

WORKING WITH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL DIASPORAS

A report from a think tank led by Culture Northwest in June 2006, undertaken in partnership with Visiting Arts.

INTRODUCTION

The events of 2005 forced 'multicultural Britain' to fundamentally reassess its relationship with ethnic minority communities: the Tory Party put immigration at the heart of its failed election bid, with David Davis later calling for enforced integration of Muslim communities; the media continually portrayed immigration in a negative light; the London bombings of July 7 cast a shadow of suspicion over Britain's Muslim communities. Shisha, the international agency for contemporary South Asian arts, was amongst many in noting these 'challenges to the ideals of multiculturalism in the UK'¹ and the damage caused by the negative stereotyping of ethnic minority communities by the media.

However, beneath the headlines and hysteria, the reality of the situation is mixed. Despite the current challenges, the influence and impact of what, for the purposes of this paper we shall call 'Diaspora communities', has never been more tightly interwoven into the cultural fabric of the UK. Far from multiculturalism being in crisis, a 2005 MORI poll showed that the majority of British people believed multiculturalism made the UK a better place, and that racial intolerance hadn't risen as a result of the July 7 bombings.² This, the message seems to be, is a country founded on the contribution of migrant communities, from the early Industrial Revolution-era Italian, Irish and Jewish workers to "immigrant" businesses such as Reuters, Marks & Spencer, Trust House Forte and Tesco³ – and it is these communities who now form the backbone of British commercial success.

In the cultural sector, working with international artists and culturally diverse communities has become – for those organisations attending the think tank – second nature. This approach is paying off: in 2007, the Northwest and in particular Manchester will host a number of major events⁴ celebrating Diaspora communities, from the 21st anniversary of the Chinese Arts Centre and its International Chinese Live Art Festival to Shisha's Rusholme Project (in the run-up to the First Asia Triennial Manchester), Cornerhouse's Central Asian Project, Manchester International Festival and Urbis' Hong Kong-focused show, Arrivals and Departures. As these events illustrate, international collaboration plays an important role in developing culturally diverse arts, and engaging culturally diverse audiences.

And it is the contemporary that participants of this event were most interested in, signalling a move away from cultural stereotypes and a strict adherence to multicultural ideals - to present living, contemporary art that has an ability to transcend cultural differences and appeal to wide and varied audiences.

For those gathered at the Culture Northwest event, then, the value and contribution of Diaspora communities is clear. However, obstacles remain. Stereotypes persist across all sectors, a fact confirmed by Nighat Awan of the Shere Khan Group, who recently spoke of the 'significant barriers [that] exist for minority ethnic entrepreneurs'⁵ - many of which are the product of outmoded perceptions, misinformation or a lack of understanding by the region's decision makers.

It is these obstacles that Culture Northwest attempted to highlight and tackle through its half-day event, and which are explored in this paper.

¹ Chairperson's Statement, Shisha Annual Report, 2004-5, p. 3

² As reported on BBC News, 10 August 2005

³ Wealth Bringers, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 5

⁴ This list of events is not exhaustive, it is a representation of the discussion at the Think Tank

⁵ Nighat Awan, *The Entrepreneur's View*, Wealth Bringers, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 3

TERMINOLOGY

The labels we use and apply without much thought are problematic. The label used in this report - Diaspora community – is a good example, implying as it does a relationship to the country of origin as somewhere the individual wants to be, or return to, when in fact the individuals and communities it applies to may consider themselves British, and consider 'home' as the UK.

Labels can lead to cultural generalisation, which masks the kind of deep cultural understanding that underpins effective social cohesion. So, the notion of ethnic minority 'groups' or 'communities' – a lumping together of individuals that is frequently used - is simplistic. It implies homogeneity within those groups, and denies the subtle but fundamental cultural and social differences within and between peoples – that could be the result of differences between generations, for example, those born within the UK or outside it, and those adhering to cultural traditions or those embracing a more culturally mixed lifestyle.

Generalisation can also effect delivery: the University of Glasgow's evaluation of Cultureshock, the cultural programme of the 2002 Commonwealth Games, revealed that one of the failings of the programme was the use of the terms 'culturally diverse' and 'socially inclusive'. 'These concepts were not clearly defined,' says the report, and, 'as a result, both concepts were used interchangeably, creating frustration both within grassroots organisations and professional art institutions of a culturally diverse background.'⁶ Clarity, then, is key.

Those attributed a label may reject – or object – to it, and for good reason. Already, words such as 'multicultural' or 'diversity' have become meaningless. Labels are easily lifted by the media and used carelessly, or taken up by interest groups and loaded with alternative meanings, which can be both positive and negative. Labels can be used as insults, or, in some cases, generate a paralysing sensitivity, the scourge of political correctness, which creates its own barriers between people (however well intentioned).

Communities want and need to be treated as individuals, and have their arts and culture judged upon their own merits. Artists in particular just want to get on with their work and many of the organisations represented at the think tank argued that their primary consideration was the quality of the artists' work rather than the social 'tag' ascribed to that artist.

We do need labels, however. We need to recognise the cultural differences between people, groups and communities if we are to meet their particular needs. It can be useful to know the ethnic make-up of a group where this affects decisions, programming, audience development and engagement. It can help interpretation to know the artist's roots and reasoning. It is useful to feed back such information to funders, policy makers and the media, where that information is positive or constructive and can lead to greater understanding.

Gary Younge, writing in *Navigational Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development*, offers an interesting alternative response to this issue. 'We all have labels,' he says, 'many of which we never asked for and cannot help. But only once we recognise them for what they are can we capitalise on their potential to unleash an unpredictable and fruitful creative response to the world around us.'⁷ Labels, then, can have some creative value – if they are underpinned with respect, support and understanding.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

A lack of understanding is one of the main barriers to working effectively with artists and groups from Diaspora communities – and funders can be criticised for their sometimes scant knowledge in this area, but what does this lack of understanding actually translate into?

Within the cultural and creative sector, it means that funders have little appreciation of an event's value. As one participant noted, 'Value is based on relevance but if you have no knowledge of that community then how can you know its relevance?' Funding bodies operate under pressure: an unequal balance of funding applications and available funds. They thus have to prioritise – and they make their priorities on the basis of professional knowledge. On the other side, within the Diaspora communities themselves, there is confusion as to what the 'arts' might mean, and whether it relates to the cultural activities they wish to have supported (there can be a limited view of what constitutes a 'cultural' event, with communities assuming it applies only

⁶ Beatriz Garcia, *Evaluation of Cultureshock, Commonwealth North West Cultural Programme*, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, The University of Glasgow, January 2003

⁷ Gary Younge, *A Great Place to Start?*, *Navigational Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development*, Arts Council England, 2006, p.4

to 'opera, ballet, Shakespearean theatre, classical music and art in galleries'⁸). Thus, misunderstanding on both sides deters funding bids or the success of those bids.

Within the commercial sectors, the results of such a lack of understanding are startling. According to Sustainability Northwest (SNW), while 11% of assimilated entrepreneurs – SNW's term for business entrepreneurs drawn from Diaspora communities - were refused funds from lenders for business development, none of their White British counterparts were. And 16% were refused a business mortgage, compared to just 1% of their White British counterparts.⁹ The same study demonstrated that the average annual turnover of such businesses was *double* that of their indigenous counterparts.

INTEGRATED AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

Strategic audience development is based on a simple equation: engaging with communities equals larger and more diverse audiences. Again, where cultural organisations stumble is at demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the Diaspora communities they work with.

There is an argument, for example, that religious and cultural restrictions are often underestimated during the audience development phase of projects - the availability of alcohol at events, for example, or mixed gender events. Note the term used here: *restriction*. Without a comfortable knowledge of religious and cultural traditions, those putting together audience development campaigns can feel inhibited, and stop short of full engagement for fear of causing offence, or 'getting it wrong.' But, as one participant of the think tank pointed out, 'this is about cultural and religious *consideration* rather than *restriction* – it shouldn't be seen as an obstacle.' Is our thinking around such issues in need of repositioning?

Do we need to re-think, too, how we view not only the needs of the Diaspora communities, but audience development itself? Successful audience development frees itself from assumption, and works across communities. There is, for example, a case that one of the audience segments in most need of engagement is White British (particularly economically deprived groups). If we follow that argument, it's logical to assume that class and neighbourhoods are as important for audience development as race and religious belief.

One size does not fit all in audience development, and not all communities value culture in the same way, or have similar levels of awareness. Traditional communications channels may need to be reconsidered, and a greater degree of targeted marketing introduced. According to Manchester City Council research, for example, Asian groups tend to have a high awareness of cultural events, but are less aware of events that include food and alcohol, while Afro-Caribbean groups tend to have a greater awareness of entertaining events, and events involving food and drink¹⁰. Interestingly, an Arts Council-commissioned study found that individuals within Black, Asian and Chinese communities were interested in the arts that related to their own cultural heritage – but didn't necessarily view them as the 'arts'. It also found that those who engaged with such events took a negative view of mainstream cultural events, or at least showed very little interest in them.¹¹

Better informed audience development, based on two-way conversations between artists/organisations and Diaspora communities was something that participants of the think tank argued could help bring about real change within audience engagement, and tackle the fact that many communities feel that cultural events have little relevance to their lives and experiences.

ECONOMIC AND INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

There is a perception lag between the image and the reality of Diaspora communities that extends to cultural events. Events can sometimes be considered closed, of scant cultural value or, at best, a little 'worthy'. Many groups have been attributed 'victim' status - despite the fact that they are highly educated, wealthy and regular attendees of cultural events. In the 16-24 age group, for example, members of the Black African, Indian and Chinese communities are better qualified than their White British counterparts, and British Asian communities are now so well established that, one participant noted, they are now voicing the same

⁸ Helen Jermyn and Philly Desai, *Arts – What's in a Word? Ethnic Minorities and the Arts*, Arts Council England, London, 2000, p. 10

⁹ Wealth Bringers, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 9, figures taken from the 2004 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor

¹⁰ Manchester Community Events, QA Research, May 2006

¹¹ Helen Jermyn and Philly Desai, *Arts – What's in a Word? Ethnic Minorities and the Arts*, Arts Council England, London, 2000

concerns about newer immigrants from Eastern Europe that White British communities initially voiced about Asian immigrants.

Sustainability Northwest's 2005 report, *Wealth Bringers*, presented hard economic evidence to prove the 'crucial role that minority ethnic entrepreneurs play in the economic and social transformation that is taking place in our region'¹² – but one that has gone largely unrecognised. *Wealth Bringers* turned the media portrayal of immigrant communities on its head, proving that assimilated entrepreneurs contributed far more to the UK economy than their White British counterparts. This is a far cry from the widely held belief that such individuals take 'away from the wealth of the UK.'¹³ Perhaps most tellingly, this report also highlighted the contributions of such businesses to the local community, 'with many assimilated entrepreneurs contributing significant amounts of both time and money to charities and community groups.'¹⁴

Participants argued that cultural events can, of course, be far from 'worthy'. Not only are they colourful, inclusive, joyful and even glamorous, they contribute significantly to the local and regional economy. Diaspora communities can bring fresh perspectives to existing cultural collections – Manchester Museum's *Collective Conversations* project worked with source communities to shed new light on objects from Africa, Australia and North America, for example – through what one participant called their 'fine-grained cultural knowledge'. On a wider scale, such communities help give cities and regions their identity, put to highly effective use in, for example, London's Olympic bid. The most visited city in the world sold itself as being one of the most multicultural.

Yet the poor perception of Diaspora communities persists. And, though as one participant noted, 'we should never underestimate the power of the pound – whoever spends it,' we do.

HOW CAN WE CELEBRATE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE?

As noted during the discussion, Manchester is a self-made city, built on the backs of early migrant workers from German, Italian and Jewish communities. As the city has grown, so too have its immigrant communities – but has it failed to capitalise on this unique cultural make-up?

If so, multiculturalism could partly be to blame. Its 'celebration' of cultural difference has led in some cases to fences being erected around Diaspora communities, without furthering a better understanding of the communities within and their histories, needs and strengths. Multiculturalism can also fix those fences in place, preventing communities from changing and evolving. Gary Younge, writing for the Arts Council, argues that, 'Britain pretends to be a multicultural society. The extent to which we are a country in which many cultures live is true. But the extent to which those cultures mix and the value and nature of that mixture still have a long way to go.'¹⁵ Although previous immigrant populations are now indigenous, integration has fallen behind.

There is, then, a fine balance to be struck between allowing Diaspora communities to celebrate their own cultures without alienating others; developing a greater understanding between communities; and seeking further integration without clamping down on cultural difference. Such a balance could prove beneficial to relations within communities, and across generations (in bridging the cultural divide between, for example, first and second generation members of a community). Arts Council studies show that arts events that allow communities to express their cultural pride (and thus difference) generate greater social cohesion and aid a sense of belonging to the wider community.¹⁶

International collaboration and programming is an effective tool to celebrate cultural difference, encouraging dialogue between nationally constructed identities of "here" and "there". However it remains important, as participants noted, to ensure that international work within the context of Diaspora communities does not insist on a straightforward relationship with the country of origin only, to the detriment of exploring other potentially fruitful intercultural dialogues.

There is a real sense – from those attending the think tank - that cultural organisations within the region and artists themselves have found this balance. They take an international approach as standard, and already

¹² Anil Ruia, *The Regional Perspective*, *Wealth Bringers*, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 2

¹³ *Wealth Bringers*, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 5

¹⁴ *Wealth Bringers*, Sustainability Northwest, September 2005, p. 7

¹⁵ Gary Younge, *A Great Place to Start?*, *Navigational Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development*, Arts Council England, 2006, p.4

¹⁶ Helen Jermyn and Philly Desai, *Arts – What's in a Word? Ethnic Minorities and the Arts*, Arts Council England, London, 2000

work hard to understand the artists they work with and their cultural needs/differences. As one participant noted, 'the idea that we're encouraged to represent Diaspora communities because they somehow need to be "worked with" is a little patronising.' Organisations work with artists on the basis of the quality of their work. Artists are free to claim an ethnic identity, ignore it, change it or do whatever they want with it. What has yet to 'catch up' with this approach is an inflexible funding system. As an Arts Council report noted, 'we still make art in boxes, and the movement within our society escapes us.'¹⁷

TAKING A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

Many events billed as 'multicultural' or 'ethnic' tend to focus on traditional arts and crafts rather than on contemporary cultural practice. While cultural heritage is important, so too is an accurate representation of contemporary life. A report into the Commonwealth Games pointed out that the risk of working solely with traditional cultural forms is the potential for 'tokenism, conservatism and chauvinism' and the exclusion of 'current cultural controversies,'¹⁸ while a participant at the event noted that, 'by focusing on the traditional, you pigeon-hole artists as those who have nothing to contribute to contemporary culture. Nothing could be further from the truth.'

Important, too, is the need to manage expectations or, rather, the perception of Diaspora audiences' expectations: often, artworks or exhibitions representative of Diaspora communities present a 'slightly clichéd version of "traditional" black arts' rather than the real thing, according to one participant.

In an ideal world, then, relationships between artists and cultural organisations should be dynamic, championing work that is vibrant and representative of an ongoing culture. Perhaps a stumbling block for some organisations and funders is that contemporary art and artists are by their nature constantly changing. They defy labelling and reject the multiculturalist ideals on which funding decisions are often based. They are 'cultural hybrids' and, as such, arts administrators lack the understanding and mechanisms to accommodate them.

However, one solution proposed at the event would be to fuse traditional delivery methods with contemporary performances or work. Resistance to new forms of culture can come from Diaspora communities just as much as from indigenous communities. Arts Council research, for example, points to the Asian, Black and Chinese communities as enjoying festivals and religious celebrations but resistant to other cultural events, which they can view as 'elitist'.¹⁹ Large-scale festivals or events can be the ideal delivery mechanism for overcoming resistance from *all* communities. They are a known, universal and familiar format, are rooted within local communities (rather than in galleries and traditional exhibition/performance spaces) and so have cross-community appeal – such events overcome the main barrier to attendance: the fear of wasting time and/or money.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BRITISH ARTS AND CRAFTS?

In among the debate around working with international artists and Diaspora communities at the think tank was a recurring theme: the need to develop indigenous audiences and cultivate traditional British arts and culture. As one participant noted, 'There is a danger in all of this that we've forgotten the indigenous British communities.' While the need to create a 'living' contemporary culture among the Diaspora communities was repeatedly stressed, so too was the need to preserve native arts and crafts in the UK, and to invest in cultural projects that nurture these communities. The Arts Council's evaluation of its deciBel project, for example, noted the 'frustration' that the 'focus on Black and minority ethnic-led work' could cause, 'as it was perceived as excluding white-led organisations with excellent track records in developing and programming diverse work.'²⁰ The benefit of investing in all forms of culture is that it will reduce resentment towards the Diaspora communities who have attracted funding and profile.

¹⁷ Gabriel Gbadamosi, *I Was Born by a River*, Navigational Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development, Arts Council England, 2006, p.6

¹⁸ Beatriz Garcia *Evaluation of Cultureshock, Commonwealth North West Cultural Programme*, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, The University of Glasgow, January 2003

¹⁹ Helen Jermyn and Philly Desai, *Arts – What's in a Word? Ethnic Minorities and the Arts*, Arts Council England, London, 2000

²⁰ Decibel Evaluation: Key Findings, Arts Council England, April 2005, p.5

SUMMARY:

Recommendations arising from the think tank

Two-way community engagement

- Create new, meaningful terminology, developed in consultation and collaboration with relevant groups to whom the labels will be applied.
- Develop audience development strategies alongside communities themselves, to ensure a robust understanding of attitudes towards culture within different communities, confidence around social and religious considerations, and an understanding of the motivations and triggers for attendance.
- Involve communities in both decision making and programming.

Contemporary/ traditional balance

- Find a balance between traditional delivery forms – large-scale festivals and events – and contemporary work or performance.
- Celebrate all forms of culture and all forms of cultural difference, whether from Diaspora communities or indigent communities.

Tailored support

- Support for Diaspora communities and artists is lacking across all sectors. Where it does exist, it often sits outside mainstream funding and business support structures. Funding bodies and policy makers across the region, and, to a degree, corporate organisations, need to improve representation to Diaspora and local communities.
- Create better training within funding, development and policy-making organisations, and create better communications channels between those organisations and Diaspora communities.
- Funding and policy-making bodies share information about the value of projects.
- Widen monitoring and measures to take into account the particular needs and motivations of Diaspora communities.
- Help develop partnerships between community groups, artists and cultural organisations and businesses, to open up alternative funding streams.

Perception revision

- Disseminate positive information about the contribution and value of Diaspora communities and artists to the regional economy through programming, reports, media relations, marketing and audience development
- Consider what Diaspora communities can offer cultural organisations and how they might help broaden, for example, an organisation's communications, to communities both within the UK and without.

General support

- Funders should set in place consistent, usable procedures that will guide smaller organisations and streamline the complex funding process.
- Funders must recognise that applications are a costly and time-consuming process, particularly for smaller organisations, and that feedback and greater guidance, as well as ongoing debate, could lead to real change.
- There may be an argument for funding smaller organisations until they begin to grow, and then gradually withdraw funding as they become more self-sufficient. This would free up funds for smaller, fledgling organisations.
- Provide greater support for monitoring and reporting for smaller organisations.

Culture Northwest is a thinking, networking and advocacy organisation. Culture Northwest is the Cultural Consortium for England's Northwest, established in 1999 by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and its role is to drive the Regional Cultural Strategy. Culture Northwest's core funding is predominantly provided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Northwest Regional Development Agency. For further information visit www.culturenorthwest.co.uk

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