//Hassan Mahamdallie

Why diversity in the arts cannot be ignored

In his text *(1), Hassan Mahamdallie, playwright and diversity expert, presents insights into the cultural and political diversity strategies of Arts Council England from his former position as Senior Diversity Officer. There are many reasons why the arts should diversify, including moral, economic and equality arguments. Hassan Mahamdallie argues it is time for 'the creative case for diversity and equality in the arts' to take centre stage – restoring diversity to its place as a central element in the creative act and arts innovation.

Diversity exists – we do not have to invent it. Inequality is the issue.

Diversity, in the widest sense, is an integral and central part of the artistic process. It is an important element in the dynamic that drives art forward, that innovates it and brings it into a profound and transformative dialogue with contemporary society.

To talk about diversity is merely to express the world around us. Diversity. Just. Is. We can observe it as an essential feature of nature, of evolution, adaptation, development and change. A lack of, emptying out of, or destruction of diversity – for example, a narrowing of the Earth's bio-diversity due to the destruction of the environment by the human species – is recognised as threatening the future of the planet and all life upon it.

In the history of the development of human society, diversity as a kinetic force – the entrance from the outside of a new idea, a new understanding and way of seeing the world – what we might call insight, vision and innovation – is the force that enables society to make a civilizational leap forward. Societies that cut themselves off from diversity, historically, ultimately turn in on themselves, stagnate, collapse and die.

Counter to the handwringing of policymakers in the arts and culture, and even in government departments, Diversity is not a 'problem'. The actual problem we face is that we have alienated ourselves from it and imposed man-made inequalities on our diverse society, and thereby on our diverse arts community and on the future development of artistic practise. But diversity can only have an active meaning when it is linked to, if you like, a dynamic societal struggle – specifically, the fight against inequality.

The problem we in the arts community face in the West, particularly, is that we have distorted the history of creativity and the arts, our practice and critical debate, and have decided that some are far more equal than others and have more value. We have created artificial hierarchies, but we pretend 'that's just the way it is'. We have constructed canons of 'important' work and subjective value judgements bound up in notions of 'taste', 'quality' and 'excellence', but pretend they are neutral and objective and unchallengeable in the manner of a religious edict.

It's political.

The fight against entrenched inequalities, and the pursuit of equality for all, is

always going to be a political question. In whatever arena, this kind of work is intensely politicised, because it throws up sharp questions about the nature of society and its claims to be truly democratic. At heart, it is about power, who has access to it, and the privilege they draw from it. But each different arena of the struggle against exploitation and oppression has its own particular starting points, arguments and goals – and this is true for the fight for equality in the arts.

I have learned that the arts and cultural landscape, the structures and institutions that shape it, the ways power and privilege are expressed, the traditions and modes of thinking and the ideas and worldviews that dominate it demand particular responses, strategies and tactics from those who seek to fundamentally change it.

Diversity and equality may have been historically marginalised in the ongoing debates on art, how it is made, how it innovates and brings itself into a close and active relation to the society from which it springs, but I contest that this is not a marginal question; indeed this is intrinsic and central to art in many ways – including in the creative act itself.

The Creative Case for Diversity

The Creative Case for diversity and equality in the arts that I and others developed for the public funding body Arts Council England over a decade ago seeks to loosen the grip of these powerful gatekeepers and tastemakers. It differs from previous approaches: It is not principally about morality (it is the right thing to do), economics (it's profitable) or legality (it's against the law to discriminate), all of which are not without merit. However, the creative case is fundamentally a conversation about art – but with the true value of diversity placed at its centre. It is based upon the simple observation that diversity, in the broadest sense, is an essential element in the artistic process. It is the principal dynamic that drives art forward, that innovates it and brings it into a more profound and transformative dialogue with contemporary society.

I put it this way: If the creative act can be expressed as a simple formula $x + y = z$, then x is diversity in its most essential and mercurial form. It is that distinct root force that catalyses the imagination, driving the emergence of the symbolic that is artistic expression. It is the new made real.

This is why we must not allow diversity and equality to be perpetually marginalised, to be just lip-service and box-ticking exercises, to be just something bolted on to the artistic world. If you are a serious artist, a manager of an institution or a policymaker or politician, you should put diversity and equality right in the middle of the debate – of all the debates – around the arts and society in this country.

And it's about power.

Virtually no one in the arts in the UK talks about power (except those who point out that they lack it). It is itself an exercise of power, of course, to think you can wield it without acknowledging that you are actually doing so. The reality is, despite the guilty genuflections at the altar of corporate diversity, the reins of power, and thus authority, largely remain in the same privileged hands as they always have. In a sense, a culture of upper middle-class entitlement still prevails.

The middle classes tend to talk to one another as a way of affirming their sense of importance and value, but the marginalised tend to talk to society as a whole, not just to their group, because they can understand the need for change across the board. It's inherent in their position in society.

The problem with the grip of the elite on the arts is that they are speaking to a society, a Europe, that no longer exists (they may wish it did, before we came along to do the jobs they no longer wanted to do). They are conversing with ghosts from a distant past. Only releasing diversity through the drive for equality can renew an art that can speak to us as we are now and help us imagine future possibilities for our species and planet.

We urgently need those without privilege to tell us some fundamental truths about the society in which we live. We need to speed up the process by which these people become visible and become heard. If we don't, the arts will drift further away from society. They'll continue to be a conventional middle-class pursuit, a consumable equivalent of bourgeois dinner table talk.

So we need arts companies and institutions to rapidly decentralise, thereby dismantling the outmoded power structures of artistic decision-making: The arts are presently structured hierarchically on a vertical axis: You accumulate power and professional standing as you go up. We need organisations that are organised on a horizontal plane, where all voices are valued. Why, for example, are those in our ticket offices, or front-of-house staff, who often have vast practical experience with audiences, rarely asked for their opinion or given influence over policy? We need leaders who relinquish power freely, not those who hoard it selfishly.

Arts companies need to exhibit qualities associated with this diversity. In order to encourage genuine diversity, organisations need to become more open in their approaches, dialogues and thinking. They need to avoid becoming fixed structurally, or in their offerings, and make way for other views and voices (and not in a tokenistic way that feels like charitable giving).

Artistic autonomy is so important: Those artists and their organisations who have been historically marginalised have to receive much more resources and power to produce their own work on their own terms than they have up to now.

For me, it's an issue of power, politics and *democracy* – maybe a word we don't apply enough to the arts.

Democracy.

There is a clear democratic imperative: For example, the arts in the UK are increasingly funded by the National Lottery, but we face a situation where those sections of society who contribute the most to the lottery are also those least served by the arts. This inequality is simply intolerable. The same goes for those in receipt of state subsidies raised through taxation. As the American Revolutionaries put it, *'No taxation without representation!' No arts without all of us!*

It's intolerable that those with power should exclude working-class people, or the disabled, or women, or LGBTQI+ individuals or companies, or black people or whomever. It's intolerable these groups should be excluded from the arts just because the members of the middle classes are saying, 'The arts belong to us, it really belongs to us, it's our inheritance.' Now, I'm a working-class guy, I don't believe in inheritance, I live in public housing, right? But that doesn't mean that I don't have lots of aspirations. Why should I or my brothers and sisters, as it were, be excluded from the arts because there is another group in society that thinks it belongs solely to them, it's their entitlement?

I also think that, in my lifetime, the arts have become ridiculously over-professionalised. You have to have a degree – or two. This excludes those who are

unable to access the university/academic system, or who choose not to, for whatever reason. Why is a degree at times valued more than the quality of the work itself? Who sets the standard for a professional work of art? A narrow group of academic tastemakers.

And there is a corresponding linear career structure, which is also a very middle-class way of organising things, socially, economically as well as politically.

Should we just keep on keeping on?

Many of us over the years have correctly called out the arts leadership in the UK and elsewhere for failing to move fast enough over issues of inequality. 'You are failing' we tell them. But there is another way of looking at it: that those with power have not failed, quite the reverse – they are succeeding. They have been succeeding in holding off real, fundamental challenges to the status quo. Academics call this phenomenon 'Diversity Resistance,' which is defined 'as a range of practices and behaviors within and by organizations that interfere, intentionally or unintentionally, with the use of diversity as an opportunity for learning and effectiveness.' (Thomas/Plaut 2003: 4) (*1)

A renaissance is needed in the arts. What can history tell us?

This x-factor of diversity that I talked about earlier will not be found in the exclusive centres of artistic power: the conservatoires, the museums and galleries, the concert halls and the grand theatres. It is to be found at the margins, the edges and the peripheries. It is inevitably to be found in what one might think of as the most unexpected places, generated by the most overlooked individuals and communities.

I'll tell you what convinced me of this: The *Harlem Renaissance*.

When I was in New York about fifteen years ago, I bought a book called *Harlem Renaissance* by African American art historian and educator Nathan Huggins. It was a revelation to me. I discovered that the Harlem Renaissance, the intellectual, social and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, spanning the early twentieth century, had a vitally important and revelatory story to tell us today. It forced me to try and grasp how was it that an oppressed and ignored community, who up to the end of the Civil War had been slaves, the property of other humans, and then poverty-stricken sharecroppers policed by violent Jim Crow laws – that this community occupied the vanguard of American art, the authentic expression for all people about what it meant to be an American at the start of the twentieth century. Not a Black American or a white American – an American. How was it that, in the words of the intellectual and activist Alaine Locke, the Black American 'lay aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization'? (Locke 1925) (*2) How did it come to be that Black Americans were transformed through their cultural contribution into 'a people, rather than a problem'? (Huggins 1971: 60) (*3)

In the *Harlem Renaissance*, you had the particular and the general coming together; you had an art that attempted to speak with two voices, 'one from the stage of national culture and the other from the soul of ethnic experience.' (Huggins 1971: 195) (*3) It was the voice of Black Americans that became the authentic voice of the mass of society struggling to comprehend what it meant to be human in the modern industrial age. So the African American gave America, and the world, a musical form that was entirely authentic, new and unique. It emanated not from Upper Manhattan, not from the salons of the gilded elite, but from the street's

dwellers of Harlem and the Bronx.

Jazz (which originated in New Orleans and then migrated to Harlem), for me, is the syncopated soundtrack for early twentieth century US capitalism, the energetic sound of the Ford assembly line (as was Motown later on), skyscrapers going up, the bustling streets, the different languages and folk expressions. Indeed, they call the first two decades of the twentieth century 'The Jazz Age' because the cultural expression and the society were so intimately intertwined. It then spread globally and influenced existing forms of music including classical music. Listen to Igor Stravinsky if you don't believe me. Like jazz, hip-hop today plays a similar historic role in US and world culture.

We should draw both inspiration and a connection between the *Harlem Renaissance* and the European context in which we are all working, and which we seek to fundamentally change. What are the images, sounds, performances, new trends and genres in our arts and culture that have the ability to draw on the intrinsic kinetic energy and potential that diversity represents? What could this mean for us in the here and now? That question would be a good starting point to open up a richer dialogue and a more far-reaching action than we have had up to now.

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*1 Thomas, K. M., & Plaut, V. C. (2008): The Many Faces of Diversity Resistance in the Workplace. In: K. M. Thomas (ed.): Diversity Resistance in Organizations (Applied Psychology Series), pp. 1–22. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group/Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

*2 Locke, Alain (1925): Enter the New Negro. In: Survey Graphic: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro (March 1925). Accessed 4 July 2022 at http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/migrations/text8/lockenewnegro.pdf

*3 Huggins, Nathan Irvin (1971): Harlem Renaissance. London: Oxford University Press, p. 60.

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* 1 This text is based on the keynote speech by Hassan Mahamdallie at the D/Arts event D/Transformation – Diversity in Decision-Making Positions in the Cultural Sector, which was held in Vienna on March 31, 2022.