

## Kunst moet luchten

Wat de dierenbescherming heeft tegen de dierentuin, breng ik in tegen het museum voor moderne en hedendaagse kunst: het is een vorm van mishandeling, die eenzame opsluiting van moderne kunst. De stilte van museumzalen, de witte steriliteit van hun muren, het aura waarmee het kunstwerk er is omgeven: iedereen weet nu toch wel dat dit symbolisch geweld kunst geen goed doet? Dat kunst zich niet in de overstelpende hoeveelheid die het museum aanbiedt laat genieten?

Mijn devies voor het museum van de toekomst is dan ook: zet open die museumdeuren, en laat de kunstwerken naar buiten. En dan vooral de vaste collectie, die nu voor een belangrijk deel voor het publiek verborgen blijft.

Waar die werken naartoe moeten? Niet naar de belevenismaatschappij, de festivalcultuur of het uitgaansleven. De flirt die het museum momenteel met de amusementsindustrie heeft (denk aan de **Museumnacht**, de avondsalon of de door Sjarel Ex voorgestelde museumsoap), leidt nergens toe. Het is een verkrampte poging om jong publiek te trekken; een poging die gedoemd is te mislukken. Want de verbrandings-snelheid ligt hoog in de amusementsindustrie, en de concurrentie is er hard. Is de nieuwigheid van het museumvertier af, dan zal dat vertier snel het veld moeten ruimen.

Het museum zou dan ook niet gericht moeten zijn op amusement en sensatie, maar op bezinning en inspiratie – het museum als huis van de muze. Maar dat huis moet wel midden in de samenleving staan. De autonomie van de moderne kunst die het museum in de twintigste eeuw zo succesvol heeft verdedigd, heeft goeddeels haar eigen maatschappelijk isolement in de hand gewerkt. De uitdaging van het museum van de toekomst is dan ook om een tegenkracht te bieden tegen de haast, de commercie en het

amusement die de boventoon voeren, zonder daarmee de banden met de samenleving door te snijden.

Laat het museum daarom verhuizen naar plekken die symbolisch minder beladen zijn; waar terloopsheid, het onbewaakte ogenblik en langzame aandacht voor een kunstwerk mogelijk zijn. Naar plekken waar de tijd stil lijkt te staan en waar mensen moeten wachten. Naar de wachtkamer van de dokter, de openbare ruimtes van het stadhuis, het postkantoor of de bank, bijvoorbeeld.

Laten we het museum verplaatsen naar een plek waar kunst zich geborgen weet. Geef wie zich werkelijk voor kunst interesseert het recht kleine collecties kunstwerken uit de depots te halen en – tijdelijk – mee naar huis te nemen. Geef iedereen vervolgens de plicht zijn huis op gezette tijden open te stellen voor zijn collectie-in-bruikleen. Niet alleen de interactie met het kunstwerk, maar ook die tussen beschouwers van kunst onderling zal er ongetwijfeld intensiever door worden. Met digitale middelen moet daarbij een handomdraai te zien zijn waar kunstwerken zich bevinden, en wanneer ze te zien zijn; voor overzichtstentoonstellingen kunnen liefhebbers altijd nog in een kunsthall terecht.

Helemaal nieuw is dat museum thuis overigens niet. De Belgische museumdirecteur Jan Hoet bracht zijn kunstwerken in 1986 al onder bij in de huiskamers van Gent – **Chambres d'Amis**, noemde Hoet de tentoonstelling. In zekere zin is mijn museum van de toekomst zelfs een terugkeer naar de premoderne tijd: private collecties en huiselijke rariteitenkabinetten stonden immers aan de wieg van het moderne kunstmuseum.

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## Bringing the Outside In – Taking the Inside Out

### Inventing new strategies for London's multicultural development

London has a reputation as a multicultural city. How did it become the cultural capital, and what kind of initiatives are deployed to keep this position?

London's reputation as a multicultural city has been in the making for centuries. Jewish migrants from Germany and Eastern Europe and black and Asian settlers have had a presence in London for several hundred years. Nearly half of Britain's black, Asian and minority ethnic population lives in London. Also important in the context of this essay is the capital's reputation for producing talented, leading edge artists and creative and cultural entrepreneurs, many of whom are from the African and Asian diaspora's, or whose work is strongly influenced by these international sources. This vibrant mix of diverse cultures is frequently celebrated as major factor in the success of London's creative profile.

London did not become like this overnight of course. But where is it possible to trace how it has reached this point? In very few places in London are these histories evident in guides or in the displays and exhibitions of major museums and galleries.

In this essay, I will outline some of the key issues that helped to shape the concepts underpinning the Mayor's Culture Strategy, **London: Cultural Capital** (2004). I will briefly focus on two significant initiatives – the GAIN project to diversify the boards of key London arts organizations, and the establishment of a commission of enquiry into the capital's awareness and promotion of African and Asian heritage' issues. I will also attempt to summarise some of the contexts within which the priorities for developing the strategy arose. Because both of the projects are at an early stage of development, the thorny issue of the effectiveness of any of these initiatives is something to which we will have to return over the next few years. Even so, it is still possible to identify some of the critical issues that have arisen and to which we will no doubt return during the evaluation process.

London is often pointed to as a place of tolerance and freedom, a place where diverse cultures live together in relative harmony with less apparent ghettoisation than other major cities around the world. Nonetheless, there are substantial disparities in the distribution of wealth, resources and power – inequalities that need to be

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addressed. Many people experience a deep sense of alienation and dislocation from society and any notion of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Others do not feel that able to participate in cultural activities due to perceived emotional and/or intellectual barriers.

**Cultural conversations** During my tenure as a professor of Cultural Studies, I became increasingly interested in the interconnection between policy, politics, practice and theory. This interest sprung from a desire to understand and harness the potential of devising and implementing strategies and policies that would make a lasting impact on how issues of ‘race’, ethnicity and culture might develop and be viewed in the future.

As Head of Culture for the Greater London Authority (GLA), I was given the responsibility of ensuring that the Mayor’s Culture Strategy was developed, published and disseminated as widely as possible. In other words, I was now in a position to be involved in putting theories into practice within a political environment.

As part of the development and consultation process for the Culture Strategy, Culture Team colleagues and I travelled extensively across London, talking with colleagues working in the arts, museums, archives, libraries, creative industries, tourism and sports. Because we could not wait until the end of the process to start work, some policies were of necessity already being discussed – and in some cases implemented – as we consulted.

In those discussions with London’s cultural sector the issues that came up were often very similar to some extent: resources were a key issue across all sectors and at all levels. But there was also a sense that most of the sector understood the need for a process of reflection, debate and transformation – particularly as a response to London’s demographic changes.

A question from arts organisations, archives and museums arose time and time again and is encapsulated by the phrase ‘what is the role of our library/archive/museum in the Britain of the 21st century?’ A range of concerns emerged relating to the content and/or products of institutions: how collections were interpreted and displayed; staff morale; issues of governance and professional development and training; how to gain new audiences without scaring away core supporters; and how to maintain or renew the organization’s overall sense of purpose. The issue of cultural diversity was ever present, but provoked a degree of anxiety and occasionally hostility. We felt it crucial to bring this issue to the foreground within the strategy for London’s cultural development, and it was made clear that cultural diversity had to be part of the bedrock upon which the strategy was built.

**What’s new?** Part of the questioning mentioned above was due to the change in policy direction implemented by the Labour government of 1997. The idea of

emphasising culture’s contribution to a social agenda gained political ascendancy, and social inclusion projects and programmes seemed virtually obligatory for all publicly funded cultural organisations. Inevitably, objections were raised and the tired old arguments about ‘art for art’s sake’ and the ‘dumbing down’ of culture to make it more accessible resurfaced.

It is important to note that many of the ideas expressed through terms such as ‘social inclusion’, ‘community access’ and ‘cultural diversity’ are not really new: it’s more of a repositioning and a renaming process. Certainly the commitment to pursuing the notion of artistic and cultural endeavour as a way of transforming society has been a consistent feature of post-war cultural activities in Britain. Much of the work carried out in the name of community arts during the 1960s and 1970s was lost to 1980s Thatcherism. A minority of museum professionals maintained their concerns with the impact on society of the work they did in the face of opposition from managers and boards who felt that such concerns were inappropriate. Since a change of government in the late 1990s, some of these concerns took centre stage in cultural policy and these perspectives have now been ‘legitimated’ through strategic local, regional and national governmental policy interventions.

In discussing diversity initiatives and the museum sector, it has to be acknowledged that there are many who do not see such work as a priority or even appropriate. Along with debates about the emotional and intellectual accessibility of our museums and the government’s agenda of effecting social inclusion through cultural institutions, the desire to reflect diversity in our cultural institutions is seen as a form of ‘social engineering’. The sceptical depict this as fruitless navel-gazing prompted by a zealous government that is intent on forcing a political agenda of social inclusion, access and cultural diversity on arts organizations, galleries and museums that are under-valued and under-resourced. This viewpoint often surfaces and is worth exploring briefly.

An example of the distaste for such interventionist policies prompted the sentiments expressed in a review published in *The Guardian* newspaper on 7 February 2004. The writer, James Fenton, is a respected member of the cultural establishment. He claims the British government’s view of the purpose of museums is that they should ‘work for the abolition of inequalities in a class society... and social criteria are everywhere substituted for aesthetic ones.’ Fenton is not alone in arguing that the intrinsic qualities of the beautiful object are enough in and of themselves to produce a sublime experience in the eyes of the beholder.

Although he dismisses as ‘fanciful’ the notion that museums can address issues of social inequality, he seems to agree with the author of the essay to which he refers when he writes ‘Beauty leads to justice...by soliciting in us the desire to care for that beautiful object – and then through a lateral distribution of caring, to protect all such objects; and of course not only objects, but all living things too – flowers, butterflies, people.’ Although conceding that there is the possibility that his argument ‘has its “fanciful” aspect’, Fenton seems convinced that all a museum need do

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is collect and present its objects.

It isn't made explicit, but the article seems to suggest that museums – as purveyors of beautiful things – are somehow free of ideology, and untainted by people's everyday lives and experiences. For many people, the beauty in an object is neither immediately visible nor instructive in the way that Fenton posits. Indeed, many people are convinced that there is nothing in a museum that would make any sense to them and they feel disempowered by the idea of walking into what they perceive as a hushed, cathedral-like building where security guards are ready to pounce if someone makes too much noise. This is not the reality in many museums, but it is many people's perception and it stops them from visiting. For example, black and minority ethnic people were found to be less likely to visit museums and archives than their white counterparts in research conducted by opinion pollsters MORI (2001), partly because they felt there would be nothing that related to their culture or experiences. The fact is that many museums and archives do have many items of interest in their collections, although organisations do not always make the most of them, and in some instances are unaware of their existence.

**Sophisticated understanding** One way of pushing diversity up the agenda is to ensure informed discussion by boards of trustees. However, this is made difficult because there is often a lack of expertise on the board about the subject. Staff are often frustrated in their efforts to progress more quickly in this area of work by the reluctance of Chairs and board members to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the issues involved.

Research has demonstrated that many of the boards of London's key cultural organisations and institutions do not adequately reflect the diversity of the city, and that this is a substantial barrier to the development of more rapid change in arts organisations, museums and galleries.

Targeting black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in the first instance, the national and London offices of the Arts Council England (ACE), Arts and Business London (A & B), and the Greater London Authority (GLA) formed a steering group to drive forward a pilot programme to diversify the boards of London's cultural organisations.

The methodology of GAIN's development programme was very much informed by the experience of the Netherlands's Atana project – a key feature of which is the opportunity to network. Also important was the necessity for both the boards of trustees and the potential trustees to understand their respective roles. Underpinning GAIN's specific objectives is the desire to support the good governance of cultural institutions through ensuring that the interests of all stakeholders are fully served.

**Heritage and representation** During the period covered by the Culture Strategy consultation period, a range of concerns was expressed with urgency within the

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museums world.

This intensity of reflection on museums and galleries' practise has manifested itself in a variety of ways, covering a range of subject matters. The following are just a few examples.

Both the Museums Association and the government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) independently of each other have brought together a group of people to think about the function of museums and the changing nature of collections respectively as we enter the 21st century.

The heritage of London is a major tourist attraction and a substantial contributor to the city's image and identity. But much of what is visible is dominated by a particular notion of history and heritage, leaving much hidden.<sup>2</sup> London: Cultural Capital pointed out the need for rapid progress in the black and minority ethnic heritage sector in order to ensure that the story of London being told encompassed the various narratives that make up the whole. The establishment of the Mayor's Commission on African and Asian Heritage (MCAAH), which began its work in June 2003, has a remit to identify key issues and make recommendations for action and implementation in this important but badly neglected area, and was intended to complement the GLA's ongoing commitment a wide-ranging agenda for action in relation to equalities. The focus is on people of African and Asian descent due to the historical – and ongoing – relationship between Britain and its former colonies. In spite of this long association, there is little in the majority of museums and archives that attests to this history.

The main aims of the MCAAH are to support and encourage the preservation of black and minority ethnic history and heritage by identifying and promoting awareness of the significant African, Caribbean and Asian influences upon the history and cultures of London; provide an overall strategic vision and development plan for black and minority ethnic history and heritage in London; increase funding; and expand and develop programmes necessary to ensure that all citizens are aware of the city's black heritage cultural and historic resources.

The lack of employment opportunities in professional and senior positions, poor representation on boards of trustees, and the slow progress of black and minority ethnic-led heritage projects meant that such an intervention was a timely one. The initiative also chimed with the other debates about the challenges to cultural institutions in a new century previously outlined.

The Commissioners were chosen because they are leaders in their field with expertise covering academic research, education, curating, administration, training and directing organizations. They were asked to examine the themes of education, training, infrastructure, partnerships and outreach, resources and representation.

The MCAAH was intended to be a wide-ranging assessment of the current state-of-play in this developing field of work. It was not set up to deal with specific instances of discrimination or research into particular historical periods. Some preliminary research was commissioned early on in the process to gain a reasonably

accurate picture of recent developments in the sector, as well as examples of good and bad practice. We also wanted to encourage ownership of the project from the key agencies before the Commission actually got to work. To this end, we established a group of Partners that included agencies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)<sup>3</sup>; Arts Council England (ACE)<sup>4</sup>; the London Museums Agency (LMA)<sup>5</sup>; and English Heritage (EH)<sup>6</sup>.

It was made clear from the beginning that this was a partnership that was meant to bear fruit. Therefore, we discussed with each organisation what their role might be – both during the course of the inquiry and subsequent to the publication of the report. Crucially, a senior member of staff represented each Partner organisation. As well as attending the sessions specifically set up for Partners, at least one representative would attend the open session to listen to and participate in the discussion. Some Partners also participated as specialist speakers.

Sessions were held at a variety of venues, again in partnership with organisations such as the Museum of London, National Trust, the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Geographical Society and the Victoria and Albert Museum, all of which provided facilities and resources. Each of the sessions focused on one of the key themes with invited audiences/participants, speakers, facilitators and transcribers. The process was designed to be as inclusive as possible, but inevitably there were many whose views could not be heard and those who felt that the emphasis, or indeed the whole project, was not appropriate.

One of the key issues to emerge was how to ensure equity in partnerships between the small, black-led groups and the larger, much better resourced mainstream organisations. The report of the MCAAH findings is due to be published in October 2004, and there has already been significant intellectual investment in the outcomes by some of the larger heritage bodies.

**All our histories** Both GAIN and the MCAAH have achieved something by coming into existence. Each of the projects has raised awareness, prompted debate and enquiry, and encouraged cultural professionals to rethink their practices. It is now up to all of us to make sure we do not waste the opportunities they offer.

We need to develop processes that will enable us to understand and make apparent historical influences, exchanges and appropriations. This will require us to rethink what a historical narrative is and how multiple narratives may be represented. To do this, we will need to think in terms of inter-cultural histories, exhibition and display practices, theory-making and analyses. We will also need develop a keener sense of the various roles played at different times by national, cultural, and ethnic groupings.

Such an approach is demanding of our time and energy, and we will all need to equip ourselves with the new tools, knowledge and skills that will help us to engage actively with the histories and heritages of a variety of cultures and historical narratives. This grand project suggests an approach that embraces those individuals and

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small organisations whose principal resources are their experience, knowledge and perspectives of their communities, and who will work along with the agencies and institutions who have staff and networks with a different set of knowledge and skills.

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- 1 In the context of this essay, I use the term heritage to include objects, documents, visual and audio texts, intangible assets, and the built environment and agencies associated with the promotion of heritage such as funding and strategic bodies.
- 2 See the report of the national conference Whose Heritage, the Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage, 1999. See also (forthcoming) The Oxford Companion to Black British History, edited by Professor David Dabydeen and Dr John Gilmore. As they emphasise, black people have lived in the British Isles since Roman times and from the latter half of the 16th century there has been a more or less continuous black presence. The peoples of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean have settled in England as educators, servants, students, servants, political activists, artists, members of the medical professions and so on.
- 3 The Heritage Lottery Fund exists to promote awareness of Britain's heritage and gives grants of up to several million pounds to organisations of all sizes.
- 4 The Arts Council of England is the funding and strategic planning agency for the arts in England. It has nine regional offices including London.
- 5 The London Museums Agency has now been absorbed into the new London-wide body Archives, Libraries and Museums with a remit to develop strategic projects.
- 6 English Heritage is the agency responsible for caring for the historic built environment.