

REINVENTING BRITAIN

Digitally



Pe
EG
ita
tal

The **Guardian**

dB



“My parents see me as Indian, but my friends see me as British. I see myself as both British and Indian”
BALJIT BALROW

The Arts Council has launched decibel, its major initiative to profile “cultural diversity”. So what is cultural diversity? Where does it fit into the arts arena? Artists and writers provide their own introductions to this provocative, diverse, growing, and very British cultural phenomenon.

contents

- Introduction 02
- Performing arts 06
- Visual arts 10

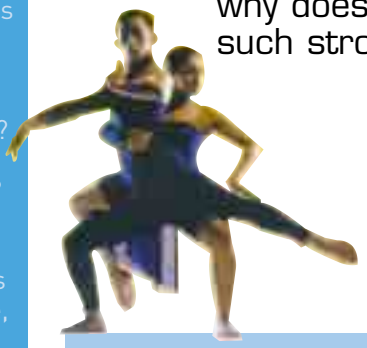
db
Editor Naseem Khan
Production editor Sue George
Art director Terry Hawes
Picture editor Jill Mead
Production Darren Gavigan
Repro GNL Imaging Department
Produced by
 The Guardian and Observer Development Department

Cover image by
 Baljit Balrow for Self Portrait UK
 Self Portrait UK is the national Channel 4 self-portrait campaign produced by Media 19 in partnership with The National Portrait Gallery and Arts Council England North East.

The Guardian

The arts in transition

Twenty years of debate about cultural diversity in the arts have raised many voices for and against. But what exactly is cultural diversity and why does it still arouse such strong feelings?



the debate over “cultural diversity”, and it is well worth tracing the roots of the phenomenon in order to get a better handle on the reactions to it today.

In the late 1970s, when the arts of ethnic minorities were first put on the map in the report *The Arts Britain Ignores*, there was little confusion. The report was a pioneer, and spoke for a wealth of cultural activity within ethnic minority communities and unsuspected outside them. Largely centred around the need of new immigrants to maintain a link with back home, they had no presence in formal funding patterns and little in arts programmes. There was initially much sympathy. Only harsh institutions would not respect such a need. The Ukrainian choirs, West Indian folk groups, Indian dancers and Urdu and Punjabi poets deserved support, and doors were tentatively opened to the new.

But as time went by and the 1970s gave way to the 80s, the profile of arts emerging from this sector began to change their shape. New generations started to uncouple them from motherland allegiances. The ideal of retention, authenticity and purity so important to their parents ceased to have the same sort of force.

Terminology — so often seen as simply a dull naming activity — offers a subtle clue to the radical shifts that have



Far left, the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company; **left**, the Notting Hill Carnival Children’s Day; **Right**, novelist Monica Ali

How we got here
 The march of cultural diversity — some of the milestones

80s



1962: Commonwealth Immigrants Bill becomes law.
 The black umbrella organisation Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination (CCARD) is set up in Birmingham, followed by the Conference of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organizations (CAACO) in London.

1964: Indian Painters Collective is formed in London.

Signals, David Medalla’s news bulletin of the Centre for Advanced Creative Study.

1965: Commonwealth Arts Festival is launched.

British Civil Rights Organisation Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) is formed at the instigation of Martin Luther King.



Malcolm X, leader of the Black Power movement in the US, visits London.

The Race Relations Act is passed.

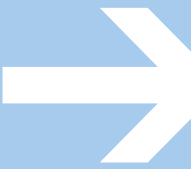
1966: Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) is formed.

1967: Black organisations take part in the largest anti-Vietnam rally in Britain, in London’s Trafalgar Square.

Stokely Carmichael, the leading Black Panther member, visits London.



continued overleaf



ONCE UPON A TIME, LIFE WAS simple, or so the story runs. Spinsters rode fine old-fashioned bicycles to early communion. Village cricket teams played friendly matches on their village greens. And Elizabeth David had not yet opened the door to foreign food.

The story of the arrival of new communities from Britain’s old colonies and the impact on this unreal and utterly illusory idyll is long and extraordinary. It is full of drama, of characters both noble and dubious, of confusions, fears, contradictions and hypocrisies. For while the changes in social life have been exhaustively recorded and analysed, the effects on cultural life still raise opposing issues. Is Britain a multicultural nation? And if so, does that mean — on the one hand — the undermining of “Britishness”? Or again, if it is indeed multicultural, why the determined policy focus on “cultural diversity”? Isn’t that a case of shutting the stable door when the horse is safely outside in the paddock winning races?

Few themes have raised so many contradictory passions as

informed this world. In the 1970s, the cultural work was called “ethnic minorities’ communities’ arts”, showing the way in which the work was totally identified with the communities from which it sprang. This mouthful of a term changed to the snappier “ethnic arts” with the rise of hippiedom, ethnic food, ethnic dress and the cautious raise of cultural tourism amongst the mainstream. Here we find the establishment of the Notting Hill Carnival as a major annual event, Chinese New Year celebrations on the streets in Chinatowns, and ethnicity acquiring a public and participatory face.

New writers, artists, directors who had lived the bulk of their lives in Britain began to turn their attention to local conditions. Intensely political, they made common cause with movements like Rock Against Racism. The gentle term “ethnic arts” with its cosy connotations of home weaving and folk singing was impatiently thrust aside by a generation that firmly declared that, no, it wasn’t ethnic, it wasn’t marginal: it was “Black” and the work was “Black Arts”.

Spurred on by the Greater London Council and a newly resolute Arts Council of Great Britain, an array of work sprang

up. But as the arts and its issues came steadily in from margins to mainstream, greater closeness revealed a gulf of incomprehension. It is easier to sympathise with cultural forms that are at a distance and lay no claim to any of your turf. Once the engagement becomes more direct, issues of vocabulary and aspiration increase in importance. The first dilemma was over terms. What did “black arts” mean precisely? Who should the work be for? Frank Cousins’ story (page nine) reveals an Arts Council that directed him to take his fledgling black theatre company to black audiences.

Secondly, the move to the mainstream raised questions about language. How profound could communication — given the cultural difference — be? It was all well and good for Indian classical dance to exist in its traditional purity in East London and elsewhere, but could non-Asian audiences understand its aesthetics? In fact, it seems, a new kind of language needed to be framed. The choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh is a good example. Trained as a classical Bharata Natyam dancer in the rigorous South Indian style, she started to branch out into different areas of exploration. Her work

The first dilemma was over terms. What did ‘black arts’ mean precisely?

began to take the building blocks of Bharata Natyam apart and see what resonances resulted when they were teamed with the work of Western avant-garde composers such as Michael Nyman.

Jeyasingh herself remarked at the time how much her improved the quality of dialogue with white dancers and audiences. With her traditional work, she said, people had been afraid of giving offence if they unwittingly stumbled an unsuspected religious sensibility. With her new work, she had created a new public domain, a place for people to meet and share and craft a new language — comprehensible to both sides - as they went along. “I suppose it’s English, said Jeyasingh, in the BBC film *The Colour of Britain*, “because I live here”.

Little by little, music and dance, theatre and visual arts that only a decade or two before had so often been acts of faith, had turned into vehicles to express a very different way of perception. It is hard to overstate the sense of creative glow that came from the freedom of being able to use ethnicity in ways that suited their own particular visions.



Right: Keith Khan, the artistic director of the Queen's Jubilee Parade (far right)

would seem reasonable to simply let the grass grow on its own since it seems to be doing it quite well. Unfortunately though, it appears that a few very hardy plants — special and driven individuals — will force their way to the top in this situation, but the bulk will not have that quality.

Dacre Balsdon's Oxford Life told the wry anecdote of tourists awestruck by the peerless grass in Oxford college quadrangle. How, they asked, was it achieved? Simple, said the lodge porter, you just rolled it and watered it, rolled it and watered it. "How long for?" asked the tourists.

"Oh, around three or four hundred years."

But would-be Black, Asian and Chinese artists and administrators do not have that sort of time and nor do venues either. If theatres, galleries and arts centres in areas where the demography provides sizeable ethnic minority communities do not reassess their way of working, hard financial facts will close them down. Britain's cities are becoming increasingly diverse, with Leicester set to be over 50% Asian in a few years time. In London, every fifth person is from an ethnic minority. But how many find their way into

Funding is lower from statutory sources because, it has been claimed, black and Asian companies are younger in timespan and less deeply rooted with less in-built expertise on fundraising. Of the 65 black and Asian administrators interviewed for the Independent Theatre Council's Glass Ceiling report (2002), 86% had personally encountered racism working in mainstream performing arts. The Arts Council's Eclipse report recounts the chilling tale of the father of a major black theatre director who had gone to the box office of his theatre to book tickets. He was told, before he spoke, that the vacancy for a cleaner had been filled.

It is maybe not irrelevant that anecdotal evidence indicates significant black and Asian presence in the cultural industries and multimedia. This suggests that commerce and entrepreneurship are ironically more open and fleet of foot than our major cultural institutions.

In the meantime, something needs to be done to ensure not so much cultural diversity as cultural equity. Nobody likes special treatment. But if the public sector is to retain any legitimacy, some kind of an intervention is a necessary evil:

Eamonn McCabe, Neil Libbert, Hulton Getty, Corbis



Clockwise from abc the Queen Jubilee Parade; Anish Kapoor and his Marsyas sculptor artist Ch Ofili

Extreme right-wing groups form the National Front.

Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) holds its first public meetings in Earl's Court, London.

1968: Martin Luther King is assassinated.

The Race Relations Act outlawing "incitement to racial hatred"

does not prevent Enoch Powell advocating enforced repatriation to avoid "rivers of blood" flowing through the streets of Britain.



70s

1971: Artists' Liberation Front is formed.

1972: Stuart Hall becomes the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

Ugandan Asians arrive as refugees in Britain.

1974: Artists for Democracy is formed by David Medalla and colleagues.

The Drum Arts Centre is established.

1976: Commission for Racial Equality is formed.

Grunwick strike, consisting of a largely Gujarati workforce, begins.

The Arts Britain Ignores is published. Minorities Arts Advisory Service (MAAS) is set up as a result.

On the final evening of the Notting Hill Carnival, violence erupts between young blacks and the police.



1977: National Front march through London.

1978: Rock Against Racism festival in London.

State of British Art conference at the ICA, London.

1979: Margaret Thatcher becomes prime minister; the era known as Thatcherism begins.

Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) holds its first conference.



continues overleaf

The work of Keith Khan, for instance, is not a reproduction of Trinidadian arts, even though carnival can be a potent component of some of his processional works. This draws confidently on a gamut of influences, sometimes using them with a contained and sardonic side glance. His Wigs of Wonderment at the ICA in 1995 used the theme of self-beautification to draw out the tyranny (racially, sexually and class-based) of ideals of beauty. For the Queen's Jubilee in 2002, Khan's work exploded along the Mall in the hundreds of costumes for the Commonwealth Parade.

CHRIS OFILI REPRESENTED THE UK AT THIS YEAR'S VENICE Biennale. Anish Kapoor is remodelling Naples Underground. Examples could go on and on of artists who have created new forms that in their turn are expanding the profile of British culture at home and its multicultural reputation abroad. Writer Monica Ali, whose novel Brick Lane has just been published, explores the fault lines of Bengali/ British aspirations. She features on Granta's list of Best Young Novelists.

So if all is well, why the emphasis on "cultural diversity"? It

mainstream arts establishments, or are actually involved in running them? Precious few. The warning given of parallel worlds in the Cattle Report on the upheavals in northern cities carries messages for the arts.

For at the moment such statistics as exist show a lower comparative rate of attendance by Black and Asian people for mainstream arts, while remaining by and large loyal to grassroots ethnically rooted culture. Upper management — the men and women who run arts buildings and companies — is almost exclusively white. Boards of management of the flagships — in receipt of millions of pounds of public money — include a handful of ethnic minorities, if any, and were hardly ever able to provide information on their staff statistics when the Guardian conducted its own straw poll. Even harder to obtain was information on the percentages of non-white staff members, and the level at which they operate, even though legislation now obliges public bodies to hold this information. However, earlier inquiries for the Arts Council found one person in upper management in 17 major arts venues, as opposed to 100 working in the kitchens.

needed in order to grow a broader base, to broaden the mainstream, to increase participation and, in the end, produce more Ofilis and more Kapoors. In order to attain lack of difference we need, in the short term, to focus on difference.

But when all is said and done however, the real debate is not about ethnic minorities or about who is in and who is out. The real debate concerns the choices facing a nation in transition, and the breadth of this question lies at the root of the confusion over cultural diversity. How does a country cope with the new, and with a shift in its basic character? Initially, the Arts Council attempted to digest what was digestible in the new arts on offer.

However, the arts proved to have a mind of their own and not to be so easily digestible. They leaped over the barriers and established their very own territory. And they challenged the way in which things should be done as well as concepts like "quality" and "purity".

The cultural environment has become diverse and variegated with artists laying claim to a range of directions — popular and traditional, conservative and experimental, in

If arts venues in areas with sizeable ethnic minority communities do not reassess the way they work, hard financial facts will close them down

single art forms or in cross-disciplinary work where musician work with digital artists or fashion designers, photographers and dancers. The time has passed when "ethnic arts" could be put in a box with the title of Ethnicity. Now they challenge basic assumptions — what constitutes arts, what makes up professionalism, how quality is assessed, how the cake is shared.

Cultural diversity in its fullest sense challenges set thinking, destabilises and shakes the status quo which is why it generates confusion and even hostility as much as excitement and vigour. But change carries benefits, as events in the commercial world suggest. When Schneider-Ross commissioned a study of 140 major businesses and organisations in 2002, they discovered that 80% confirmed a link between good diverse practice and overall business performance.

At the end of the day, diversity makes money, but at a deeper level, it also makes sense too, part of the painstaking job of reinventing Britain.

NASEEM KHAN
With additional research by Sarah James

Centre stage

While some black and Asian performers have become household names, there's still a long way to go before the world of the performing arts reflects Britain's diversity



Steve J Benbow

Above, Frank Cousins today, pictured at his home in Menorca



LACK PERFORMERS APPEAR TO BE IN A STRONG POSITION nowadays. You can find us in the National Theatre and the RSC, in demand for international tours, and on stage in the West End in Bombay Dreams. We are increasingly varied in our creative approaches. But how secure is all this? Have the changes been as profound as they appear?

Let me take you on my personal journey. I had trained in classical Indian dance but fell into acting as it seemed a more secure career choice! This was, of course, well before Shobana Jeyasingh transformed the way British audiences looked at South Asian dance.

In the early 1980s, we theatre practitioners began our

work with research. We gathered material — stories of migration, derring-do and dashed hopes, mixed with nostalgic daydreams of “home” — from Sikhs in Southall, Rastas in Reading and Bengalis in Bow. We improvised and workshopped, learning techniques from Butoh to Commedia dell’arte and Kathakali. And we worked with new writers such as Hanif Kureishi and Tunde Ikoli, whose early plays dealt with the very essence of being black and British.

Increasingly, as we found our own voices, we were reluctant to be part of the agenda set by others. By the early 1980s, there was enough momentum for a festival, and the first Black Theatre Season was launched at London’s Arts Theatre in 1983. It continued right through to 1990. This is where mainstream audiences first had a chance to see The Little Clay Cart, a fabulously irreverent version of an 8th-century Sanskrit classic performed by the Tara Arts Group, founded by Jatinder Verma in 1977. Several other companies presented shows in the annual seasons — Anton Phillips’ Carib and Alby James’ Temba (established by Alton Kumalo), and the Asian Theatre Co-op started by writers Farrukh Dhondy and HO Nazareth.

Focus: Frank Cousins

“The Dark and Light Theatre — that was a dream come true. I came to England from Jamaica on September 20 1960, wanting to be an actor and studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. My first job after drama school was in pantomime in Cambridge. I played the genie of the lamp. It was very hard for black actors. The writers weren’t there; there was no way for black performers to develop: repertory was impossible to get into and the Caribbean accent was difficult for the English ear. We needed a black theatre company.

I was talking to the Reverend Canon Collins, and he said, ‘Why don’t you start one? Somebody’s got to. You can’t just sit back and wait.’ I said, ‘OK, I’ll do it.’ You face me with a challenge and I’ll take it up!

So we ended up with Longfield Hall, between Camberwell and Brixton. Not easy to find, but it was that or nothing. It was the first time ever we had a black company with a base. Lambeth Council

paid our electricity and charged us a token rent. I was the first black person to take the Arts Council arts management course.

We wanted to tour, and quite a few major theatres were interested. But then suddenly I was called up by the Arts Council who said, “We’re cancelling your tour. We want you to go into black areas.” I was really angry but they were right. We had to create a demand. So we had to go into community centres and halls with insufficient electricity and no facilities. But we were breaking new ground, showing African and Caribbean history and culture, and building an audience all over England.

The Dark and Light ended six months after I stepped down as artistic director, but I hope what it achieved, small though it was, helped towards the companies that have come after it. It set the precedent.” Frank Cousins was talking to Tara Mack for Talawa Theatre’s Black Stages archival project. Go to: www.talawa.org

But these showcases did not bear fruit in the way that had hoped. The mainstream continued much as it always had. Some actors did well and television picked up many brilliant performers. Otherwise, despite mutterings about multiculturalism from the Arts Council, black companies struggled to keep their heads above water, with inadequate funding. Yvonne Brewster’s Talawa Theatre Company, which had led the way in the late 80s and 90s, enjoyed a too-brief base in London’s West End. The Black Theatre Co-Operative came close to folding and was rejuvenated in the 1990s. Now known as Nitro, it is being successfully run by Felix Cross.

Some London producing theatres were staunch allies — the Royal Court, Tricycle, and Riverside Studios, as well as the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, that has acted as base for black companies and performers, presenting a wide range of talent from cabaret by The Posse and the Bibi Crew, to hit music like Five Guys Named Moe. It also launched Keith Khan and Zaidi’s Asian performance phenomenon, Moti Roti, on an unsuspecting world in 1993. And continues to surprise by showcasing local street-dance talent in Da Boyz its recent reworking of Rodgers and Hart’s classic The Boys from Syracuse.

The trailblazers have done well. Keith and Ali went on to introduce their brand of large-scale spectacle to millions worldwide who watched last year’s Golden Jubilee

80s

1981: Brixton Riots. Heavy rioting breaks out in April in the wake of an increase in policing and later spreads throughout Britain.

The Scarman Report forces a review of funding and cultural policies towards black arts practitioners.

A fire in Deptford causes the death of 13 Afro-Caribbean youths. The tragedy, referred to as the New Cross Massacre, served as a locus for the political organisation of black Britain.

Black Audio Film Collective is established

The Nationality Act is passed, restricting the right to live in Britain to British citizens.

The first cases of Aids are reported.

The Workshop Declaration is signed, supporting grant-aided film and video workshops.

1982: National Black Art Convention, organised by the Pan-African Connection, takes place at Wolverhampton Polytechnic.

The Pan-African Connection an exhibition of work by young black artists

continued overleaf

Focus: Mira Kaushik

Mira Kaushik wears an outsize red bindi on her forehead. “I originally wore a bindi just to feel beautiful. When I came to this country from India in 1982, I got a very clear message: it was too strange, too scary. So I wore it with defiance. Now it has become a symbol of celebration of my presence here. It’s a joke to say I’m part of cultural diversity. I’m a Londoner.”

Kaushik is director of Akademi, a South Asian dance organisation. It was founded in 1979 as the Academy of Indian Dance, focusing on classical dance. Kaushik, whose background is in community theatre and film, took over in 1987 and has expanded its activities to include artistic experimentation and research, advice and consultation. “There are no set notions about what we are and what we do.

“South Asian dance now flourishes on many different levels,” she continues. “There are classical and contemporary styles, the whole world of commercial and social dance, and folk dancing. But dance has not moved to centre stage the way fashion, food and film have done.”

For Kaushik, visibility is crucial. In 2000 Akademi produced Coming of Age, a large-scale site-specific performance at London’s South Bank Centre. “Coming of Age set a landmark, encompassing a whole spectrum of artists.” Akademi’s next project, Escapade, is another site-specific event at the South Bank (August 1-2). “Escapade looks at London as an exotic locale. I wanted to look at how the West is being Indianised.” Sanjoy Roy

celebrations on TV. Jatinder Verma was the first Asian director to be invited in by the National Theatre in 1990 and the following year Yvonne Brewster became the first black woman director, with Lorca’s Blood Wedding, there. The people who worked with them have gone on often to bright careers, and other companies have sprung up from their inspiration. That’s particularly impressive. For more than 20 years, the company provided the training ground for a committed and talented bunch of performers from the Asian diaspora.

Kali, the Asian women’s theatre group, was started by people, and so was Man Mela. Tamasha — run by Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar — is the best known, with several popular hits to its credit like Balti Kings and Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral, as well as Ayub Khar Din’s hilarious comedy, East is East. A few ex-Tara performers are now household names, like Sanjeev Bhaskar, Vincent Ebrahim and Indira Joshi from The Kumars at Number 42.

Other alumni, like Shelly King and Paul Bhattacharjee, are currently rehearsing Hobson’s Choice at the Young Vic in a version by Tanika Gupta. Tanika is amongst a generation of

Hulton Archive, PA, Herbert art gallery & museum



hot writers who are, with others like Biyi Bandele, Adjoa Andoh and Neil Biswas, much in demand. Look out too for Kwame Kwei-Armah, whose *Elmina's Kitchen* is currently at the National Theatre, and Debbie Tucker-Green who recently impressed audiences in London's Hampstead Theatre with her *Born Bad*. Barriers are being challenged by Benji Reid and Jonzi D, while David Tse's *Yellow Earth* theatre company is questioning preconceptions about East Asian experiences.

Outside London and the big national companies, theatres like the Leicester Haymarket and Birmingham Rep are building a steady track-record of commissioning work by and for black and Asian audiences. The Contact Theatre in Manchester is also hot-housing new talent from different backgrounds and classic plays are being directed by black directors at some of our best known powerhouses, such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse, in Leeds and Nottingham Playhouse where Paul Savage's production of *Othello* will open in the autumn.

SO, DOES THIS MEAN THAT 20 YEARS AFTER THE FIRST BLACK Theatre Season, our ambition to move into the mainstream has been realised? Not entirely. There is more work around. There is no doubt that the range and quality of the performing arts have improved. Standards have risen and performers are generally better trained and open to more experimentation.

Black, Asian, and Chinese writers have found their own voices and this means the work is much more complex. We are no longer required to "represent" entire communities or cultures in a single evening at the theatre. The snow-white world of Live Arts has been broached by extraordinary performers like Ronald Fraser-Munroe, Ansuman Biswas, and George Chakravarthi. This is challenging stuff, and these artists are less concerned about "communities" and more interested in questions of identity.

The funding system is trying to respond; for most of the



Ali Zaidi, Sheila Burnett, Nutkhut, Chris Nash, AAVAA

past 30 years, black companies have been fighting over the crumbs on offer while the cake has continued to be sliced in the same way. Even when the size of the cake grew, with the advent of the Lottery, black companies were left wondering where to find the requisite "matching" money. The Arts Council says it is keen to invest in cultural diversity and decibel is a chance to celebrate the gains made over the past 30 years. But it needs more than celebration. A total change of mind-set is needed. The "access" agenda should move to a recognition of the range and "excellence" of the work created by black performers.

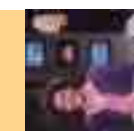
But if change has got to come, we performers must play our part too and change our own thinking. We cannot continue to point the finger of blame simplistically at "the system". There are positive signs of change that the new generation of black performers are starting to determine their own terms of engagement. A number are rejecting the hoops and hurdles of the arts funding system and venturing directly into a more commercial arena. They have also turned to the more open areas represented by new technology, where race is neither here nor there. New producers like Marc Boothe are more interested in making work which can hold its own in the marketplace rather than seeking grants.

Finally we come to *Push* — a sign, I would argue, of new

1982: The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain is published by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham.

The GLC Arts and Recreation Committee enacts a policy to recognise and foster the multi-ethnic nature of London's culture.

MAAS publishes its first national register of black artists and art groups. The following month MAAS produces *Artrage*, an intercultural arts magazine. The periodical showcases visual, performing, and media arts and literature from communities of colour.



Channel 4 is launched with a specific multi-cultural remit for minority audiences.

CLR James opens the First International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books.

Falklands' war: Britain flexes its military might.

1983: MAAS National Conference takes place at the Commonwealth Institute, London.

Black-Art Gallery opens in Finsbury Park, showing the work of only artists of African roots.

The five-month long alternative Festival of India is set up by CAA UK (Committee of Asian Artists). It culminates in the summer with what has been cited as the UK's first mela.

Sankofa Films is established.

1984: Sankofa's Maureen Blackwood and Martina Attile lead Black Women and Representation Group seminars (funded by the GLC).

The GLC declares 1984 Anti-Racist Year.



continued overleaf



Clockwise from top, Self-portrait, by George Chakravarthi; Jonzi D in *Aeroplane Man*; a still-walking princess from Nutkhut's *Maharajah's Banquet*;

the cast of the National Theatre production of *Sanctuary*, written by Tanika Gupta; *Coming of Age*, produced by Akademi



Focus: Ajay Chhabra

"As an actor and director, my work has been described as cross-art form and multi-disciplinary.

I enjoy pushing the boundaries, and am at my happiest when the work is simple, chaotic and honest. My outlook on collaboration has strengthened by working with David Glass and observing Robert Le Page. I continue to be drawn towards stories of struggle and hardship, as I grew up in this environment.

Last summer, Diesel Clothing Co asked me to create a show for their summer 2003 range. I mixed performers with models and created a show merging fashion and theatre. This summer I am creating the London Mela with the Greater London Authority, using a similar fashion concept. *Nutkhut*, (Hindi for mischievous) was set

up with my partner, Simmy Gupta, to nurture our own work. We have created *Maharajah's Banquet* — *Maharajahs* and *Princesses on stilts* — and *Futurepreneur*, a theatre show about high-tech gadget salesmen, Jewish entrepreneurs and Eastern European call girls.

I have never defined myself by my ethnicity (Fijian mother, Indian father) but by the work I am creating. The climate of cultural diversity should be a time for celebration but I am wary of the more pressing issues beneath the surface: the class structure, which exists among Asian artists and companies and the frenzy with which companies are trying to engage with black or Asian practitioners. It seems to be well-meaning but in some cases, may be unnatural and false."

times. Josette Bushell-Mingo and Ruth Nutter set up *Push* as a result of demand from their peers — other black artists and performers — and staged their first festival in 2001 in order to widen the horizons of black performance. The programme included street work, opera, new commissions, a dramatised reading of the whole of *The Odyssey*, and what was probably the first black circus.

Push will continue on its bold path in 2004, maintaining the emphasis on freshness and innovation. *Push 04* will present a range of artists and the details will be posted on their website soon (www.pushherenow.org). It's a clarion call, not just aimed at those who hold the purse strings, but also for those who are in charge of programming up and down the country. Excellence is central to the *Push* ethos. And as those of us who are black already know, there are no limits to the imagination or creativity of black people. So, why is it still so hard for those in power or authority to understand?

It could and should be a model of collaborative working between culturally diverse organisations and the mainstream, but a cautionary word. *Push* was designed from the outset as

Hulton Archive

The 'access' agenda should move to a recognition of the range and excellence of the work created by black performers

a time limited "project". This means that for it to succeed the mainstream has to pick up the gauntlet. The people who run the major arts institutions in this country cannot hide any longer. Come on promoters, 'nuff excuses! No one can pretend these days that they don't know where to find out about the work of black, Asian and Chinese performers. Nor can we let them get away with sticking their heads in the sands and talk about lack of audiences — the success of black companies and the popularity of everything from popular sitcoms to films that are breaking box-office records are ample proof of demand.

Black performers have raised the game, we have carved some space within the main institutions, but the power has not yet changed. Right now we are still guests in the house which is run by others — mainly white, male and middle class. As the *Eclipse* report from the Arts Council shows, with one or two exceptions, the mainstream still has a way to go to recognise what is there just outside the door.

SHREELA GHOSH

Looking forward

Britain's visual arts scene is the most diverse in Europe, with artists such as Anish Kapoor, Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili attracting international acclaim



Focus: David A Bailey

When Isaac Julien was planning his film, *Young Soul Rebels*, he looked in institutional archives to recreate black life in the 1970s but he couldn't find anything. The only places with that information were diaries and photo albums. In 1988, African Asian Visual Arts Archive, was born out of the need to create visibility for the work of Britain's black artists.

My own photographic work and curating at that time was informed by a concern about visibility but, by the 1990s, I wanted to document a wider range of diverse works. That led me and my fellow artist, Sonia Boyce, to work at the African Asian Visual Artists Archive as co-curators. We were part of that history and didn't want it erased.

AAVAA always suffered from a lack of space and institutional infrastructure. In the early 1990s, it was invited into the University of East London. To be supported, housed and nurtured within an institutional

context and as part of the art department was revolutionary. It meant the archive could make a contribution to teaching and research practice. It was not just a library but had a public life — locally, nationally and internationally.

But profiling Black work isn't just an AAVAA issue. It is part of the new building planned by Autograph (the Association of Black Photographers) and inIVA (Institute of International Visual Arts), for which I am part-time associate curator. Autograph recently launched a monograph on the artist Donald Rodney, showing that we can canonise our own artists and situate them in the contemporary art landscape.

The problem with the notion of cultural diversity is that it puts people in cul-de-sacs. We cannot allow that. We need to make the notion more fluid and to find a dialogue across different communities. **David A Bailey was talking to Sara Wajid**



WHAT WOULD THE VISUAL ARTS LOOK LIKE IF THERE WERE NO black or Asian artists in Britain? Your answer might not have made that much of a difference in the past, but today the mainstream is multicultural and contemporary art is no exception. Artists and galleries inspired by Britain's post-immigration cultural mix have not only shaken up the rules of the art establishment, but have won significant international acclaim along the way.

Over the last year alone there has been enough evidence to suggest that diversity is a distinctive feature of the British art scene as a whole. Anish Kapoor's sculptural installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall left visitors open-mouthed in amazement. Installation artist Steve McQueen was awarded an OBE and, still in his early 30s, he is one of the youngest British artists to be decked out with a gong. McQueen's most recent film, *Western Deep* (2002), took the viewer down a South African mineshaft in a pulverising experience of light, sound and primordial darkness and was one of the highlights of Documenta 11, the prestigious global showcase for contemporary art held every five years in Germany. Among the hundreds of artists shown in Documenta, numerous critics singled out Zarina Bhimji's video piece, which delivered a searing portrait of the Uganda landscape her family was forced to leave behind as a result of the mass expulsion of Asian communities in the early 1970s. Not shy of tackling equally big themes in his highly idiosyncratic style, former Turner Prize winner Chris Ofili rendered *The Last Supper* in a suite of 12 paintings shown at the Victoria Miro Gallery in London. Critics loved it, and so did the audiences who lingered in the chapel-like



Above, Hew Locke's portrait of the Queen Mother, from the *House of Windsor* series. **Above right,** from *Mayling To's The Stranger*. **Right,** Erika Tan

<p>1984: Racial attacks target the Asian community. In a single year, over 7,000 incidents are reported.</p>	<p>1985: An archive is established for black British artists at the St Martin's School of Art library.</p>	<p>Black Art/White Institutions conference, Riverside Studios, London.</p>	<p>The Commission for Racial Equality, set up after the 1976 Race Relations Act, publishes a report, <i>The Arts of Ethnic Minorities</i>. The report recognizes the value of ethnic arts organisations.</p>		<p>Live Aid raises £40m for starvation in East Africa.</p>	<p>Handsworth in Birmingham and Broadwater Farm in Tottenham, London, both erupt with riots.</p>	<p>Vision and Voice, a black visual arts conference. The Cave, Birmingham, England.</p>	<p>1986: The Arts and Ethnic Minorities: Action Plan, report by the Arts Council of Great Britain.</p>	<p>Black Visual Artists Forum is held at the ICA, London.</p>	<p>The GLC is dissolved in April. The dissolution of the GLC significantly affects the funding of black arts organisations.</p>	<p>1987: Publication of <i>There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack</i>, by Paul Gilroy.</p>	<p>First issue of <i>Third Text</i> and of <i>Bazaar: South Asian Arts Magazine</i></p>	<p>1988: AAVAA, the African and Asian Visual Artists' Archive, is launched.</p>		<p>continued overleaf</p>
---	---	--	--	--	--	--	---	---	---	---	---	---	--	--	----------------------------------

setting specially created by architect David Adjaye.

With so much activity underfoot, is ethnicity still relevant to the art itself? The Arts Council seems to think so, as its current decibel campaign aims to highlight the creative input that the UK's black, Asian and Chinese artists bring across the arts. What's different now are the issues being debated. Whereas artists from minority backgrounds were once held to ransom with the choice of either being an artist or being an ethnic, the gradual acceptance that Britishness is no longer what it used to be has changed the terms of discussion.

A more sophisticated understanding of identity has developed. Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare, who has described himself as a "post-colonial hybrid", provides an example: his witty and irreverent works utilise jazzy West African fabrics purchased in Brixton market that turn out to be manufactured in Korea or Indonesia. Hinting at the trade routes through which cultures cross-fertilise one another, this subtle approach reflects an attitude of curiosity and

James Stafford, courtesy of the artist, Pål Hansen.

open-ended enquiry. Embraced by such collectors as Robert Loder in Britain and Eileen and Peter Norton in America, and championed by leading international curators such as Okwui Enwezor, black British artists have been in the vanguard of contemporary artistic responses to global change.

This current state of inclusion is a far cry from the time when an exhibition called *The Thin Black Line* was held in the corridors and stairwells of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1985. Furious at being literally placed on the margins, members of the 1980s generation fought to get the debate going about awkward matters of racism in the arts. A coterie of students in the Midlands formed the BLK Art Group to campaign for more access to exhibition opportunities. Filmmakers lobbied Channel Four and the British Film Institute. Photographers formed a professional association called Autograph.

It proved to be a turning point. Out of the activism came a welter of stories that showed how much Britain had changed as an "imagined community" in the face of the waves of

David Helfman Archive, Rotimi Fani-Kayode

Quirky, cosmopolitan, unafraid of controversy: are these some of the reasons why artists born elsewhere have chosen to live and work in England?





Focus: Marc Boothe

For the past five years, Marc Boothe's media arts agency, b3 media, has been shaping the multicultural arts scene as facilitators, producers and consultants in digital media, moving image and marketing. "Cultural diversity is a very last-century way of thinking," says Boothe. "I'm more drawn to people who are open to new perspectives coming together to make interesting things happen."

Boothe sticks close to his Brixton roots but schemes on a global scale. In 1996, he organised Digital Slam, the first in a series of live arts events broadcast via ISDN between London, New York and San Francisco. Today his team is part of the cipher.tv network, a music and video collaboration linking London and Johannesburg using broadband.

Locally, he is probably best known for Nubian Tales, the film marketing company that is the cornerstone of b3 media. Establishing the first major

showcase for black cinema in the West End, Nubian Tales has spawned bigger and broader initiatives: the multi-ethnic film and new media festival, Beats, Bytes and the Big Screen, and the 23:59 Digital Short Film Challenge, where over 150 London filmmakers each made a digital short. Now b3 media plans to take things to the next level with its new baby, Electric Avenue Studios.

Boothe aims for the studio and other b3 projects to remain a catalyst and conduit for minorities. Achieving cultural, economic and political leverage for black and Asian artists won't happen overnight. The first step is for funding bodies to take a long-term view of diversity by investing in artists, producers, buildings and audience development. "There needs to be a seismic shift, where diversity becomes an essential core of the arts. It's been proved that when it does, the benefits are huge." **Uju Asika**

Pål Hansen, Nick U/AP, AP



Taking a quick look abroad for comparison soon reveals that the network of organisations supporting culturally diverse artists in Britain is something not duplicated anywhere else. European countries like France and Germany certainly have minority communities, but they don't have long-standing public policies to nurture the artistic aspirations that might come from them. The United States on the other hand, has numerous black and Latino artists in the mainstream art market, but outside of the universities there are fewer public venues for the vigorous exchange of new ideas.

Quirky, cosmopolitan, and unafraid of controversy: are these some of the reasons why artists born elsewhere have chosen to live and work in England? French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira decided to stay on after studying at the Slade School of Fine Art. As a co-curator of Veil, a touring exhibition travelling to Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, and Modern Art, Oxford, this summer, she features her own photography-based work, which explores images of wom

The notion of 'diaspora' was evoked to explore connections between communities separated by space and time

ex-colonial migration since 1945. Just as the second or third generation were coming to terms with their search for a place to call home, institutions of art and culture recognised that the old "monocultural" world-view was breaking up. I'm British, But... (1989), the title of the first short film by Gurinder Chadha, director of Bend It Like Beckham, encapsulated this breakthrough moment, which culminated in the first historical survey of black and Asian artists in post-second world war Britain at the Hayward Gallery.

Curated by Rasheed Araeen, who had come to England in the 1960s to study engineering but opted for minimalist sculpture instead, The Other Story (1989) showed that so-called minority artists had been practising in Britain since the 1940s. Ronald Moody from Jamaica, Ivan Peries from Sri Lanka, and Li Yuan Chia from China had each engaged in a critical dialogue with modernist ideas even though their work was more or less erased from the official version of art history.

The Other Story had a controversial reception. While some critics attacked it for being an all-ethnic show that amounted to an act of exclusion in reverse, many visitors felt bewildered by the sheer variety of styles on display. If the lack of a unifying aesthetic left some dissatisfied, others were frustrated by what they saw as the "burden of representation" whereby a single exhibition was expected to say everything all at once. In retrospect, however, the passionate debate was precisely the stimulus needed to open up the art world to fresh perspectives during the 1990s.

Araeen went on to set up a quarterly journal called Third Text, providing a forum for writers and academics such as Edward Said and Stuart Hall to interact with artists who were

1988: Formation of Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers.

Coco Fusco writes Young, Black, and British: A Monograph on the Work of Sankofa Film/Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective.

Panchayat Arts Education and Resource Unit is formed by Shaheen Merali and Allan deSouza.

1989: In China, hundreds of pro-democracy students are gunned down by soldiers in Tiananmen Square.

also exploring the politics of "race" and culture. In a revealing twist to the conventions of theory and practice, Isaac Julien's film, Looking for Langston, a poetic meditation on the Harlem Renaissance era, actively anticipated the far-reaching concept of the Black Atlantic pursued by Paul Gilroy, who now lectures at Yale University. Rejecting the notion that identities are determined by biology, the notion of "diaspora" was evoked to explore the imaginative connections that exist between communities separated by space and time.

Some galleries and venues picked up on these new approaches. Keith Piper's 1991 solo exhibition at the Ikon in Birmingham featured multimedia installations that paved the way for his subsequent computer-generated digital environments. Working with Afro wigs, Sonia Boyce touched on the perception of black hair as a kind of racial fetish in her contribution to the Mirage exhibition at the ICA in 1995, co-curated by Gilane Tawardros. Since then, the Institute for International Visual Arts (inIVA) in London has taken a key role in promoting innovative exhibitions.

90s

1990: John Major succeeds Margaret Thatcher as prime minister.

Nelson Mandela is released from prison.

1991: Nubian Tales established to distribute black diasporic cinema.

1992: Los Angeles riots in April following the acquittal of four white police officers charged for the beating of black motorist Rodney King.

1993: Stephen Lawrence is murdered by white youths. Four young men are tried and acquitted of his murder.

1994: inIVA, the Institute of International Visual Arts, is launched at the Tate Gallery.

Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies, by Kobena Mercer, is published.

1995: AAVAA, the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, moves to the University of East London.

1997: Re-inventing Britain, conference on identity organised by the Arts Council and British Council.

This is a shortened version of a timeline, included in Shades of Black: Assembling the 1990s. Black Arts in PostWar Britain, edited by Ian Baucom, David A. Bailey and Sonia Boyce. To be published in 2004 by



Above poster from 1985's The Thin Black Line exhibition at the ICA. Right Pidgin, by Erika Tan

Focus: Erika Tan

"After I left college, my first project was Travels with Pup (1992). It was a very personal piece, exploring my own identity and that of the photographic image. It was also the first work I made in Britain after leaving Singapore and reflected upon the changing nature of identities for my father and myself. This is not just about an ambiguity based on being mixed race, both Chinese and English, but was a reflection on historical and generational differences.

I quickly knew that I did not want to make work that would be identified by an audience as "ethnic" — for people other than themselves. My subsequent piece, Sites of Construction, used audience interactivity to incorporate the viewer into

the making of the work with games that looked familiar, yet were impossible to solve. This led to Guarded Proximity, an audience-dependent work which explored the desire for, and belief in, a knowable world at the push of a button.

So how does my work fit into the world around me? The focus on cultural diversity has created opportunities, but comes with the continuing danger of limiting the scope and interpretation of my work. How do you keep the issues and experiences of cultural difference alive when the language seems on the verge of becoming rhetoric?"

Adapted from Erika Tan's speech for the conference Connecting Flights (www.connectingflights.org)

in Islamic visual culture, alongside such fellow expatriates Ghader Amer and Shirin Neshat.

Exile, displacement and heightened mobility have characterised the ways in which almost everyone experiences the give and take of identity and "otherness". With hilarious results, there are some of background themes that give Mayling To's videos their edge. In The Stranger (2003) we follow a cute and cuddly panda bear on a violent rampage through suburbia. Equally compelling in their ability to undermine everyday icons are Hew Locke's recent drawings of the House of Windsor (2003). The constellation of tiny skulls that come together to form familiar faces, including the Queen Mother and Princess Diana, evoke methods of depiction that began in the Spanish Baroque, which Locke updates and translates to create his strangely ambivalent and ghostly portraits. If this is what British art looks like now, the future will be an interesting place.

KOBENA MERCER's book on Harlem photographer, Jam VanDerZee, was recently published in Phaidon's 55 Series



Sign of the times

Cultural diversity is a top priority for Arts Council England and its decibel initiative is making sure that theory leads to practice

Raising the voice of culturally diverse arts in Britain



The arts play an integral role in helping us understand the world and our different communities. Here in Britain vast numbers of people have heritage or roots in other countries and it is this diversity that connects us to a truly global community. It's also changing the arts landscape in unexpected and exciting ways. Nitin Sawhney, Shobana Jeyasingh, Akram Khan, Peshkar Theatre, Chris Ofili and Jonzi D are just some of the artists and organisations expressing the vitality of art formed through the experience of existing among many cultures.

This is a good time for the arts in this country. In the last two spending reviews the government has doubled its spend on the arts and this gives Arts Council England a real opportunity to give more support to artists and arts organisations. Arts Council England's Chair, Gerry Robinson, has made cultural diversity a top priority. "We are a culturally diverse society. Our leading artists come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and are often at the cutting edge of artistic and social change. Arts Council England wants to reflect that fact, to support those artists and to ensure that as many people as possible have access to a wide range of artistic activity – art that really reflects our country as it is today."

Arts Council England has a bold manifesto for the arts and cultural diversity is at the heart of it. Within this, the decibel initiative has been developed to raise the profile of culturally diverse arts in England, and to act as a catalyst for change.

While Arts Council England has a commitment to diversity in its broadest sense, decibel looks at ethnic diversity



resulting from post-war immigration, with increased focus on arts and artists from African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds.

Decibel programme manager Samenua Seshar says: "We are very aware that many culturally diverse artists want to be known for their work, not for their ethnicity. The key word here being "known". The ultimate goal for decibel and for the arts generally is to get to a time when there is no need for such initiatives. A time when there is genuine equity for culturally diverse arts and the names of leading culturally diverse artists trip as easily from the tongue as Tom Stoppard, Judi Dench and Francis Bacon."

As Arts Council England positions itself not only as a funding body, but as a development agency for the arts, decibel provides an opportunity for taking proactive steps in highlighting and addressing the long-term needs of African, Asian and Caribbean artists and arts organisations. Decibel runs until March 2004 and provides a platform for Arts Council England to profile the culturally diverse arts activity it funds; an opportunity to explore issues around cultural diversity in the arts; to commission research, stage debates and assist the development of black and Asian artists and arts administrators. It's a short-term initiative that will inform future Arts Council England policy.

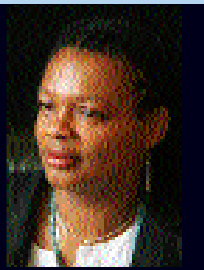
Highlights in the decibel calendar include the recent performing arts showcase (in association with x.trax) in Manchester which brought over 400 culturally diverse artists

together with promoters; visual arts events, literature and a national campaign to profile culturally diverse artists. Decibel has received a total budget of £5m. In addition to this Arts Council England has set targets of £5.7m from its Grants for the Arts programme for spend on culturally diverse individual artists, organisations and touring projects this year.

"The Arts Council's done a lot to prioritise cultural diversity – it's an ongoing priority for us, not a box to be ticked. With decibel we have a budget and a moment in time, to not only get people talking about the issues, but to identify gaps and address some key needs of the sector. In doing this we are also looking at the Arts Council itself and how it approaches cultural diversity in the long term," states Samenua Seshar. A view that is echoed by Arts Council England's Director of Diversity, Tony Panayiotou.

Getting the word out among communities that may have had no prior contact with the Arts Council is a key area of the decibel project. Each of the Arts Council's nine regional offices is employing ambassadors who are working with communities who may not have had the experience of working with the funding system before. One of the measures of decibel's success will be an increase in successful applications for funds from people new to the Arts Council.

The good news is the landscape is already starting to change. Local authorities give considerable support to culturally diverse arts activity, particularly at a community level.



'With decibel we have a budget and a moment in time, to not only get people talking about the issues, but to identify gaps and address some key needs of the sector'

Samenua Seshar

Elsewhere, for example, the ITC (Independent Theatres Council) is currently running a fast track scheme for black and Asian arts administrators and the Cambridge-based Eastern Touring Agency has been working for many years in the area of developing black and Asian arts.

"If enough people are working in these areas," says Samenua Seshar, "engaging in the debate and developing their arts practice then this agenda will move forward. The Arts Council's own commitment to cultural diversity will continue beyond decibel, however. Decibel gives us the opportunity to work with artists, organisations and the mainstream to ensure this work and these voices are not lost. We hope that through the short decibel time frame we can develop long-term partnerships and put the building blocks in place to collectively enable the development of a rich and diverse cultural life in this country."

More information on decibel events, initiatives and news can be found on www.decibel-db.org

Online debate

Promoting and reflecting cultural diversity is a policy priority for arts organisations today. Does cultural diversity policy challenge discrimination and broaden the arts scene, or does it risk politicising the arts at the expense of equality and aesthetic judgement? What do you think?

To have your say, log on to www.spiked-online.com/cultural-diversity