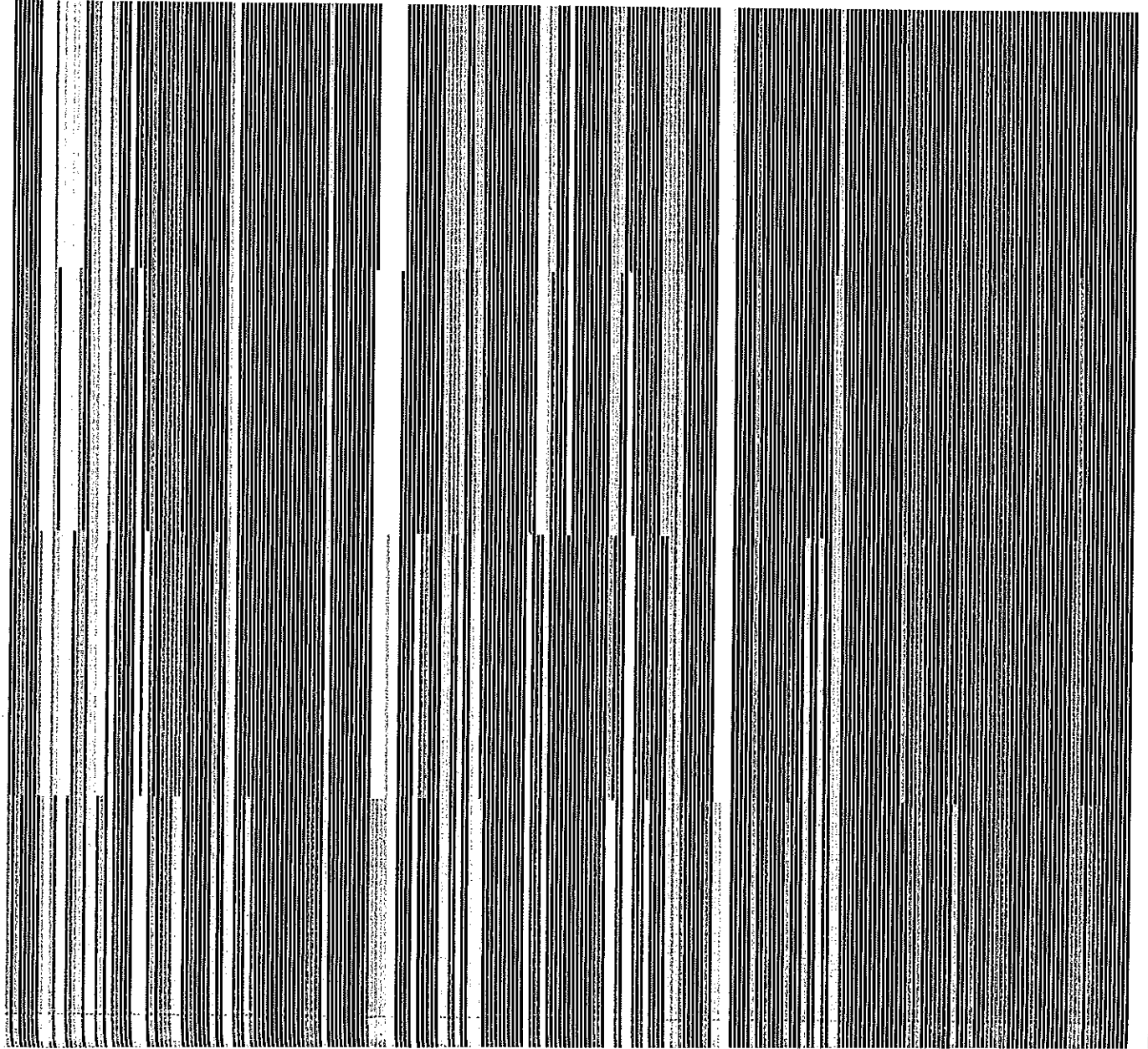


Navigating difference

cultural diversity and audience development



c2006

Losing labels and liking it

Jorella Andrews proposes an approach to programming the visual arts that focuses on the individuality behind the labels



If creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away; it is also that they have almost all their life still before them.

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty)¹

I'm not sure how useful it is to foreground collective concepts – race or ethnicity or 'Blackness', for instance – when thinking about art and about audiences for art. Somehow, doing so seems to close down more possibilities for communication and exchange than it opens up.

Admittedly, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of British artists *did* organise themselves collectively around self-identifications of 'Blackness' – I'm thinking particularly of Eddie Chambers' BLK Art Group (1981-4), the Black Audio Film

Collective (1983-98) and the Black-Art Gallery (opened 1983). There was also Rasheed Araeen's venture *Black Phoenix* (1978-9), which re-emerged in 1987 as the academic journal *Third Text*.

Such collectives were strategically important for a short period. They brought together artists who had been relatively isolated and unsupported, enabling them to exchange ideas and develop their thinking and their art. Together, artists produced work that exposed and addressed overt racism as it occurred on the streets and in the media – often by re-telling historical and current events from perspectives that were unacknowledged by the mainstream. John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, a counter-narrative of the Handsworth riots of 1985, was a striking example of this.

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Venu Dhupa on page 79 argues that Black artists are excluded from theatres and galleries because arts organisations are ignoring what is happening in the society around them and that this matters because they control access to resources.



Collectivity around 'blackness' also empowered artists to address the more covert forms of institutionalised racism that dominated British social and cultural life, including the art schools. For, as Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid and other Black Britons coming of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s quickly learned, the art-educational institutions were often indifferent, if not antagonistic, to the experiences and concerns of their Afro-Caribbean and Asian students. Furthermore, publicly funded and commercial art galleries typically excluded the work of Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists from their exhibition programmes, or marginalised it by presenting it in exoticised or primitivised terms. The work of Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists was also excluded from official accounts of the history and development of modernity and of modern art.

Rasheed Araeen, who was already making work in a modernist/minimalist idiom when he came to Britain from Pakistan in 1964, has been particularly concerned about this issue. He has attempted to address this lack throughout his career as a politicised artist, writer, editor and curator – with his exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain* at the Hayward Gallery in 1989, for instance, and with the journal *Third Text*. But as noted by Alicia Foster in her recent book *Tate Women Artists*² exclusions persist today, particularly where Black women are concerned. (Incidentally, an even more profound absence is to be found in the National Portrait Gallery's contextualising accounts of 20th century British history. Here neither the fact of post-war immigrations into Britain, nor their impact on British cultural life are mentioned.)³

Eddie Chambers' response to such exclusions (shaped in important ways by his exposure to the Black Power/Consciousness movements in the USA) differed somewhat from Araeen's. Chambers, with Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Marlene Smith and Claudette Johnson, was the driving force behind the BLK Art Group, and like Araeen he curated a number of important exhibitions of Black art. However, his approach was to look for ways of working outside of the parameters of the mainstream art establishment.

Chambers insisted that Black art should be made by Black people for Black people. Militant, educational and affirmative, particularly where the younger generation of Black Britons was concerned, Black art was about addressing social, political and historical issues as these affected Black people in Britain and elsewhere in the world, and it was about establishing a sense of pan-African solidarity and pride.

But, important as collective ventures of this kind were, most had run their course by the mid 1980s. As Keith Piper put it, by now 'individual group members were itching to emerge from the collective entity'.⁴ Furthermore, there were issues other than race that many of them wanted to address in their work. The broader social and intellectual climate was also changing. 'Difference' was being understood in more complex ways as operating internally to individuals and groups as much as between individuals and groups. (Interestingly, this sense of complexity was always present in the early work of practitioners like Keith Piper, despite the

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often oppositional nature of the rhetoric that was being used during this period. His *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Swinging (or Another Nigger Died Today)* from 1982 is a case in point, with its mix of materials and its multiple references not only to the Black male body but also to art history, to punk, to comics, to crucifixion, to African-American art, to graffiti...)

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Also interesting, I think, is the dilemma that quickly became apparent with Chambers' venture: the Black community didn't appear to be interested in what Black artists were trying

to do on their behalf! In conversation with Aareen in 1989, Chambers spoke about a 'gap' that existed between Black artists and the Black community. 'You don't hear Black musicians talking about such problems', he said, 'because there is no gap to fill. The question here is of communication and how to increase it'⁵ (This dilemma regarding 'blackness' and the visual, approached in an American context by Michele Wallace, interests me greatly.)⁶

Ironically, though, it was just as collective ethnic and racial identifications were losing their usefulness for artists, that these designations were adopted with a vengeance by the arts institutions – in the form of equal opportunity policies for funding, and so-called multicultural agendas.

This wasn't all bad. As already noted, some important exhibitions opened in mainstream spaces. Like Areeen's *The Other Story* – even though its staging as *other* (in the exhibition title at least) was seen by some as problematic. New funding opportunities also opened up possibilities for many artists and radically increased their visibility. However, as Areeen has observed, because artists were generally required to 'show their cultural identity cards' in order to obtain this backing many found this state of affairs restrictive and separatist rather than enabling.⁷ Artist and writer Sunil Gupta has referred to the 'Beast' of race politics in this regard.⁸ More recently, neurologist and cultural critic Kenan Malik has claimed that multiculturalism's understanding of diversity is more divisive than racism ever was or is.⁹ In any case, the question that arises is this: if a

collective ethnocentric approach wasn't sustainable for artists in terms of their practice, how successful is it likely to be as a curatorial strategy for the 21st century?

Individuality ... and letting the work lead such as it is

We are not who we are primarily because we belong to this or that group. Key instead are all those factors and aspects that the use of collective labels all too easily renders invisible. I think that the best art, the best writing about art and the best curatorial strategies, create situations that allow these invisibilities and particularities to come to light.

Crucially, work of this kind is not about abandoning notions of personal or collective coherence and belonging. Instead, it can make our

Naseem Khan examines the impact of equal opportunities policies and multicultural agendas in her article on page 21.



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connections with others and ourselves flexible and strong – albeit in ways that may be difficult to 'put into words'. This potential was demonstrated powerfully in Lubaina Himid's site specific exhibition *Inside the Invisible* from 2002. It was made for the St. Jorgen's Leprosy Museum in Bergen, Norway, to commemorate those who had suffered from this disease:
*'I wanted to make a series of works that might give these people a voice. They were individuals, real, idiosyncratic, sexual, thinking people. They had memories, hopes, families. In the same way that slaves were more than slaves, lepers are more than just people with bits of their bodies missing through disease.'*¹⁰

pattern, five inches square, centrally positioned on a canvas measuring eight inches square. And each had small luggage label attached with words written on it, English on one side, Norwegian on the other. She talks about how the visitors experienced the work:
You look at the pattern, see it, read the text,

'This is my boat, my brother helped me build it, and either see the boat or do not. Someone who did not see the object, however hard she looked, decided that the owner of the pattern/object did not want her to look into this private memory... Each work existed as a memory, a secret, a history, a fact.'

In other words, Lubaina Himid's actual, physical, touchable labels (together with the patterns) functioned as anti-labels on a conceptual level,

For the installation she created a series of paintings. Each painting was a simple, brightly coloured

undoing the category of leprosy behind which these people had disappeared. Her approach here is fascinating and, I think, a model for other art-related practices (writing, curating) because of the way in which it combines singularity, a definite concreteness and historical specificity, and a label-free openness that is humanising and engaging.

So... where our art-writing and curatorial strategies are concerned, perhaps it's about letting the individuality of persons – and the individuality of works of art – take the lead. For as the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, '... we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own'.¹¹

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Notes and references

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