

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY : BITE-SIZE CHUNKS FROM MY LIFE

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independent artist and producer

*Why are we angry? We are angry because we have been mistreated, we are angry because no-one understands, we are angry because everyone understands and yet no-one acts, we are angry because no-one really acts, we are angry because our thinking is not aligned with the world, we are angry because the world is not aligned with our thinking, we are angry because we see injustice, we are angry because we have no equivalent to the African-American movement, we are angry because we are white, because we are women, because we have choice, because we are men, because we have power and we have no power, because we have power and we don't acknowledge it, because we have boxes and the ability to shape them from the inside, because there is every need for a social justice movement and yet it is so hard to justify. We are angry and we're not sure why. These issues are complicated.*<sup>i</sup>

Diversity is a rather huge subject-area. Its definitions bleed into every corner of our work and of my life. I have found it baffling, overwhelming to write intelligently on this subject. What I offer here are bite-size experiences that in some way make up my life, my opinions. Perhaps I offer them because they are easily digestible, perhaps because I want you to read between my arguments. The essays are both image and language-based, as were the experiences. They all begin here:

### 1. Initiation into the world of brownies

In May 2003 artists from all over England performed at the decibel<sup>ii</sup> x.trax performing arts showcase. It was one of the first big decibel events. Black, brown, yellow, artists of all colours came together to perform in one place, to showcase their talents to international promoters. And if you were white, just this once, you didn't stand a chance. Everyone applauded. This was to be celebrated. Finally, a voice for the disenfranchised, a chance to address inequality of programming. Everyone traipsed around Manchester dutifully watching a rather random mix of work for four days. Following the showcase, some artists were programmed into new spaces. The event was declared a resounding success. And in some ways it was. But there was something deeply unsettling about the experience for me, something that made alarm bells ring inside me. And more disturbingly, it was something that didn't seem to ring alarm bells for many of the other delegates. This safe, superficial exploration of issues of racism, elitism and accessibility was perfect because everyone could applaud it without fundamentally changing anything. I felt alienated.

This was when I became intensely aware of the colour of my skin, when I started to feel like I was living in a truly segregated arts community, when I suddenly felt at risk of being labelled 'Asian' rather than 'artist' or 'producer' or 'director'. This was also when I realised I could own a part of this debate as much as anyone else. And for the first time in my life, I wanted to be around other 'brownies', I desperately wanted to join forces with other artists who might be experiencing the same thing.

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<sup>i</sup> Opening text by Rajni Shah

<sup>ii</sup> Decibel is a funding initiative that forms part of the diversity strategy of Arts Council England. Decibel is a cross-arts programme designed to support black, Asian and Caribbean artists.

## 2. the body as culturally diverse artefact <sup>iii</sup>



Applications are invited for a five-day research workshop exploring the process of making solo work within and without the constraints of the term 'culturally diverse'.

The project will bring together four artists who wish to debate what it means to be labelled 'culturally diverse' in Britain today. Applicants should be professional artists from any background who wish to work with their own body in performance, and who are considered or consider themselves culturally diverse.

-excerpt from an advert placed on arts mailing lists in April 2004

*How are we framed (and how do we frame each other) as brownies? How am I already framed in certain situations as a black man / Asian woman etc? Is art representative of the fact that blacks, whites and brownies all use each other's games, music, language, walk? Do I have a responsibility to be a role model to younger brownies? Should I take advantage of initiatives like decibel that label me as an artist of colour?*

'the body as culturally diverse artefact' opened up questions. At the end of the project, we hosted an open sharing with performance, text, video and an opportunity for interaction. We asked viewers that they start to recognise the complex structures, the individualities that lie beneath a blanket statement like 'cultural diversity'.

*In asking questions, discussions began, topics were raised, and it seemed that an atmosphere of openness was created, where people felt able to challenge and be challenged; not without bounds, there was still 'polite conversation', but perhaps less of it than is usually present at such events. Yes, attendees were inclined to say WELL DONE and THANK YOU but also, I think, to be disgusted or disquieted, and some, to ignore the topics in question all together, by talking about washing machines, catching up with*

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<sup>iii</sup> the body as culturally diverse artefact, April 2004 as part of the Chisenhale Dance Space Artists' Programme. Artists involved were Sam Lim, Persis Jade Maravala, Colin Poole and Rajni Shah. Both images are taken from video stills by artists and feature Rajni Shah.

*friends, resorting to old patterns, safe areas, but not without some awareness that this was what they were doing...*

extract from evaluation for 'the body as culturally diverse artefact'



In many ways, the week of research was frustrating. All four participants were seeking answers, but I think we were asking different questions. On the last day, before the public sharing, we sat down in the space and just talked, argued; we talked about what our childhoods had been like, the choices our parents had made, the choices we had made, our frustrations and ambitions as artists. One thing we agreed on was that we did not like the way we were being treated by funding bodies which had created a 'culturally diverse sector' safely separate from the mainstream. However, on most other issues, we disagreed. We disagreed about how we wanted to be seen, about what responsibilities we had stemming from our parents' choices, about whether it was possible to have 'no sense of nationality'. I think it's safe to say that we all came away having raised many more questions. If I came away with any answer, it was an answer to the question: "What's really dividing the arts sector?" And the obvious yet often wilfully ignored answer: class.

### **3. Writing**

"It turns out that the white boys on the train are American. My Theron is American. But for me, he is primarily Theron. This is also how I define myself, primarily Rajni. And I have always been allowed to define myself this way. And yet the privilege of being an individual seems to be tied very closely with class. If you are a middle-class or upper-class individual, you will probably continue being an individual. If you are a lower-class individual, you will struggle not to be labelled a trouble-maker. I am on the border between being a troublemaker and an individual. But my conviction that it was worth continuing the struggle, on the borders, not immediately getting anywhere, that (surely?) came from my middle-class status..."

Rajni Shah, diary 2005

#### 4. Mr Quiver <sup>iv</sup>



**So tell us a bit about yourself to start with, what's your name, where are you from, how old are you?**

My name is Rajni Shah, um, I'm from London and I'm 27 years old.

**Okay. Now I understand that you have a fairly interesting history in that you've lived in a number of different countries. Can you tell us a little bit about your family background? You know, who is your mum, for example? Is she from London as well?**

Okay, um, I feel a little strange telling you about my family actually, but, well, my mum's British, like me, um, she and my father were both born in India. Um... I grew up in Switzerland, and then later on lived most of my life um near Oxford. I, I ... I studied in Cambridge and then went to live in America in the United States for um, about three years, and -and now I'm based in London, um that's-

**Okay, that's great.**

extract from soundtrack for 'Mr Quiver' by Rajni Shah

I developed the solo show 'Mr Quiver' over two years. As well as being an intensely personal process, it enabled me to find new ways of communicating a lot of complex thinking around issues of race, belonging and nationalism. The show is now an installation performance lasting four hours, during which the costume, patterns of maps in salt, lighting and sound are repeatedly created and destroyed. I perform alongside Lucille Acevedo-Jones (costume designer) and Cis O'boyle (lighting designer), slipping in and out of performance, repeatedly inhabiting costumes of Elizabeth I and an Indian bride, while Lucille and Cis repair and re-hang costumes, layer music, swing, rig and de-rig lights, and draw and destroy the salt maps. Our three patterns of improvised (non)performance coincide and diverge throughout the four hours, slowly breaking down as the audience walks between and around us, enters and leaves.

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<sup>iv</sup> 'Mr Quiver' was most recently performed at the National Review of Live Art 2006. Images from performance at camden peoples theatre, taken by Chiara Contrino and Theron Schmidt.

I've often wondered whether it is thanks to the work of initiatives like decibel that I ever made 'Mr Quiver'. I find it an exciting and topical piece of work, born at least in part from my anger over the way coloured artists are being treated in this country. It's a response to the boxes, to the many attempts to make one genre out of 'Asian art' or 'black art'; it's a plea for individualism but also recognises that we cannot escape being identified by the way in which others see and categorise us. Most importantly, it asks these questions equally of each audience member, it's a reminder that we all have a past, that we all suffer or succeed by the assumptions others place on us, and that we're all equally implicated in this debate whether we like it or not.



## 5. Traditional forms

At the recent 'Pride of Place' festival<sup>v</sup> in Woodbridge, Suffolk, I was asked to lead a session on cultural diversity. We had an enjoyable and engaging debate, munching on London-bought Indian sweets as we went. Afterwards, a member of the local council approached me: "I'm not sure I agree with what you were all saying about finding new languages by merging traditions. Surely there is a great amount of worth in retaining traditional artforms and values?" he said. I replied that yes, there was. And I genuinely agree that there is a great amount of worth in sustaining traditional art from all over the world. The problem at the moment, as I see it, is that the art itself is getting ignored in favour of the colour of the artist's skin. So there is very little specific attention being paid to this issue- artists working to preserve traditional forms are given the same parameters as artists whose work has nothing to do with those traditions. Categorisation is not based on social background (giving priority to artists who have not previously had opportunity) or talent but solely on skin-colour. In my opinion this won't bring about the preservation of traditional forms or encourage innovation, much less do anything to tackle social injustice; it will simply alienate artists from one another. What's more, I believe that this kind of segregation actually reinforces hierarchy as these 'culturally diverse' platforms become less and less critically engaging and encourage funders, promoters and programmers to lump non-white artists into one indiscriminate category rather than recognising and nurturing them as independent artists.

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<sup>v</sup> Pride of Place is a consortium of regional touring theatre companies taking a lead in the debate about the relationship between place and art and the ways in which rural communities contribute to contemporary Britain. See [www.prideofplace.org.uk](http://www.prideofplace.org.uk) for further information.

## 6. An Invitation to Tea <sup>vi</sup>



*We're sick of cultural diversity. We don't know what it means, why it matters, sometimes we're not even sure if it's a good thing or not. Can this really be the way forward? We think that there are still issues to be addressed, and new ways to address them. So we want to create an atmosphere where you can have useful, truthful conversations, where you can express any opinion and have it heard. We want you to meet other artists, arts managers, producers and policy makers from the region, to share experiences and exchange ideas about the future. We're inviting you to share our tea, our food, and our time. We really hope you can make it.*

*Saj Fareed, Tracey Low and Rajni Shah*

invitation to 'An Invitation to Tea' conference



*Why is there so much focus on culturally diverse art in the south east when 95% of the population is white?*

*Positive action: does it work? Is it helping to move things forward or widening divides and encouraging segregation?*

*How can the arts help to develop racial and cultural understanding in our current climate?*

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<sup>vi</sup> 'An Invitation to Tea' took place on January 20 2006 at the Farnham Maltings. Artists involved were Ansuman Biswas, Dreadlockalien, Silke Mansholt, Lucy Panesar, Qasim Riza Shaheen, Yara El-Sherbini. For further information please visit [www.artscouncil.org.uk/aninvitationtotea](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aninvitationtotea). Images from the conference by Marina Dempster.

*Is there an audience for diverse work in the South East? Are 'cultural diversity' initiatives in rural areas a farce?*

*Is it enough to programme non-white artists, regardless of the kind of work they are making? Or do we need to go deeper to effect real change?*

*Does the term of 'culturally diverse arts' stereotype artists?*



An Invitation to Tea took place at the Farnham Maltings in Surrey and offered delegates from across the South East region an opportunity to share experiences of cultural diversity with other artists, arts managers, producers and policy makers from the region. The conference was organised by Saj Fareed, Tracey Low and myself, at the time all senior management fellows funded by Arts Council England, South East. The idea was to provoke debate by presenting the issues in unusual ways (e.g. tea parties, a pub quiz). It aimed to open up the complexity of these issues rather than offer a nicely packaged, easily digestible solution.

It was always going to be a challenge inviting a mixed group of delegates from the South East of England to come and talk about cultural diversity. This is a region where, famously, approximately 95% of the population is white. Many people feel pressure from funders to become more diverse, without an understanding of how or even why that might happen within their organisation. We wanted all opinions at the conference to have equal validity, and for people to feel free to make criticism without fear of judgement, so we played with format, making some unusual decisions about how the day was structured, including long discussion sessions and a two-hour lunch hosted by performance artists.

Some people loved the conference, some people hated it. On reflection, the thing that I am most proud of is that it had the potential to fail. It's not often that you come across a cultural diversity initiative that is prepared to take that risk, which is why we end up with so many 'multi-cultural celebratory' events, even at the higher level of culturally diverse programming. But we recognised that these were difficult questions in a difficult region, and we didn't want to pretend they weren't. The delegates who were least happy with the

day were mostly frustrated at the lack of resolution. And we could have offered more resolution in the structure. But the day made people think differently, made new introductions, and if it made some new frustrations, perhaps, in some ways, it achieved its aims.

## 7. The conversation continues

And finally, a small post-script. On sending a draft of this article to the editor of 'engage', Karen Raney, she asked me some further questions. Instead of working the answers into the body of the article I thought it might be more enlightening to post both questions and answers in their raw form, to bring the article to the present day.

**KR:** I wasn't sure if you see the segregation and alienation you describe as a necessary stage, or as avoidable. If it's avoidable - how? The same with 'ignoring the art'. Is this a necessary stage, or avoidable? Decibel organisers feel such initiatives redress an imbalance by channelling funds in a different direction than usual, and they feel they have asked people what they want and tried to provide it - such as open-ended funding, not tied to a particular project, and trying to be specific to each art form and what it needs at this time (the visual arts need more diversity in curation, for example, in the performing arts it's more about touring opportunities). Do you think it's unhelpful even to have funding streams earmarked for 'black' artists? Or do you think they need to be managed differently?

**RS:** Karen- this is complex and I'll try to answer succinctly! I think that at the heart of your question is a request that I unpick further my criticism of initiatives such as decibel. On the one hand, decibel did what it set out to do and raised the volume of debate around cultural diversity in the arts. What it did not do (and perhaps this was never its aim) was to raise the level of that debate. So we're stuck now with a very loud, very crude definition of what it means to be culturally diverse within the arts sector. Of course, from my perspective, I think things should be done differently (and that's why I've chosen to respond with projects like 'An Invitation to Tea'). I think that initiatives should be aimed at integrating different artforms and artists, at shaking things up, juxtaposing unlikely work, challenging promoters. Instead, many promoters get away with hiding 'difficult' work within programmes like Black History Month. So we've got a long way to go before artists of colour are actually recognised as individual artists, working professionally in a number of very different ways that require very different types of support. Many artists whom I believe are making serious, exciting, and often political work either feel that their work is getting ignored or that they are being forced to make work with a particular ethnic focus just because that's where the money is. There have been very few opportunities where artists of colour feel they are able to make the work that they want to make and present it in the way they want to present it. Therefore initiatives like decibel can feel rather out of touch with the real needs of many professional artists.

So that's my take on (a small part of) it. But I should acknowledge that I'm speaking with the advantage of hindsight, and also as someone who is particularly interested in raising difficult questions and in art for social justice. There's no easy solution to the many issues raised by a blanket term like 'cultural diversity' and there are countless agencies, organisations and individuals across the UK who have been effecting change and challenging opinions in many different ways. This article represents my opinion- ask ten other artists and you'll find ten more.

**Images, in order of appearance**

*the body as culturally diverse artefact* (workshop footage)

Public sharing for *the body as culturally diverse artefact*

*Mr Quiver*, Camden People's Theatre

*Mr Quiver*, Camden People's Theatre

*An Invitation to Tea* – Silke Mansholt's tea table

*An Invitation to Tea* – Yara El-Sherbini's pub quiz

*An Invitation to Tea* – Round Table feast by Ansuman Biswas

*An Invitation to Tea* –an 'authentic' Sikh Langar by Lucy Panesar

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