

How the Beast Lives

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The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector

A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006, Richard Hylton, published by ICIA

It is not unusual that once in a while, a book is published that seeks to make sense of what on the face of it looks simple, but in the process begins to point at embarrassingly complex questions. Richard Hylton's *The Nature of the Beast*, is a book of the kind. The full subtitle is *Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector, A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006*. It is an achievement for the author that no one reading *The Nature of the Beast* will fail to spot the Orwellian doublespeak through which statutory institutions deal with the issues of equality and equity on the one hand and, simultaneously, widen the gap between reality and fantasy on the other hand.

Predictably it is only too evident from the book, (as it is in the everyday encounter with bureaucracy for those who know how to feed off it) that cultural diversity has created its own vocabulary. Yet while Hylton appears to mock several of the terminologies, he also falls for them rather too easily. The very idea of describing the visual arts as 'a sector' will sound repugnant to those with a more nuanced attitude to the whole field of culture and the arts. More worryingly, he fails to critically unpack what is meant by 'culture' or by 'diversity' as in 'cultural diversity' and whether any justification exists for applying the term to the practice of arts, in all its varieties.

Notwithstanding this early irony, however, the book demonstrates how well Hylton has trawled through the papers of the Arts Council England and understood the histories of the defunct Greater London Council, whose pioneering work on 'ethnic arts' and the like was a major influence in the shaping of Arts Council England's policy towards what is now known as cultural diversity. He is also acutely aware of everything that has been taking place since the 1990s when cultural diversity became an ever recurrent term across social policy and politics in the UK.

Hylton's central thesis is perhaps eloquently summarised in chapter eight of the book 'Summary: the Golden Age and Cultural Diversity', as follows:

"Since the late 1970s, cultural diversity initiatives within the visual arts sector have arguably exacerbated rather than confronted exclusionary pathologies of the art world. There has been very little in the way of resistance to such initiatives over the past thirty years or so. It could be argued that a resistance or boycott en masse of such schemes might have curtailed their existence or lessened their credibility. However, as evidence suggests, far from resisting or boycotting 'culturally diverse arts' initiatives, Black artists have often appeared to be enthusiastically accepting of them. This has in effect legitimised the existence of cultural diversity initiatives." (p.131)

Hylton suggests that notwithstanding their willingness to collaborate with 'such initiatives' black artists have not, collectively that is, enjoyed either rewards or recognitions other than those which tend to place their work in the category of ethnic oddity. It goes without saying that those of them who have managed to transcend such fixations have done so either because the law of unintended consequence worked in their favour when they willingly submitted themselves

as marionettes to the manipulative visual arts establishment, or they have been plainly fortunate, or both! This, of course, is a highly contentious suggestion, but it is one of the better deductions one can make from Hylton's analysis.

One suspects that Hylton is insinuating a sense of cynicism here because he wants to see a more informed problematisation of Blackness within the arts that is so patronised. This is one issue that Hylton could have done more to investigate by asking questions such as what category of 'Black artists' is preferred by the arts establishment, or whether it is possible, given the structure of the UK arts funding system, for any Black artist of whatever shade to resist any form of patronage and still be able to earn any form of living from their practice? That Hylton fails to pursue this sort of enquiry adds to the puzzlement of the book, but then there are so many hinted but unexplored insights in *The Nature of the Beast*. An example is Hylton's instinctive rejection of the 'black' and 'white' polarity in favour of a better nuanced colour/race-blind 'mainstreaming' of artists and arts practice. However, this instinct eventually disappears totally in his discussion and therefore the book falls into the same trap of segregated development about which Hylton rightly feels uncomfortable.

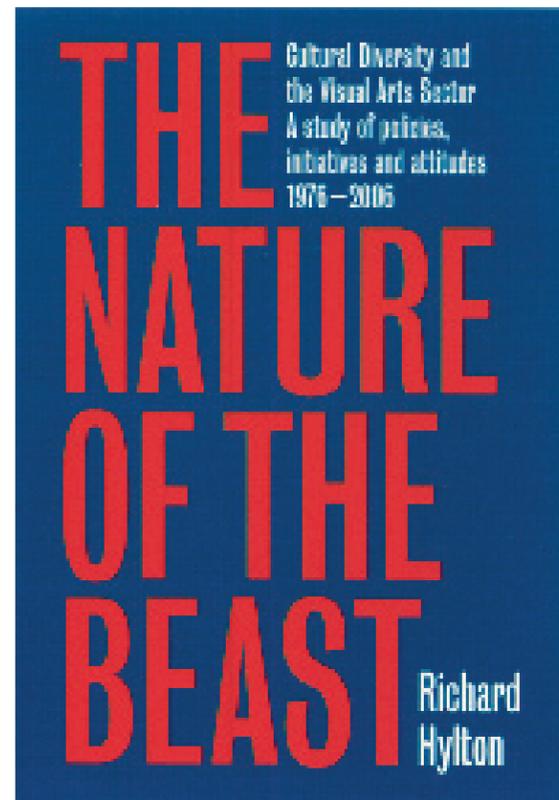
Hylton infers that not much changed in those 30 years covered by his investigation. This may generally be true and there is much in his documentation to prove it. What is lacking in his labour is a clear explanation (beyond the 'failure of policy' sort) as to why these initiatives have had no effect or who may be held accountable for their lack of effectiveness. Of course that is an unfashionable sort of discussion to pursue, leading, as it would, into a broader discussion about a transitory and psychological political economy of identity.

Of all the initiatives that have been devised and promoted so far, none seems to have angered Hylton as the multi-million pound *decibel*, routinely described by Arts Council England as an initiative aimed at promoting the work of artists from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Hylton writes of *decibel* as:

"Attracting millions of pounds worth of investment and employing significant numbers of staff across England, *decibel* appeared to be a fitting response to the growing interests of government, for public institutions to address issues of 'inclusion' and, by association, cultural diversity. However, despite this level of financial and structural input and its focus across all art forms, it could be argued that in the visual arts sector alone, *decibel* has, thus far, failed either to sustain a national profile or to instigate a genuine debate around issue of cultural diversity." (p.19)

decibel started a little over five years ago, but it has gone through a number of transformations and reinterpretations, not least to demonstrate the awareness of those behind it of the enormous power of marketing. Now said to be in its final stage, *decibel* currently brands its programme as *decibel legacy*, which in some way goes to corroborate Hylton's remarks about lack of genuine debate around issues of cultural diversity.

Yet, for all the industry and sometimes unhidden anger of *The Nature of the Beast* about the underlying politics of 'race' that Hylton rightly sees lying behind the so-called 'policies' and 'initiatives', this book is at best sympathetic



towards the Arts Council as a helpless institution and at worst ambiguous about that institution's culpability in supporting a politics of parallel development between white artists and institutions and their non-white counterparts. Thus, it is not clear how much its widespread mockery of the Arts Council's ineffective efforts to bring about the sort of mind shift that could enable cultural diversity to function in the arts can be taken seriously. His frustration with *decibel* apart, it is difficult to know who or what exactly Hylton holds responsible for the continuation of what he calls the "exclusionary pathologies of the art world".

Is this failure to name itself symptomatic of the nature of the cultural diversity beast or simply an evidence of poor radical politics on the part of Hylton? The latter seems more plausible an explanation, not least because of the manner Hylton ignores the way cultural policy is ultimately meaningless if separated from social policy and disconnected from ideology.

For an author who excellently trails the beginning of any serious discussion of race and arts practice in the UK to the little known yet pivotal publication *The Arts Britain Ignores* (1976), by Naseem Khan, some of the elementary analytical mistakes are unpardonable. Unlike nearly all those initiatives that have subsequently lifted off its back, *The Arts Britain Ignores* did not seek to racialise arts. On the contrary, that book's greatest strength was in its plea for investments to be directed into the ethnic minorities' communities for the purpose of improving the arts activities taking place within them. The box ticking bureaucracy will of course overlook that qualitative emphasis, which, inscribed with idealism, makes the important distinction between society and community. Failure to recognise the theoretical implications of the distinction which *The Arts Britain Ignores* made between *gesellschaft* (society) and *gemeinschaft* (community), and how its various successors have collapsed the two to create the basis for an *identikit* politics, is sufficient reason for casting aside *The Nature of The Beast*.

It is within the terms of *gesellschaft*, and the

implicit problem of community which is evident in Naseem Khan's 1976 work, that one could reasonably ask questions about the quality of practice, aesthetic innovation and indeed the far from abstract issue of the number of non-white practitioners who get into arts schools and courses annually in Britain. And following from that, one would ask how they fare 10 years and more after graduation. All this is a far cry from the communitarian ideology that now holds sway among those who speak in the name of 'community'.

The manner in which Hylton jumps from a critique of pre-New Labour 'social inclusion' politics of the defunct Greater London Council (the major part of which was expressed in and symbolised in the courtship of anything that Margaret Thatcher and her Tory band would consider irritating) to what he sees as Tony Blair's New Labour's economic instrumentalism of everything from expansion of nursery places (so that young single mothers could be driven off benefits while they seek work that pays below decent living wage) to funding universities (so that they could do more R&D as a way of attracting several times more funding from industry) is far too mechanistic to really be taken seriously.

It may be true that with cultural diversity an attempt is being made to impose on cultural institutions a duty which their structure cannot successfully translate. Indeed, it is bad politics not to recognise that in the UK, and indeed the whole of Western European context, the politics of race almost always defines itself within the larger national politics-policy nexus. One of the consequences of official 'cultural diversity' being driven by the arts bureaucracy is that it not only anthropologises every instance of participation at the level of what used to be called community arts practice, but seems also to subvert critical issues of aesthetics and genre formation and reformation that constitutes real diversity in the arts.

Where does it all come from?

Within the past two decades or thereabouts, the formulation of cultural policy in the UK context has been overtaken by what Jim McGuigan calls "instrumental thought and research", which seek to justify "cultural policy most typically on economic grounds and, to a lesser extent, social grounds as well, that is, grounds that are not specifically cultural". This recourse, he suggests, is not happening in isolation as it is part of a general confusion of both language and purpose, no doubt with a view to masking the question of power and relationships, without which the term culture itself ceases to have any serious meaning. The recourse also represents the remaking of the purpose of the state against the backdrop of the neo-liberal ascendancy or what McGuigan calls transition from state to market thinking. Though McGuigan does not address cultural diversity, it can be taken for granted that it is included in what he calls "grounds that are not specifically cultural".

Britain may not have reached the level of 'culture war' similar to what occurred in the US in the 1980s, but no one who has paid any attention to the ongoing attempt to strip down culture into a specific category of instrumentalism, part of what McGuigan denounces, will deny that the UK is moving in the same direction.

Yet, while the US 'culture war' – before it spilled into and was later overtaken by a vulgar incursion into areas of cultural intimacy that turned the whole issue on its head – was originally about ideas and expressions, formulated as it were on the back of the

enduring struggle within a state founded on mass migration and the ideals of freedom, the UK sub-version seems to be beginning at the vulgar end. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in 'initiatives' such as 'cultural diversity', when it becomes the janus complex in the discourse of citizenship, nation, identity, migration, etc.

A generation or two ago, the situation was easier to understand. As Etienne Balibar once summarised it: "In Britain people speak of 'race relations' ... – which evokes a much more directly post-colonial situation and imagery."

Often, what should have been a straightforward acknowledgement of Britain's late (and often non-existent) acceptance of inescapable cross-over between Empire building and non-white migration with consequences on 'the public space', is being subtly defined as a series of moral hazards about which something must be done. The instrument is *cultural diversity*. Over the past five years even those with impeccable credentials for progressive politics have been seduced by the panic behind the title. A good example is David Goodhart, who in February 2004 identified a so-called 'progressive dilemma', which, he said had been drawn to his attention by David Willetts, a conservative party politician and Member of Parliament:

"The basis on which you can extract large sums of money in tax and pay it out in benefits is that most people think the recipients are people like themselves, facing difficulties that they themselves could face. If values become more diverse, if lifestyles become more differentiated, then it becomes more difficult to sustain the legitimacy of a universal risk-pooling welfare state. People ask: 'Why should I pay for them when they are doing things that I wouldn't do?' This is America versus Sweden. You can have a Swedish welfare state provided that you are a homogeneous society with intensely shared values. In the United States you have a very diverse, individualistic society where people feel fewer obligations to fellow citizens. Progressives want diversity, but they thereby undermine part of the moral consensus on which a large welfare state rests.

Lifestyle diversity and high immigration bring cultural and economic benefits but can erode feeling of mutual obligation, reduce willingness to pay tax and encourage a retreat from the public domain." (p.202).

It is, of course, bizarre that a commentator of Goodhart's pedigree could be swayed by an ominously reactionary nationalism and uses it to make a plea for the progressive defence of the welfare state. Such a surrender of human and political rights takes us towards the territory occupied, not foolishly, by the identity politics of the BNP! Lamentable as the error might seem, the subtle connection Goodhart makes between citizenship and racial identity is as difficult to forgive as it is to overlook. It is the sort of remarks that often blur the line between enlightened politics of solidarity and sheer populism. Populism is all about reaction and with the clever, often a gifted ability to redefine language to suit one's purpose. It is possible to identify with popular sentiments without ceasing to be progressive and radical simultaneously and be able to reject the racism-laden atavism. This is why we cannot ignore the behaviour of politicians – especially those among them whose actions and words can influence and inform the sort of debates that lead to laws which we are all obliged to respect and by which our conducts, whether alone or in communion with others, are to be regulated. Nearly all of those who replied to Goodhart when his piece was published three years ago, bar a few, did so without challenging his notion of citizenship, which he falsely suggests to be homogenized and inherited *jus*

sanguinis (by 'right of blood'), but sought to erect an equally false notion that citizenship can function unregulated by the state.

It is always worth bearing in mind that the developments which led to the adoption of 'cultural diversity', both as a term and widely embraced if little practised policy, were initiated by way of resistance to exclusion from the ordinary benefits of citizenship, such as the right to be able to walk in the streets without being spat upon. To that extent, the whole thing has been part of an evolution that the state could not ignore. Naturally, it was the enlightened segment of the state that rightly sought to use race relations as one of the desperately needed expressions of change from a sterile plurality to something more dynamic. That everything having to do with race relations now has to be couched in the language of cultural diversity may, in some cases, look opportunistic, but this is nothing compared to its usefulness as a strategy for mobilising consensus around the surrender to exploitation by external markets.

This is precisely the dilemma of a book like *The Nature of the Beast*. Such works will tend to ignore the failure of institutions that define and perhaps control the public space on behalf of *all* citizens to function *sui generis* (by default) while uncritically analysing the initiatives with which these institutions mask their failings. But that is always the better place to begin slaying the beast.

References

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