival, financing decibel support staff at Arts Council England.</i>
<i><b>Budget:</b></i>	<i>£5 million in the first year, then £1.3 million per annum thereafter</i>
<i><b>Inspire:</b></i>	<i>Arts Council England, 2005-ongoing</i>
<i><b>Aim:</b></i>	<i>'The Inspire Fellowship Programme is a positive action training scheme aimed at addressing the under-representation of minority ethnic curators in London's museums, galleries and arts organisations.'</i> <sup>4</sup>
<i><b>Initiatives:</b></i>	<i>Finances two-year curatorial fellowships, which have been hosted at institutions including the British Museum, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, Tate and the V&amp;A.</i>
<i><b>Budget:</b></i>	<i>£411,000 per annum</i>
<i><b>Diversify:</b></i>	<i>MLA/Museums Association, 1998-2009</i>
<i><b>Initiatives:</b></i>	<i>Provides bursaries and traineeships for ethnic minorities, which include grants of £6,000 -£19,000 to finance course fees, expenses, and work placements in museums.</i>
<i><b>Budget:</b></i>	<i>£500,000 from MLA; donations in kind from a variety of organisations.</i>

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At present approximately five percent of the workforce in the arts and cultural sector is from non-white backgrounds, compared to around eight percent of the total population.<sup>5</sup> DCMS and ACE are exerting substantial pressure on arts organisations to develop workforce targets for increasing proportions of non-white staff.<sup>6</sup>

Culture minister David Lammy MP has publicly attacked the cultural sector for being ‘too white’;<sup>7</sup> and argued at a Museums Association seminar for museum directors, held at the National Portrait Gallery on 5 December 2006, that the sector needed to set diversity targets. Lammy has held at least two private meetings at DCMS where he stated that he expected organisations to choose these targets themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Inevitably, under such pressure from their main sponsor, many museums and galleries have already begun to put down numbers on paper.

## **Fig. 2. Workforce targets in museums and galleries**

*The National Portrait Gallery has a target for BME staff working in administration and visitor services to grow from 12 percent to 15 percent in five years’ time, and to 30 percent in 10 years time. In specialist staffing, the gallery aims to increase BME staff from two percent to five percent in five years, and to 10 percent in 10 years.*

*The British Museum aims to increase BME staff in administration and visitor staff from 18 percent to 30 percent; and to increase BME specialist staff from five percent to seven percent (these figures correspond to the proportions of ethnic minorities in the London and British population, respectively).*

*The Tate will introduce targets for its workforce over the next year. The board of directors is working with each department to set targets for ethnic diversity, which will be firmed up for the planning round in November 2007, and announced as part of the budget in March 2008. The Tate’s head of National Initiatives says: ‘every year, we will look at milestones, and tighten them up. We will set ourselves hurdles we have to meet.’<sup>9</sup>*

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DCMS and its client museums are also planning to use diversity targets in the appointment of trustees. A report from the Museum Directors’ Cultural Diversity Working Group in March 2006, headed by the director



of the National Portrait Gallery, Sandy Naime, argued that ‘Each national museum should set its own goals for BME staffing - and agree with its sponsoring department [DCMS] the minimum number of BME trustees appropriate for its governing body – and take responsibility for achieving those goals.’<sup>10</sup>

Local museums and galleries are also coming under pressure from their sponsor, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). The MLA has stated that workplace diversity plans will be compulsory in the next funding round (2008) for the 41 local museums and galleries it funds through the ‘Renaissance in the Regions’ programme. In most cases this will include workforce targets. MLA guidance states that ‘workforce diversification plans’ should include ‘core staff, trustees, volunteers, boards, freelancers’, and that museums should be ‘developing their own targets to track progress and development’.<sup>11</sup> Each hub region will also be obliged to offer a *diversify* traineeship.

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2 Cultural diversity, on the DCMS website (last accessed 28.03.06)  
[http://www.culture.gov.uk/what\\_we\\_do/Arts/arts\\_and\\_communities/cultural\\_diversity.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Arts/arts_and_communities/cultural_diversity.htm)

3 Decibel, on the Arts Council website (last accessed 04.04.07)  
[http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project\\_detail.php?sid=3&id=79](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=3&id=79)

4 Inspire, on the Arts Council website (last accessed 04.04.07)  
<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/news/phpt8cH5p.doc>

5 ‘Turning Point’, Arts Council England (last accessed 30.03.07)  
<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/projects/phpx6gf6u.doc>

6 The DCMS report, ‘Understanding the Future’ (October 2006), states: ‘One of the key areas of concern around the current museum workforce is its lack of diversity. In key professional areas (managerial and curatorial) it does not reflect the makeup of the population that it is intended to serve. [Existing positive action] initiatives are very welcome, but more must be done. Creating a more diverse workforce, representative of museums’ users, is a challenge that has to be addressed.’  
<http://www.culture.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/31419198-35C1-4A00-8C12-CB0572EC9B57/0/UnderstandingtheFuture.pdf>

7 ‘Arts minister attacks “too white culture”’, 25 October 2005, on David Lammy MP’s website (last accessed 28.03.07)  
<http://www.davidlammy.co.uk/da/24530>

8 From private conversations with individuals working in arts institutions.

9 Interview with Caroline Collier, 1 March 2006

10 See National Museum Directors’ Conference report on cultural diversity, March 2006  
[http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/images/publications/cultural\\_diversity\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/images/publications/cultural_diversity_final_report.pdf)

11 See the MLA document, ‘Supporting Museum Hubs to Develop a Diverse Workforce’,  
[http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/1/ITTo117\\_10538.doc](http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/1/ITTo117_10538.doc)

# Black Arts: From Radical 1980s to Establishment Present

The origins of the current ‘diversity frenzy’ can be traced back to the radical black arts movements of the 1970s and 80s, in particular the pioneering cultural policies of the Greater London Council (GLC), which set up specific programmes to fund black artists and arts organisations. Some of the landmark moments of this movement include Naseem Khan’s seminal paper ‘The Arts Britain Ignores’ (1976), Rasheed Araeen’s book, *Making Myself Visible* (1984), and exhibition *The Other Story* (1989). ‘The Arts Britain Ignores’ is widely regarded as the first report to pinpoint the lack of support for black artists (or ‘ethnic minority art’, in the language of the time) by the funding mainstream. It is a hugely influential text, which in many ways set the ball rolling for the government’s subsequent diversity initiatives, particularly in advocating separate provision for ‘ethnic minority arts’.<sup>12</sup> By the mid-1990s, ACE had recruited staff specifically to work on diversity issues.<sup>13</sup>

I hold the history of the black arts movement and the GLC in high esteem, although it is an uncomfortable fact that it was usually only black artists who used their art as a political weapon – in tune with the GLC’s anti-racism policies – who received funding. Certainly many of the tenets of the so-called ‘loony left’ era are regarded today as common sense and laudable ideas: that women should have an equal place in the job market; that it is wrong to discriminate on the basis of race or sexuality, and so on.

However, it seems to me that thinking about ethnicity and race has not moved on from those times. Black arts exhibitions in the 1980s were often seen as a temporary response to racism, which many hoped would become defunct as a more equitable climate developed. For instance, when Anish Kapoor was invited to appear in *The Other Story*, a seminal exhibition of art by black British artists, he responded: ‘Being an artist is more than being an Indian artist. I feel supportive to that kind of endeavour... it needs to happen once; I hope it is never necessary again.’ But we are being told that it is. One is left with a sense of déjà vu. Does this suggest that artists

from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds are in no better position than 20 years ago?

What was once a radical fringe movement, created in a particular historical moment to address issues of that time, has now become a permanent fixture in the establishment mainstream. As a consequence, arts funding bodies and organisations seem to be adopting a very different approach to the activism and achievements of artists in the 1980s. Whereas that generation sought to challenge ideas about the mainstream and get recognition for non-white artists, diversity policies today are overly preoccupied with attaching labels and emphasising their difference to the mainstream.

Matthew Krishanu, a young, emerging British artist, notes that there is now little consideration of the history or legacy of the black arts movement:

*'... any discussion on race and power must be combined with specific and historical knowledge, [including] Rasheed Araeen's "The Other Story" (which includes the history of non-white artists in England before the 80s - such as Frank Bowling and FN Souza), and on to more recent international projects like Okwui Enwezor's "The Short Century", and "Documenta XI". Why at so many conferences on race and cultural diversity in the arts are these projects not given more specific and detailed attention (or even a mention)? I would find reference to any of these projects far more useful and concrete than endless discussion of the relative merits of words like "black" or "culturally diverse".'*

Krishanu is right to question this ahistorical approach. I would suggest that constantly presenting artists from black and minority ethnic backgrounds as 'new' and in need of racially specific schemes is a way of preventing these artists from developing their practices, expanding their networks and creating new audiences for their work.

Rasheed Araeen, one of those centrally involved in the 1980s black arts movement and a founder of the journal *Third Text*, criticises current diversity funding policies, and even sees these policies as implying a certain kind of racism.

*'Racism in the visual arts is not only about the failure of black artists in their pursuit for a career – many white artists also fail in this respect – but also about how they are perceived by the system. This perception removes them from the criteria by which an artwork in the modern world should be recognised and evaluated. Instead they are pushed into a separate category, based on an assumption that they are unable to fulfil the requirements of the Modernist mainstream without an underpinning from their own cultures. If we are seriously concerned with racism in the visual arts, we should look for it not only in the failure but the success of black artists. Why are some artists ignored while others are promoted and celebrated? This question must be answered by the institutions that are now spending millions of pounds in support of black artists. What is the basis or criteria for this support?'*<sup>14</sup>

He is concerned that the arts sector's engagement with black artists – whether it results in that individual's success or failure – is predicated on the basis of their racial identity.

Current public policy in the arts is not driven by artists, but by New Labour's political agenda – specifically the idea that the arts must be made to 'represent' and 'improve' society. The problem is that this conflates cultural representation with political equality: it is based on the idea that political or social inequalities can be solved by galleries and museums containing 'representative' proportions of African, Caribbean, Asian and Chinese artists.

This is a deeply flawed strategy, in my opinion. Inequality cannot be solved overnight by workforce targets. It requires society to have a longer-term commitment to equality, and an aspiration that people of whatever background should have the best education and opportunities to pursue the arts. The use of these official schemes to 'promote difference' is not helping black and minority ethnic people enter the mainstream as equals, but instead is keeping them at the margins.

Richard Hylton, the artist and critic, provides an incisive analysis of the contradictions and limitations of the decibel scheme in his recent book *The Nature of the Beast*. It is worth quoting in some detail here:

*'...decibel appeared to be a fitting response to the growing interests of government, for public institutions to address the issue of "inclusion" and, by association, cultural diversity. However, despite this level of financial and structural input and its focus across all art forms, it could be argued that in the visual arts sector alone, decibel has, thus far, failed either to sustain a national profile or to instigate a genuine debate around the issue of cultural diversity. Furthermore, it could be argued that rather than challenging, it has apparently compounded the problems of tokenism and racial separation within the visual arts sector.'*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I am only offering here a synopsis of the historical background of diversity schemes. For a more background and analysis, see Richard Hylton's book, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural diversity and the Visual Arts Sector. A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976–2006*, Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts (2007)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/publications/354.pdf> (last accessed 30.03.07)

<sup>14</sup> 'Culture and Difference' debate on spiked-online  
<http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/000000CA421.htm>

<sup>15</sup> *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural diversity and the Visual Arts Sector*, Richard Hylton, p19

# Ghettoising 'Black' Art

One of the main aims of the black art movement in the 1970s and 80s in Britain was for artists to achieve recognition for their work, beyond issues of race and ethnicity. Resources such as the African Asian Visual Arts Archive, started by Eddie Chambers in 1989, sought to document self-generated activity by black artists, including those whose work was not publicly funded. The movement strived to open up the canon of art considered worthy of support, and subvert what was expected of them.

Today, the institutionalisation of diversity policies means that art is being sidelined, and in many cases black artists are first and foremost regarded as black. This is clearly shown by the unhealthy pressure on artists and curators from non-white backgrounds to privilege their racial background above all else in relation to their practice. Black artists and curators are often expected to produce projects that are geared towards attracting a black and minority ethnic audience. One young British Asian curator I spoke to about this said that he had never felt 'othered' until he began working in public galleries. It goes without saying that white artists and curators do not generally feel the same kind of pressure to appeal specifically to white audiences.

aladin is an artist and strategy consultant, former co-chair of the Mayor of London's Cultural Strategy Group (2000–2004), as well as a consultant on the decibel scheme (2002), carrying out leadership training for the regional heads of department for ACE. He says that the political objectives for beginning diversity projects included redress for perceived imbalances, such as giving 'non-whites a larger slice of the cake'. He recognises that initiatives such as the Mayoral strategy group arose from a deep sense that 'public policy wasn't proportionate. [It was] politically loaded, weighted towards establishment culture'.

At the same time, he is also clear that cultural policy that focuses on ethnicity can cause problems - not least as it arises 'from political imperatives, not artistic ones'. While aladin feels strongly about the injustices of the past and the way in which non-white work was once ignored, he also

sees that a homogenous, centralised approach can be too rigid.

*'People feel they have to fit an agenda. Artists and organisations often had great ideas that were not related to diversity, but wondered whether it was a priority for the funder... We are complex people. Complexity needs to be built into the system as well.'*

Diversity-based funding has become an almost anthropological exercise. Practitioners must 'demonstrate' their ethnicity in very particular ways and be seen to 'perform' it. I would not insist that black and ethnic minority artists should neglect their cultural backgrounds in their work - I believe that black artists, like everyone else, should feel free to make work about whatever subject they choose. However, the 'burden of representation' placed by external forces upon black and minority ethnic artists and curators, means that they are often coerced into accepting responsibility for bringing 'diverse' audiences into galleries (as if 'BME' audiences can only appreciate 'BME' work). This is shown by the way in which black artists' work often tends to be associated with 'community outreach' or educational programmes. By categorising black artists in this way, our diversity as individual practitioners is diminished.

The notion that 'black' artists and curators are a separate category - and that this 'separateness' is a permanent state - is deeply entrenched in arts organisations. I once attended a meeting with the newly appointed director of a major arts organisation. When discussing possible future plans, the director mooted a number of bursaries for artists at different stages in the career, 'You know, emerging artists, mid-career artists, black artists...'.

So, unlike emerging artists (who will one day become 'mid-career' artists), black artists are stuck, and need a special fund to help them through, and always will do. Black artists cannot be mid-career or emerging, cannot be determined by the stage they are at in their lives, their level of experience, the quality of their work, but always by their ethnicity. White artists do not have to contend with this. (There is an equally lazy equation of 'blackness' with 'disability'. In discussions and internal documents I have seen the phrase 'for black and Disabled artists'

a number of times, as if blackness were a disability in itself.)

My objection to this director's patronising and questionable approach was the first she had ever heard. It is no coincidence that the organisation's only non-white member of staff at the time was the African accountant. More often than not, it is those who have no or little contact with non-white practitioners who are most likely to display these kinds of attitudes. Their only encounters with black and ethnic minority artists is through the prism of diversity policies via pressure from funders. To her credit, the director seemed to take my comments on board and the organisation in question has not (yet) run the proposed schemes.

It is worth mentioning that the emphasis on 'diversity' does not only affect non-white artists. Many white artists I advise are convinced that they need to include some 'diverse' element to their funding applications in order to increase their likelihood of success. Perhaps there is some truth to this, perhaps not, but I would argue it is to the detriment of their work. Of course, there are many artists with specialist skills who do great work in the field of arts education and outreach - but these sit alongside many a hastily arranged education project with 'hard to reach' youngsters, which is put together solely to keep funders happy.



# Patronising Black Artists

Without a doubt, racism exists in the world, in this country and in the art sector too. However, there is something suspect about the presumption that non-white artists are inherently needy and require specially branded help. Having worked for over five years in artists' professional development, and for eight years as an artist, my experience tells me that there is no difference between the needs and desires of artists based on their ethnic backgrounds. Most artists, at some point, require specific training, networking skills, and information about funding. There is no reason to assume that black and ethnic minority artists require greater facilitation than white artists. (Refugee and recent immigrant artists, however, often face very specific difficulties related to language barriers and their knowledge of the UK art world.)

Yet, because black artists are regarded as inherently disadvantaged, there is reluctance on the part of some white arts administrators to treat applications from black and minority ethnic artists with the same rigour as applications from white artists. This mistaken paternalism has a negative effect on black and minority ethnic artists and helps to maintain the idea that they are incapable.

As an example of this, I was on a panel last year for a small-scale financial award for art groups, with quite clearly laid out application guidelines. As ever, most of the applications were of a similarly low standard, while a smaller number of applications stood out as good or exceptional. One of the applications was from a black-led group, which not only failed to meet the eligibility criteria, but was also one of the many poor applications. In a panel of four, I was the only person not to shortlist this group for the award. The others (all white, middle class, liberal) did. When asked to justify short-listing such an application, none of my fellow jurors could do so convincingly. The ensuing conversation revealed one of my main causes of concern – they had applied lesser criteria to the application, in order to be seen to 'include' black and minority ethnic groups. (Ironically, I suspect they probably felt that they ought to short-list the group because there was a black presence on the panel. They seemed perplexed when I told them I

thought the application was unconvincing.)

In the end, this particular group was not successful. Unfortunately, they responded badly to this and accused the panel of being racist via an email to the project coordinator. (They were not aware that I was on the panel and that I am a woman of Caribbean origin.) An apologetic email was sent by the well-meaning project coordinator in return, apologising for the negative result and offering more ‘help’ in the future. At no point was this group told that they were ineligible, that their application was weak, that if they wanted to gain funding in the future they needed to work on developing more effective application writing skills and only apply for opportunities for which they were eligible. At no point was real, constructive criticism or feedback offered. An opportunity for this fledgling organisation to actually grow was missed, due to the crippling effect of the collective white guilt of the other panel members.

Rasheed Araeen notes how the patronising attitude of white administrators towards black artists ends up reinforcing racial difference, which can only fuel a sense of victimisation:

*‘The situation today is so disturbing that every failed black artist (by which I mean an artist of Asian or African origin), irrespective of whatever he or she produces and its quality, sees his or her failure as a result of racism. The problem here is that racism in the visual arts is camouflaged, so that both its perpetrators and its “victims” are unaware of its existence. It is perceived as a benevolent or altruistic act, which is supposed to empower those who were once denied power.... it does bestow some with power, but on a highly selective and discriminatory basis.’<sup>16</sup>*

Of course, most artists feel hard-done-by and out of the funding loop. As Rasheed Araeen indicates, it can be tempting for non-white artists to believe racism is to blame when their work is rejected. This type of apologetic response from the arts world doesn’t do them any justice, or help them develop their practice.

The underestimation of black and minority ethnic artists means that certain programmes aiming to ‘coach’ or ‘support’ non-white artists and

arts administrators are highly patronising or aimed at such a basic level as to be virtually useless. Early on in my own arts administration career, I left one such programme, 'Stepping Up', after being appalled by the patronising advice on offer. Run by the Arts Marketing Association, Stepping Up's stated aim was to develop 'BME' arts administrators through a series of mentoring sessions (with other black and minority ethnic arts administrators) and activities. Although well meaning, it was difficult to see how the programme was supposed to help budding arts managers, or how it would lead to increased job prospects. There was also no strategy for networking or introductions to the arts 'mainstream' – potential employers.

Understandably, many artists react against inconsistent and patronising treatment. Among visual artists that I know, there can sometimes be a feeling of suspicion that they are being used by organisations because of their cultural background, as opposed to the quality of their work. I disagree with Richard Hylton's assertion that black artists have 'little problem with being categorised as "culturally diverse"'.<sup>17</sup> In my experience many artists are uncomfortable with this, even some decibel awardees. But they are also pragmatic and in need of financial support, like everyone else. Some artists, such as myself, choose not to engage with 'diversity' at all – inevitably missing out on many potential sources of funding, exhibition, etc. One well-known British artist from a Caribbean background once commented to me that almost every year, at some point during the spring, he received calls from curators offering him an opportunity to exhibit in October, which is Black History Month. This is an artist with an international reputation and work in major national collections. Would an equivalent white artist be treated so poorly?

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<sup>16</sup> 'Culture and Difference' debate on spiked-online  
<http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/000000CA421.htm>

<sup>17</sup> The Nature of the Beast: Cultural diversity and the Visual Arts Sector, Richard Hylton, p131

# Creating Dependency and Ticking the Box

One of the main negative consequences of the ‘diversity’ culture is the sense of dependency it potentially encourages in many non-white artists, who feel they can only succeed through diversity schemes. During my time working in the field of professional artist development, I have seen the emergence of a hardcore of black practitioners who only ever apply to ‘diverse or ‘ethnically’ specific projects.

On one level, this is hardly surprising: one has to be pragmatic. For a number of arts practitioners, if the only way to get their careers off the ground or raise funds for a project is to perform the act of being ‘diverse’, then so be it. Sherman Mern Tat Sam, a current Inspire curatorial fellow, told me that because he did not have a curatorial degree from one of the ‘top two’ art schools, he was disadvantaged in the competitive world of institutional curating. ‘If ACE create an opportunity for me, I’m going to use it.’ I asked Sherman whether he thought racism was a huge factor in black and minority ethnic people supposedly being ‘under-represented’ in the arts – I come across white curators with the same problem all the time. He thought, on reflection, probably not. This pragmatic approach is common among Inspire fellows I have spoken to.

But perhaps more worryingly, many black and minority ethnic artists choose only to apply to diversity schemes out of fear. They believe they are so out of the loop of the ‘system’ that the only ‘friendly’ schemes will be those based around race. In my experience, this is not true. In fact, it is the current framework of diversity policies that really discourages non-white artists from having confidence in themselves as artists. These schemes give the impression that non-diverse schemes and funds are not for them. Because artists are encouraged to believe that ‘diversity’ funding is the only show in town, and that one’s blackness is the cause of multiple rejections (something the vast majority of artists from all backgrounds experience), we have ended up with a segregated art practice. Diversity schemes help maintain a self-imposed exclusion.

Diversity schemes like decibel and Inspire create a culture of dependency among many black and minority ethnic artists who feel there is no alternative available. This thinking also permeates the wider world of arts administration. Diversity programmes ensure gainful employment for many experienced African, Caribbean and Asian origin arts professionals in arts management and administration. Many of the older generation of arts administrators I know feel that diversity-related jobs are perhaps the only chance they will get at a senior management position: becoming what Rasheed Araeen calls 'black functionaries'. One can, therefore, understand the proliferation of 'diversity' jobs through this lens.

But what do these posts actually achieve? My concern is that black and minority ethnic arts administrators too often only apply for these jobs, and are therefore kept firmly in their place. It is unusual for me to meet a non-white person working in arts administration whose job does not involve diversity, outreach, community, or similar. Black arts managers are often regarded as being there to represent their ethnicity, making organisations look good, 'bringing in' the 'community', and bumping up the 'brown quota'. In practical terms, many black and minority ethnic artists are also cut off from the mainstream because their reliance on diversity schemes connects them almost exclusively with other non-white practitioners, instead of the wider network of powerbrokers in the mainstream art world.

Most of these positive action posts are not 'mainstream' but reside in the 'diversity' departments. This means that individuals are marginalised in their organisations and lack any real 'cheque book power'. While they are represented in the statistics, people have little chance of shaping the direction of an organisation and encouraging others to come forward.

No doubt diversity scheme advocates would say that they want to use positive action programmes to bring talented non-white artists into the mainstream sector where most of the real opportunities lie. But I am not convinced that these schemes are genuinely about finding and nurturing talent among non-whites and discovering the barriers to access. For example, ACE has barely analysed the kinds of people who are applying to its own diversity schemes. One ACE officer told me that around 100

people had applied for the last two rounds of the Inspire curatorial programme, but they had not bothered to analyse how many of these had applied more than once, what proportion of them had an art history or curatorial educational background (as most young institutional curators do now), how many of these applicants had curated before, and the kinds of institutions they had worked with. In short, they did not try to work out what proportion of their applicants were actually institutional curator material.

Why not? This is a potential rich source of information on the state of curators from non-white backgrounds that could shed some light on the supposed lack of black and minority ethnic curators. Furthermore, not all the Inspire fellows are based in the curatorial departments of their host galleries – if the aim is to change the face of curators, why is this? Perhaps the reason is that schemes like Inspire have become self-justifying machines, and are more interested in boosting numbers rather than understanding the people they are supposedly trying to help.

One person I interviewed, who was involved in managing the Inspire scheme, felt that it had become an end in itself, and it would be hard to see a point at which such policies would be deemed unnecessary:

*‘How long are these positive action projects going to continue for? How will we demonstrate that “equality” has been reached? What will happen to organisations that have been deemed not to have absorbed enough of the “diversity” mentality? Is there life after positive action?’*

These diversity programmes are often more about institutions ticking the diversity box, than about engaging seriously with artists from a range of backgrounds. Programmes have often been badly organised and thought through. In ‘Not by Design’<sup>18</sup> - a self-initiated evaluation of the Arts Council England South East Fellowship Programme (2004–2006) – the authors, Rajni Shah, Saj Fareed, and Tracey Low state:

*‘We never felt that we knew exactly what the funders hoped to achieve from it. This lack of clarity felt debilitating for both funders and fellows.’*

In addition to this lack of clarity, the report also highlights other issues, most notably, 'lack of support' for participants. This was also a common complaint of many decibel and Inspire fellows I spoke to. Many felt that the host organisations were often unprepared for the training aspects of the placements, and said that some staff members even displayed outright hostility towards them. Many of the schemes are short term, with no real legacy for the institution or the individual artist or curator. Niru Ratnam, director of Store Gallery and former Inspire coordinator at Arts Council England, noted the tokenism of some placements:

*'the (trainee) curators tended to be given "culturally diverse" projects to work on at their institutions... I did get the feeling that this is all very DCMS/David Lammy driven rather than being any deep-seated intellectual commitment'.*

No doubt, many arts organisations are less concerned about using their 'diversity fellows' to put on challenging work than they are about pre-empting censure from their funders, such as ACE. As long as organisations are seen to be 'doing something' (by asking practitioners to literally demonstrate their ethnicity) they escape punishment and can feel they are 'doing their bit' to help equality.

Because diversity schemes are not really about promoting talent, but instead about ticking boxes, many artists and curators feel ambivalent about them and regard such schemes as potential traps. While talking to Inspire fellows, I discovered that many were concerned that their participation in the scheme might be a stigma, affecting their prospects for future employment in a mainstream role in a mainstream organisation. Even before accepting their place on Inspire, they were thinking 'How can I overcome what this says about me?', or 'Does it suggest that I am especially needy and that the only way I can work with this gallery or museum is as a result of a special measure?'. These 'opportunities', further down the line, can turn into a problem to be overcome. Sherman Mern Tat Sam admitted that he would not mention the Inspire part of his fellowship when meeting new business associates as 'it takes too long to explain'.

Diversity schemes have a reputation within the arts 'mainstream' for poor quality, and many practitioners are reluctant to apply to them. Those who

do often have to negotiate the (unfair) perception that they are ‘second rate’. This stigma is something that even those working in the ‘culturally diverse’ sector now recognise. I know of one artist who requested feedback on an unsuccessful application to one of the major ‘diversity’ schemes and was informed that there were already too many ‘diversity’ funds and exhibitions on her CV for her to be short-listed – they were keen to distance themselves from artists who were overly reliant on the ‘diversity’ sector. For larger, more prestigious diversity awards such as those offered through the decibel scheme, the recipients are usually high-profile artists who have already received critical acclaim and have strong exhibition records with commercial galleries. But what good are smaller scale ‘diversity’ schemes, if being involved with them prohibits one from being considered for more prestigious ‘diversity’ awards? The contradiction is that for ‘diverse artists’ to get serious, critical recognition in the future, they have to be wary of lower level diversity schemes that promise them easy recognition in the present. One can see how the inclusion of prestigious names on the selection panel for the last round of the decibel scheme was an attempt to distance itself from this stigma. As Richard Hylton suggests, this ‘indicates a desire for endorsement from the upper echelons of the art world’.<sup>19</sup>

Another consideration is the importance of networks in developing a career in the visual arts, or an artistic practice. Artists need a variety of networks – this is more possible now for black and minority ethnic artists than ever. Multi-generational, multi-racial networks are the norm among many of my peers. What is important is developing the ability to be strategic and learning the art of simply getting things done – skills that can be learnt.

Which is why many clued up black and minority ethnic artists and arts administrators are rejecting the diversity system and going for jobs in the mainstream sector, or pursuing an exhibition record involving non-‘BME’ specific routes. There seems to be a generational shift, as younger black Britons’ career choices reflect their own relationships with their Britishness and expectations of what they can achieve. We are now seeing a growing social confidence among many black and minority ethnic Britons, which is reflected in many positive ways in society. This might not seem as newsworthy as reports about educational under-achievement or forced marriages, but it is just as real a phenomenon, reflected in my peers in the



arts (and elsewhere). More of us are applying to mainstream jobs and there are an increasing number of black and minority ethnic people getting mid-level posts in major organisations, or curating in public and commercial galleries with successful freelance careers.

When one of my interviewees, who had worked on Inspire, complained that there had been a lack of high quality applicants for the scheme, my response was, 'Of course! What do you expect?'. Real progress for black and minority ethnic curators is going to come from curators getting jobs outside of diversity schemes. Diversity-based jobs limit one's future employment options: it is hard to move on from diversity/access departments into other areas in the arts. This 'diversity trap' is well known among my peers.

We should be encouraging more black and minority ethnic applicants to go for jobs that are not predicated on race, and applicants should be persistent and determined about what they want to achieve and where they want to go. Of course, many people will actively choose to work in the fields of education, access or diversity, but this should be a personal choice made because it is what people want to do, rather than because they think there is nothing else available.

Zoe Whitley, curator of contemporary projects at the V&A, is a young, confident woman from a middle-class African American background, who graduated from the Royal College of Art and has worked for the V&A in different capacities for four years. She notes that there are several black curators in the mainstream museum sector, one of whom, for example, is a specialist in Medieval Italian Art (fluent in Latin, Greek and Italian – 'A posh boy from Gloucester would have the same qualifications as her'), while another is the British Museum's curator of Medieval German artefacts. Yet these examples of success are not generally those heralded by the diversity sector. Whitley says: 'Invisibility is placed upon you. There are [black] people but nobody knows about them because they are in the mainstream.' Of course, in many ways, this is a good thing. Non-white individuals should be going for mainstream posts and getting on with doing good jobs, without constant reference to their ethnicity. The problem is that the Arts Council and DCMS behave as if such people did not exist.

At this point, it's worth noting the genuinely good work that has been undertaken by many organisations to ensure that their recruitment policies are fair, open and will attract talented people from as wide a pool as possible. No doubt, some of this is due to encouragement from public bodies such as DCMS and ACE. The problem is the heavy-handed, tick-box approach that central government imposes and its effect on how arts organisations are able to relate to artists. From my experience, most people working in the arts sector, including those working as visual arts officers at ACE, are passionate and engaged with the sector.

Of course, one could argue that positive action has long existed in the arts, and that it favours white, middle-class women. I am not suggesting that we should let institutions 'off the hook' and not challenge inequalities. What I am saying is that diversity schemes ignore the real issues behind why the visual arts may not be an attractive option to many people, and then proceeds to separate those black and minority ethnic people who do wish to work in the sector from the 'mainstream'.

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18 'Not by Design: An Evaluation of the Arts Council England South East Fellowship Programme 2004–2006', Rajni Shah, Saj Fareed and Tracey Low. <http://www.rajnishah.com/notbydesign.pdf>

19 *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural diversity and the Visual Arts Sector*, Richard Hylton, p132

# Is Money, Not Race, the Real Issue?

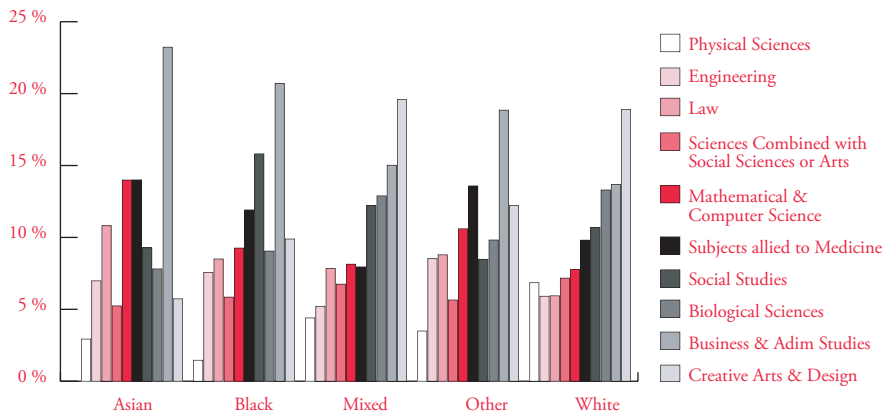
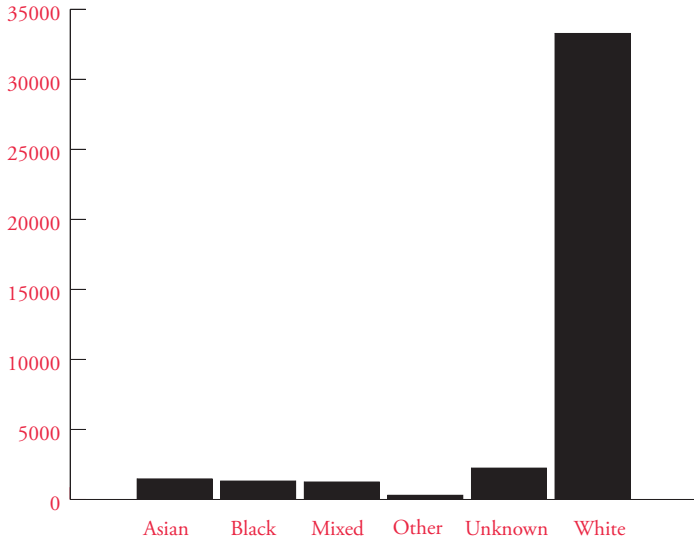
Diversity initiatives ignore the fundamental generational shift in attitudes among second- and third-generation Afro-Caribbean, Asian and Chinese Britons. They presume that we are especially needy because of race, yet factors such as financial background are probably far more important today in preventing access to the arts sector. The assumption that people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds share the same experiences (for example, of economic deprivation) is erroneous. These schemes are based on the lazy presumption that all or most black and minority ethnic people in the arts are inherently disenfranchised. Curator Nav Haq has previously referenced the presumption that Pakistani artists are poor, noting that, in fact, most Pakistani artists showing in the West are most likely to be from the most privileged sections of society.<sup>20</sup>

By focusing only on non-white ‘proportionality’ (i.e. increasing the proportion of black and minority ethnic workers in the arts sector in proportion to their size in the total population), positive action and diversity schemes obscure the complex cultural and social reasons which lead to fewer black and minority ethnic people studying fine art and entering the arts sector.

First of all, it is clear from the UCAS statistics for 2006 that the vast majority of students entering ‘creative arts and design’ (the category under which subjects such as fine art fall) are white (83 percent).

Of all the groups identified by UCAS, black people, Asians and those marked ‘Other’ are least likely to study creative arts and design. The statistics show that business studies and medicine are far more popular among black and Asian students than for their white or ‘Other’ counterparts. Social studies subjects are more popular with black applicants than for any other. Mathematical and computer science are most popular with the Asian group.

# UCAS Entry for creative arts and design courses, 2006



Why don't more Afro-Caribbean, Asian or Chinese people go to art school?

The reason is perhaps because the black and minority ethnic population is disproportionately working class.<sup>21</sup> Choosing fine art is choosing to be poor - unless your family can subsidise you, or if you are prepared to live an unconventional and financially unstable life. In my experience, and the experience of my peers, choosing to be poor is not regarded as a smart move, particularly if one incurs student debt along the way.

### **Fig. 3. Choosing to be poor**

*Around 60 percent earn less than the national median for all employees (£18,000 a year).*

*Only 2.8 percent of the workforce earns more than £40,000 a year.*

*75 percent of the arts workforce has no pension provision attached to their current post.*

*The lifetime earnings premium for medicine and dentistry qualifications is £340,000, compared with £51,549 for the humanities and £34,949 for the arts.<sup>22</sup>*

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It's not unusual to see a full-time job in the visual arts advertised at £17,000 or thereabouts. These are jobs for people who have undertaken three years of study to achieve a BA, and often an MA as well. Arguably, the question of future income (and family expectations) leads many creative people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (as for working class people in general) to study subjects that might actually lead to gainful employment (web design, graphics, fashion), as opposed to the financially impoverished world of fine art.

Fundamentally, it is easier for people from financially privileged backgrounds to survive and thrive in the arts sector because they can afford to. The average working-class person (black or white) cannot

afford to intern, support a flat and a studio simultaneously or survive the ridiculously low-wage jobs in the arts pay. The way the arts are run at the moment presumes a level of financial independence that most people from working-class backgrounds simply do not possess.

Why doesn't the DCMS or ACE recognise these considerations? Perhaps because doing so may force the sector to confront the elephant in the room – the low wage structure for arts administrators, curators and others working in the arts. As long as people working in the arts are expected to work for less than other people with the same level of education (even in other sectors in the 'creative industries') it will remain the domain of people from economically privileged backgrounds.

Of course, money is not the only consideration. Knowing the 'right' people and getting into the 'right' networks is crucial. This is a barrier that affects all people from poorer backgrounds who may not have the means to generate the same connections as those from more well-off backgrounds (e.g. through internships). As Matthew Krishanu states:

*'Again and again I have been in conferences where the discussions have revolved around the labels - BME, culturally diverse, multi-cultural, trans-cultural etc. Very rarely do I hear talk of how power and privilege is embedded in the art world. How much of the art world is a world of "insiders"? What "type" of non-White person can become an insider in the art world?'*

I would argue that the relentless emphasis on race is an excuse to negate the influence of class in the arts. Successful applicants to diversity schemes do not tend to buck this trend. There are exceptions or course, but they remain rare.

In which case, why just have schemes for black and minority ethnic people? Why not for everyone who needs it? There are plenty of white people who cannot afford to go to art school, so why not fund bursaries for students who don't have rich parents to support them? That way, young people, of whatever background, could be encouraged to apply to the elite art schools and stand a better chance of succeeding in the workplace.

Similarly, why not have fellowships for those talented individuals who did not graduate from the prestigious Royal College of Art or Goldsmiths curatorial programmes yet would like a career as institutional curators? These schemes need not be racially based, but open to all. We need to have multiple strategies that make it possible for people from any background to feel as if they can have a future in the arts. And to make black and minority ethnic practitioners feel that they are being chosen for their skills, not because of their racial backgrounds.

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20 'Pashmina Power: Class structure in international arts funding', Nav Haq, *Bidoun*, Issue 6, Winter 2006

21 Of course, the terms 'working' and 'middle' class are problematic in modern Britain (one can come from a 'working class' background yet lead a 'middle class' life), and there are many ways to categorise sections of the population than by economic privilege. While acknowledging this, I hope the reasons for the broad-brush approach to class/economics in this instance are clear.

22 'The economic benefits of a degree', Universities UK (2007) (last accessed 30.03.07) <http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/research-gradprem.pdf>

# The Way Forward: Recognising Talent

There are now a growing number of black and minority ethnic arts administrators, curators, and artists working in posts that are not predicated on their ethnicity, in both the public and private sectors. This is encouraging. There needs to be more, but this will only happen when more of us apply for posts.

Artist and arts educator Sara Haq has spent many years running education projects with institutions such as Tate Britain and the British Library, and she is convinced that institutions are more open to suggestions and different attitudes than many artists realise.

*'Artists should take responsibility for themselves and for issues with organisations as they arise, and only then will things improve. Open and direct dialogue with institutions is key.'*

She is also hopeful that more institutions know 'they are getting things wrong' in the way they treat black and minority ethnic artists and staff. We need to let those in charge know when we find their approach patronising, clumsy or unnecessary.

aladin believes that 'Quality should be the validation. Just because they say it's worth funding, it doesn't mean it's good. I want to see the best culture made by everybody'.

Artists, curators and arts administrators who feel uncomfortable with 'cultural diversity' initiatives need to make their voices heard and resist being pigeon-holed. We can acknowledge and appreciate the work undertaken by people in the past, but the reality is that there is more than one option available to people of my generation today. Let's stop complaining about this in private and get active.



Here are my suggestions for ways forward:

- 1 Convert funds for diversity projects into funds made available for all talented people from low-income backgrounds. This can be used to increase work experience and opportunities for those who could really benefit from it.
- 2 Concentrate on breaking down the barriers for all people who feel unsure about applying to the 'top tier' art schools. It is a great advantage to have had an education at Goldsmith's and the Royal College of Art – we should make it as accessible as possible. This is not just about cost, but also ideas of 'cultural entitlement' – feeling that one will not fit in, and so on. Make no mistake, my experience of Goldsmiths was not easy, but I know that it has opened many doors for me.
- 3 Improve opportunities for mentoring between the generations and continue to support young artists' professional development across the board.
- 4 Administrators need to understand that specifying the racial background of artists eligible for opportunities will only diminish the number of talented, critically engaged artists who might apply for it.
- 5 Organisations should utilise the word-of-mouth power of networks of African/Caribbean/Asian practitioners to encourage black and minority ethnic people to attend art school and apply for mainstream jobs.
- 6 Government agencies need a more realistic and positive assessment of the experiences of black and minority ethnic artists, curators and administrators entering the mainstream. Many are showing with commercial galleries, undertaking major commissions, and participating in major group and solo shows, working with major institutions, running artist-led projects. Don't act as if we don't exist!
- 7 We need a greater understanding that practitioners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are as 'diverse' as any other sections of the population. Pigeonholing them may make life easier for tick-box purposes, but ultimately it does not benefit individual practitioners or the sector as a whole.