

Hello! Welcome to the Farnham Maltings and to An Invitation to Tea. Thank you so much for being here, we feel honoured to be hosting this event, we really do, and I hope that by the end of the day you will feel honoured to have been here. I realise that many of you may feel like you have been somewhat bombarded by 'cultural diversity' events of one sort or another over the past few years. We've tried to make this one quite different- and I hope that this speech I'm making is the perhaps the only bit that will remind you of a normal conference. We've tried to create spaces here at the Maltings that really allow you to speak your mind, to hear about very different experiences, and most importantly to feel that your own experience is as valid to this debate as anyone else's.

As Daniel mentioned, I'm Rajni Shah, and I'm a senior fellow here at the Maltings. I've been working on this conference with Saj Fareed from Fabrica art gallery in Brighton and Tracey Low from Chichester Festival Theatre- they're my fellow fellows, which means that we're all on positive action fellowships funded by Arts Council England South East, and we all felt that it was incredibly important to make today happen, for various reasons. Some of those reasons, we share, and some are very individual. So I'm going to talk a little bit about my personal reasons, and hope that throughout the day you'll get a chance to talk to Saj and Tracey about theirs. And please- feel free to disagree with me.

You might look at me and think 'cultural diversity, yes, that makes sense, she looks ... brown.' The funny thing is that until a couple of years ago I didn't feel brown. Let me go back to the beginning of my life for a moment. I was born in Oxford, in the John Radcliffe hospital. When I was one, we moved to Switzerland, where I went to the Geneva English School and learnt to speak French and English. When we moved back to the UK, I went to The School of Saint Helen and Saint Katherine, a small private Anglican school that used to be run by nuns. In 1999, I spent a year in France, at the College International de Ferney Voltaire. I graduated from Cambridge University, lived in Atlanta, Georgia in the States for two years, and then moved back to London. Throughout these experiences, although I was often one of the only coloured people in my class or in the room, it never occurred to me that I might be different to anyone else. Maybe that's good, maybe that's bad. But I had learnt, been taught, to see people as individuals, and not as defined by their superficial skin colour or sexuality. In 2003, I found myself at the first Arts Council England decibel showcase in Manchester, as a delegate. And as I sat watching performances by artists of colour working in various artforms in various ways, it occurred to me: "oh, people think I'm brown. *That's* what they mean by 'African, Asian and Caribbean artist'. People think I'm a 'culturally diverse artist' ". And so it began.

Since that day, I feel brown; I'm really focused on my difference. I'm on a positive action fellowship. My work as an artist has become obsessed with exploring this issue. Now, my question –to myself as well as you- is, are these shifts in the ways I perceive myself a good thing? Is the shift in my practise a good thing? I certainly love the work I'm making now, and I feel it's important,

but I also feel obliged to make it, because it gives voice to *my* story and asks people to stop making assumptions and start asking questions.

Arts Council England is about to launch a publication called 'Navigating Difference' which quite beautifully sets out often opposing views on cultural diversity within the arts. In one of its essays, author and critic Ziauddin Sardar writes,

“art itself can be a routine, in which easy assumptions sustain conventions and stereotypes. When modern western art comes to consider ethnicity it encounters particular problems. It can only deal with ethnicity because it does not know how to find the individual within this tightly woven construct.”

'It does not know how to find the individual'. That's interesting to me, and it makes sense. Now I think there *is* a need for representation in the arts, a need for role models from all walks of life, who show people what they might become, who make people to feel valued and significant, whoever they are and wherever they come from. The challenge is- how do you redress the balance in the sector without resorting to some sort of crude privilege scheme for people with coloured skin? Essentially, how do you bring about real change that isn't just as exclusive and segregating as the injustice that you're trying to eliminate? And my fear is that a lot of schemes and initiatives that have been set up to address issues of race, although they provide wonderful statistics in the short-term, are not really investing in the long-term. And the long-term for me is the art itself, it's about investing in the future of the whole art world and its potential role in our society. For me, there has to be more consideration of the work that people are making - the impetus needs to come through the art itself. So I say, target support at people who are working to eliminate injustice, target support at people who show great potential as artists, or who are making great work already but are not working within familiar paradigms. And I think we should open out the ways in which we nurture people, so that they feel they're being given support because they're exciting artists, and not because someone noticed the colour of their skin.

There has been some great work highlighting the issues around cultural diversity in the past few years. But so much of what has happened so far has left so many people out. People who are making exciting, relevant work, people from under-represented backgrounds socially and economically, people from countries that are not 'on the agenda' right now. I'm afraid that what we have been doing so far has been alienating these people. And we need to move forward together, so that real diversity, cultural and otherwise, is embedded in all of our practices. But it's my belief that we can only do that by recognising individuality, and understanding the arguments from all sides. We must move forward with all of those interests at heart. Only then can we become truly 'culturally **diverse**'.

So we've brought together today some of the artists we consider are most confident and talented, who are prepared to challenge what's out there, who won't compromise and will speak truths, personal truths, in this debate. They come from different backgrounds in their practices, but I believe that they all

come from a place of honesty, of integrity. They will welcome you and they will challenge you to speak your own mind.

*At this point, there was a planned intervention from one of the artists, leading delegates into breakout sessions.*