



Hassan Mahamdallie. Photo: Nick Gurney/Arts Council England

What is the creative case for diversity?

Hassan Mahamdallie, Senior Officer, Diversity, Arts Council England, argues for bringing the debates about the arts and diversity together

Introduction

In September Arts Council England launched a new conversation around the relationship between the arts and diversity and equality in the arts at a 500 plus conference in Manchester.

The conference heard from speakers from across the arts including Alistair Spalding from Sadler's Wells, Maria Oshodi from Extant, Deborah Shaw from the RSC and Skinder Hundal from the New Arts Exchange gallery.

Of course there were many questions directed at Arts Council England and other institutions as to their ongoing commitment around equality, but there was also a level of enthusiasm generated by what we are calling "the creative case for diversity in the arts".

As one delegate put it, "I really believe there is a value in making a creative case for diverse arts at this time when there's financial constraints and everything is looking a bit bleak, it's not the time to turn away from engaging in these kinds of arguments".

The creative case for diversity is an attempt to re-unite two conversations that have been in danger of becoming separated. Instead of having a conversation about diversity on one side of the room and a conversation about how we make profound, or great, or excellent art, on the other side of the room, let's have one conversation about art and how we make it with the true value of diversity and equality at the heart of it. It is an attempt to get away from a 'deficit' model of seeing progress around diversity and equality as being a burden on the arts, or a worthy pursuit, towards a recognition of the intrinsic value of diversity in the artistic. Or as a South Asian dancer expressed it to me recently – "difference should be seen as a point of dynamism, not a point of tension".

The Creative Case is based upon the simple observation that diversity, in the widest sense, is an integral part of the artistic process. It is an important element in the dynamic that drives art forward, that innovates it and brings it closer to an authentic dialogue with contemporary society.

This was recognised by Sir Brian McMaster in his 2008 report for the Department of Culture on excellence in the arts:

"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".

McMaster makes two obvious points – that it is to the benefit of everyone involved in the arts – creators and participants and audiences – to put "diversity at the heart of everything cultural". He is also right in pointing out that we are not there yet. We have a journey to go on.

Starting points: The Harlem Renaissance

I started the search for what a creative case for diversity might be by looking at the art of the Harlem Renaissance – to try and grasp how was it that an oppressed and ignored community found themselves in the vanguard of American art – the authentic expression for all people about what it meant to be an American at the start of the 20th century – not a black American or a white American – an American.

How was it that, in the words of the contemporary intellectual William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, that the black American "lay aside the status of a beneficiary and ward, for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilisation". How did it come to be that black Americans were transformed through their cultural contribution into "a people, rather than a problem"? I draw an example from the arena of race and class, but clearly there are parallel narratives in the arena of disability and art, women and art, sexual orientation and art, and so on.

How can we make the Creative Case for diversity a reality?

The Arts Council believes that the Creative Case approach demands three interlocking progressions:

- Equality
- Recognition
- A new vision

1. Equality

Diversity is not the problem. Diversity exists. It does not have to be created – it is all around us. But it only has meaning and value, and becomes an active force, when it is linked to

the drive for greater equality.

The issue we face is that within a diverse society and diverse arts community, within its history, its practice and critical debate, some are seen as 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.

Unfortunately this inequality is widening. New Deal of the Mind's recent report Creative Survival in Hard Times found that "employment in the creative industries is becoming a prerogative of the privileged, and that entry into the profession is largely confined to those who can afford unpaid internships or who have access to those in a position to get them into work." The student pressure body The Arts Group, have found that 80% of jobs in the creative industries are still secured through closed networks. That is why the Arts Council and Creative & Cultural Skills have published guidelines on internships in the arts that recommend a fair recruitment process, 'meaningful' work experience and paying interns at least the national minimum wage.

2. Recognition

We can all be enlightened by new ways of telling the story of the development of contemporary art in Britain. For example, post-World War II immigration has forever changed the essence of British life – so why do we still largely struggle to properly articulate that phenomenon 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. 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. We have to question why so many influential artists remain largely invisible in the history of the arts and absent from contemporary debates.

As dramatist Kwame Kwei-Armah told me: "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."

3. A new vision

We need to develop a total approach to the arts that allows us to reassess artists whom we consider to display excellence, and uncover aspects of their lives that the establishment template cannot hold – for example the role of disability in art.

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 had impairments. However, it is of value to understand how their impairments may have entered the artistic processes. The Turner Prize-nominee Yinka Shonibare has explained how the nature of his impairment interacted with his artistic development. 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 that made it both physically manageable and emphasises the political critique."

There is a 20th century encounter that particularly intrigues me – the artistic relationship between the seminal Ballet choreographer George Balanchine and an African American dancer – Arthur Mitchell.

Before Russian exile Balanchine accepted the job running the New York City Ballet in 1933 he asked for a troupe of 16 dancers – eight black and eight white. (The segregationist-era Americans turned him down). Balanchine was inspired by the black dance styles of this era and he worked or learned from African American dancers, thus introducing these movements into his choreography. This synthesis for him was not a problem, or a hindrance, it was a necessary part of the development of modern Ballet.

Despite some opposition, Balanchine hired the talented African-American dancer Arthur Mitchell, who scandalised America performing a duet with a white female dancer. Mitchell went on in the 1960s to found The Dance Theatre of Harlem and inspire a new generation of dancers.

Now ponder on this: dance researcher Sandie Bourne tells me even though Balanchine is still regarded as the founder of modern Ballet, that there are today less than a handful of black ballet dancers employed in the big four mainstream UK Ballet. Where is Balanchine's total vision represented today?

Think how many different ways we could expand our possibilities for the art and culture of today and tomorrow if we could truly value and harness and release that kind of transformative potential that exists unrealised in our society today? We could then talk seriously about the 'authentic' and the 'profound' and 'truthfulness' in human creative expression.

The Arts Council don't want to have a monopoly on this debate – we need 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.

Let us banish forever the wrong notion that diversity in the arts is a problem. In fact it is a map to all our futures.

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