**Awkward Bastards symposium: Review**

The first *Awkward Bastards* symposium in 2015 brought together artists, activists, thinkers and producers to reflect on ‘the spectrum of diversity from disability, ethnicity, and sexuality, to gender and class.’[[1]](#footnote-1) This year’s conference, AB2 (organised by DASH, mac birmingham and the Live Art Development Agency (LADA)), continued in the same vein, and introduced the theme of ‘absence.’

The keynote speech by Frances Morris’ (Director of Tate Modern) pointed to the complexity of an event like this. On one hand, Morris said that ‘everyone needs to have physical and intellectual access,’ to Tate’s collection. On the other, she acknowledged the institution as a construction, at least in part, of white, male, able-bodied privilege. In this context, is ‘diversity’ about access to our cultural heritage, or designing a different future? Is it ‘awkward’ to insist on visibility, or on variation? Are we the bastards who are going to smash down the doors to the mainstream art world, or the ones that will sail on by, whispering words that mainstream ears can’t hear?

Naturally, these were the kinds of awkward questions being posed by commentators at this year’s event. Two panels invited artists, arts managers, programmers and curators to give five minute provocations in response to one of two themes: ‘Framing Diversity’ and ‘Pasts and Futures.’

Rachel Anderson, of the women’s arts space idle women, read out a delicate and ferocious manifesto against the ‘coercive control’ enacted by art institutions, as part of a capitalist economy that undermines individual creativity, confidence and independence. Similarly, the dancer Jamila Johnson-Small described the difficulties of speaking through a mesh of institutional frameworks – the art space, the academy, the racist and sexist public sphere. Johnson-Small questioned Morris’ aspiration for inclusivity as nothing more than an ‘illusion of empathy’, which erases individual identity. Art is not one size fits all. In order to engage meaningfully with different people, art will always mean different things.

In fact, Morris, had acknowledged this diversity of affect. ‘We need to create safe spaces for people to disagree’, she said. But, as Johnson-Small points out, this ambition is often couched in the language of conflict-avoidance, as if art is a kind of plaster applied by the people-in-the-know to the wounds or deficiencies of the people-previously-excluded. Perhaps this is what the theatre maker Simon Casson meant when he exclaimed, ‘everything’s for posh people!’ 35% of the UK is working class, he said, and yet art is always made for middle-class sensibilities. Art, Casson implied, is a middle-class value system. This means that ‘diversity’ is not a matter of access or representation. It is a matter of power.

Power was on Tony Heaton’s mind, too. Heaton, the outgoing CEO of disability arts organisation Shape, was clearly fed up. ‘Thirty years ago,’ he said, ‘I gave non-disabled artists, with their power and rank, the benefit of the doubt.’ But experience has changed his mind. ‘Our exclusion is deliberate,’ he said. His anger was sharp enough to rupture any safe space designed for people to change their minds. Instead of making peace, Heaton wanted to expose the hypocrisies, inequities and daily cruelties of our discriminatory culture.

If the conference was convened around absence, its content was concentrated on definitions. Like Heaton and Casson, arts consultant Lara Ratnaraja identified power as the ultimate impediment to equality, diversity – or whatever else you want to call it; and, ‘whatever else you want to call it’ is crucial. Legislative protection for minorities is all very well, Ratnaraja said. But as long as diversity (she was speaking, particularly, about race) is defined in terms from the 1976 Race Relations Act, then it will always be about permission, not rights. In this context, language is both a power tool and a disabling barrier.

I was struck by Melanie Keen’s intervention near the start of the day, which laid the foundations for many of the approaches advocated later on. Keen is the Director of Iniva (Institute of International Visual Art), originally set up in 1994 to redress the cultural imbalance in visual arts. Its makeup and its mission have changed over the years, however; currently, Iniva is ‘dedicated to developing an artistic programme that reflects on the social and political impact of globalisation.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This new mission reflects Iniva’s need to ‘shift shape’, said Keen, to ‘avoid the burden’ of representing the visual arts’ approach to diversity.

Positioning itself in relation to globalisation instead of diversity, Iniva acknowledges the biased and discriminatory history of the art world, as well as the intersectionality of contemporary life. It addresses the past, and shapes the future. This strategy suggests an alternative model of power, in direct contrast to the cultural imperialism of an ‘illusion of empathy.’ Instead, it’s a model that defies definition, that changes course, that makes strategic relationships. Not just awkward, then, but slippery, self-determined, and going places.

1. [www.thisisliveart.co.uk](http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk) accessed 1st May 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org) accessed 1st May 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)