

juice

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Daghda Mentoring Programme

Focus: Exploiting Ethnicity?

essexdance: PRO:fessional technology

labs

oh!art Autumn season



for artist development

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

What is it? Why should I care? Who does it affect? Does it actually promote or repress true diversity? Who qualifies? Is there a winner? Is it exclusive? Why bother? Does it promote racism? Who thought of it? What difference does it make? Is it all about funding? Does it exclude white people? Why should I be classified by the colour of my skin?

positive discrimination

discrimination in favour of those who were formerly discriminated against, esp. in the provision of social and educational facilities and employment opportunities.
(Chambers English Dictionary)

Love it

or **hate** it, you have probably noticed the words **cultural, diversity** and **awareness** creeping unannounced into your life and taking centre stage in your dealings with funding bodies, trips to the theatre, job applications etc. It might feel like your **ethnic origins** are becoming more important than your experience as an artist, your training or your talent. But what is it, and who is it for? Who is becoming more aware? And most importantly, is it a good thing for dance and the arts?

Most people agree that it is wrong to discriminate against someone because of his or her ethnic background. On the other hand, **positive discrimination** brings immediate, visible results to those organizations that are taking steps to become more inclusive. But what does it bring to the artists involved? Do "African, Asian and Caribbean" showcases provide a platform of diversity, or are they exclusive displays of **exoticism**? Do they prioritise looking good, looking inclusive, over actually dealing with the real problems behind a culture of exclusivity? Or are platforms like this providing a platform for under-represented groups, and beginning to redress the balance of arts programming in Western society?

1. What IS a culturally diverse artist?

Is it someone who makes art that originates from a particular culture (e.g. Kathak or Polish folk dance)? Is it someone who challenges the notion of culture and/or diversity within his or her work? Is it someone who represents many cultures within his or her own personal history? Or is it someone who isn't white? The emphasis on the artist rather than the art is a puzzling one; perhaps these initiatives are not really focused on the art, but on the way things look to the general public: **representation**.

2.

REPRESENTATION for whom?

Let's say that, because of a desire to be more inclusive, certain organisations are selecting artists primarily because of the way they look and only secondarily because of the quality of their work. This can make artists feel that they are merely being used to illustrate a point and that the real point - their artwork - is being missed. In some cases, platforms of culturally specific work are justified and can even be desirable, giving opportunities where there otherwise would have been none and allowing greater publicity for certain artforms. However, these platforms also risk segregating artists from different cultures when there would be real benefit in facilitating dialogue between them.

Surely it should be the artist who makes **choices** concerning how they present their work...



'THE BODY AS CULTURALLY DIVERSE ARTEFACT'

"Don't look a GIFT HORSE in the mouth! If they're offering you money because you're brown, TAKE IT."

3. Do cultural diversity initiatives leave artists with CHOICE about how they want to present their work?

Positive discrimination is an essential way of bringing about change!

3. Do cultural diversity initiatives leave artists with CHOICE about how they want to present their work?

The decision to be labelled Black or Asian, to represent the under-represented, or to appear as a **role model** for younger generations of coloured artists should rest with the artist concerned. Some artists choose to identify themselves with a culture or tradition, or to forge new paths whilst remaining strongly connected to their chosen ethnic origins. This can be useful in targeting audiences and creating a company image, as well as being true to the artistic beliefs of the individual or company in question. However, there are other artists who don't find these labels useful, who would prefer to be **labelled** by the type of work they're making (which is often not related to their ethnicity), or who don't want to be labelled at all.

But in a world where **arts funding** is scarce, most artists do not feel financially able to reject an opportunity in order to make a personal or political statement. To

what extent, then, do artists become trapped within the constraints imposed by cultural diversity initiatives? And how does this affect the relationship that an artist of colour has to his or her own **artistic integrity**, to his or her ability to market work, and to evolve, to change, to break through new boundaries?

you're not really in a place of choice - if the funding's there, you take it ... sometimes that means being labelled a 'black artist' or being showcased as someone who represents 'diversity' within an organisation or funding body

4.

Fighting elitism in the arts

Then there is the unspoken question of class. Nobody likes to address the issue of elitism within the arts, the fact that it is often only people who come from wealthy families who can afford to be full-time artists. But surely this consideration is key to the issues that arts councils and other organisations are trying to address? If these initiatives are ultimately about **inclusion** and not exclusion, if what they are really trying to do is advantage those who would not usually be advantaged, then perhaps they could go further.

Platforms and opportunities that advertise for "culturally diverse artists" do not go far enough towards reaching and supporting new groups of artists and audiences in the arts. The real problems, it seems, are much more **deeply rooted** in issues of class structure and accessibility.

Perhaps it is time to say **LOOKING GOOD IS NOT**

GOOD ENOUGH. Having artists who look brown, black, exotic, who use art forms that are not British in origin, is not enough. To get to the heart of the issue, we have to go deeper, and going deeper involves exploring the roots of inequalities in the system.



ANGIKA PERFORMING 'BHAKTI'

PHOTO: MIKE ZATOUFF

5. Looking good is not good enough

It might seem controversial to question initiatives that are attempting take positive action in society, or to ask so many questions and not offer any answers. This article is certainly not suggesting that initiatives such as **decibel** should be discouraged. They raise awareness of certain key issues and do offer opportunities to artists. But let's not be afraid to talk about them, critically, honestly, to give feedback as a way of saying -yes! I want you to continue with this kind of work, and here's how I see it progressing to make real and effective change in the arts today...

**Is this debate
about the art or the
artist? Culturally
diverse arts
programming -yes-
but "culturally diverse
artist" just pigeon-
holes artists because
of the colour of their
skin.**

Contact

This article is written to further the debate around cultural diversity in the arts. If you have an opinion, please let me know using the following contact details:

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decibel

Arts Council England's cultural diversity initiative, **decibel**, is now over, but you can find information on its legacy, publications, and contact details for funding ambassadors for culturally diverse artists at:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=3&id=79

Thanks to Chisenhale Dance Space Artists Programme, Akademi's 'Exploring South Asianess' symposium, spiked-online.com, and the decibel conference 'A Free State' for recent opportunities to debate around this issue.