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# Do the Arts Really Value Diversity?

Petra Abbam

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## About the author

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BBC Clore Fellow

Petra Abbam joined the BBC in 2016 and oversees the publishing operations for the BBC Proms and the BBC Orchestras and Choirs. She has worked in many sectors including technology, finance, advertising and sales.

Petra is a 2017/18 BBC Fellow on the Clore Leadership Programme where she investigated ethics, bias and fairness in technology, particularly around content production and dissemination and how algorithms can represent the entirety of society. She is also interested in the accountability and ownership of personal decisions and the community impact of these.

Petra is also a volunteer official with England Athletics and a mentor for Media Trust.

Over the past months of my fellowship, I have been exposed to many experiences, people and places, but as I navigated the pathways of the cultural sector a frustration was growing in me. No matter where I went, who I spoke to or what I heard, most of the voices were the same. They shared similar visions, beliefs, passions, fears. I wondered where the naysayers were? Where were the people who were pro-Brexit (let us not forget that 52% of votes were for it)? Where were those who didn't care about broadening audiences, or thought that arts education in the UK was sufficient? Those who didn't agree with #MeToo or thought the gender pay gap was fine?

One of the main focuses of the arts sector (indeed most sectors) is diversity. It is rammed down our throats at meetings and conferences, in policy documents and in funding guidelines, but I question the true meaning of the diversity being preached. I expect we can all reel off facts, anecdotes and statistics about how we need to represent the population in everything we do, and how more diverse workforces perform better financially, but how much do we actually think about what this means? How much do we in the arts sector care?

### How does the arts sector look at diversity? <sup>1</sup>

In an Arts Council England 2017 report, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case*<sup>2</sup>, diversity is addressed across five areas: gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and age. As with many reports across the sector (and indeed across all sectors), there is no mention of other types of diversity, such as thought, opinion or character. Why not?

1. Diversity of opinion, personality and understanding is seen to be addressed by diversity of gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and age.
2. It's easier to concentrate on the obvious and the easily quantifiable. For example, age can be captured without subjectivity, but how someone sees the world or thinks is altogether harder, so it isn't addressed.
3. Failure to address the fact that certain demographics are minorities in certain working environments; for example, conservative white men in the arts sector.
4. Individuals are taken to be representative of a whole subset of diversity. As a black woman, I have also observed over the years that when I am the only black person in the room I am taken to be speaking for my entire race, and often all other ethnic minorities. One opinion is seen to be enough.

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<sup>1</sup> \* I am concentrating on publicly funded artists and arts organisations as they have a duty to reflect wider society and speak to all aspects of the country. Other artists and organisations don't have any such duty; it's up to them what art they create and for whom, but this applies to anyone considering diversity in their work.

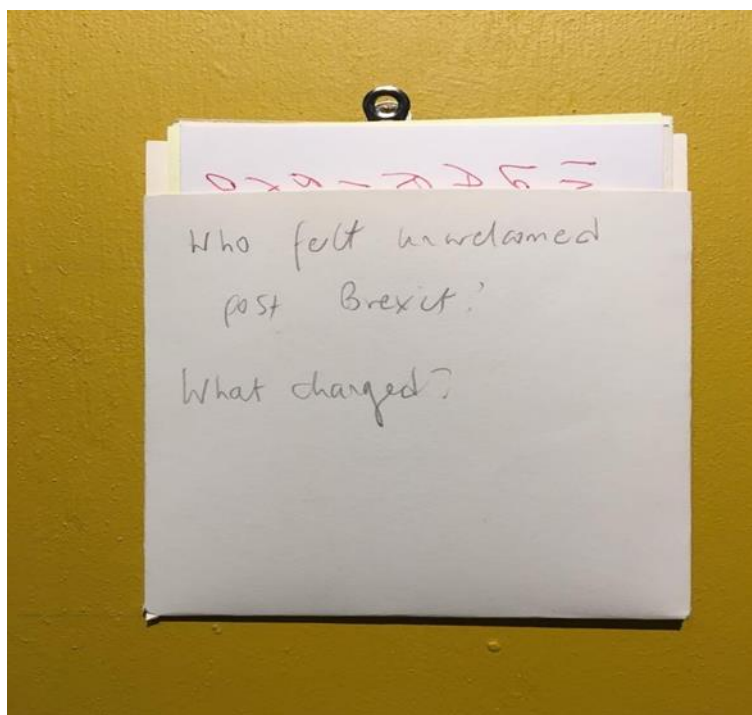
<sup>2</sup> Arts Council England, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case*, 2017.  
[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Diversity\\_report\\_1617\\_FINAL\\_web.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Diversity_report_1617_FINAL_web.pdf)

People can think the same and have completely different backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, ages, socio-economic statuses, etc. They can also have similar backgrounds yet have wildly different beliefs and opinions. Just looking at the five basic measures for diversity does not go far enough in building true diversity. It becomes simply a box-ticking exercise where your minority status becomes the most important part of your identity.

### What happens when your opinion or your identity doesn't conform?

When I talk about diverse voices I am referring to a variety of political beliefs, cultural experiences, values, education, experience of sectors, business approaches, to name a few. However, based on my experience, the majority of the cultural sector self-identifies as liberal and progressive, which, however laudable, does not give rise to a broadness of opinion.

One of the more, if not the most polarising subjects in British society today is Brexit. 52% of votes were pro and 48% against. However, as I sat at another conference which railed against the iniquities of Brexit, the thought crossed my mind that if you took the cultural sector alone, you would think the remain vote was nearer 100%. It is not just that the majority of speakers are obviously anti-Brexit; what is more worrying is that there is a hostility to the other side and, even worse, an assumption that no-one in the room would be from that side. As someone who voted for Brexit, it took me months to work up the nerve to say so to my colleagues. It was only because I was tired of people assigning reasons for my behaviour that didn't reflect reality that I decided to speak out. How does this foster diverse opinions?



© Migration Museum Project.



It has been a long time since the colour of my skin has made me feel unwelcome in this country, but nearly every day, my opinion on Brexit makes me feel this. When we dismiss, shame and ignore opinions because they do not match our own, this is no different from doing so because someone is of a different sexuality, ethnicity or gender.

“plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”  
[the more things change, the more they stay the same]

*Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849*

In 2018, Manick Govinda and Michael Lightfoot convened Artists for Brexit, “a non-partisan network of artists, art workers and art enthusiasts” for those who support Brexit because: “Many artists have been unable to vocalise their support for Brexit and so this association of creatives was founded to give support, a platform and a voice to those who do.”<sup>3</sup>

I felt it was important I spoke with Manick, as someone who was actively providing space for different opinions. He felt that people didn't want to hear other points of view and this is leading to people self-censoring for fear of harming their careers. He also expressed frustration about the assumptions placed on identity and how ethnic minorities who have opinions that don't seem to fit with the colour of their skin are “seen as an oddball or even an Uncle Tom. Depressingly, people see you as brainwashed by white patronism.” The idea that you are betraying your identity by expressing another viewpoint is unfair and lacks understanding. Identity is made up of more than one thing and everyone prioritises the different parts in different ways. Conversely, this simplified view of opinion and identity being intertwined can also have advantages. I asked Manick whether it was easier for him to speak out for Brexit because he would be less likely to be assigned racist motives because of the colour of his skin? He agreed and mentioned a discussion with a white working class woman who said, “if I say the same thing as you, they'll just call me racist trash. Because of who you are...”

### So, who is allowed to voice an opinion?

Society is currently facing an identity crisis, where who you are dictates what you are allowed to say. As a backlash against the suppression of voices throughout history, people are sensitive about weighing in on issues that do not explicitly affect them, especially when there is a dissenting voice. This may be a controversial opinion, but I have noticed that only those who are affected by a movement are invited to voice an opinion, particularly when it is a dissenting one. If you are a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, well-educated, well-off male, when are you allowed to disagree or object? I agree that there are some voices that have been raised above others for too long, but let's not close off avenues for discourse. We all have experiences that lead us to empathise with others or add value in unexpected ways.

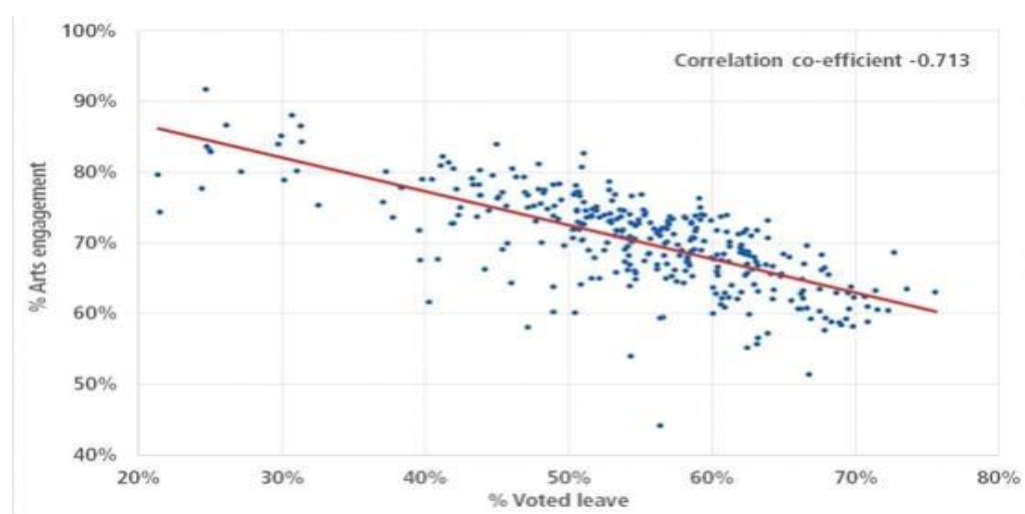
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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.artistsforbrexit.com/membership>

*Arts Professional* recently published an article titled: *Brexit voters more likely to shun the arts, research finds*, where the main point was that Remainers engage more and Leavers less.<sup>4</sup>

*Arts Professional* seemed to imply the problem was Leavers rather than art or arts programming itself; however, the data didn't actually address causality. The arts sector needs to reach out more and programme in a way that is relevant to everyone, but the sector is unable to go beyond demonising and ostracising those who aren't the same as them – literally the opposite of the diversity agenda.

### Correlation between arts engagement and Brexit voting across the country.



©ArtsProfessional.

### How could the arts sector reach out?

Arts Council England recently awarded National Portfolio Organisation status to the Tank Museum, which is not the usual type of funding recipient, being less obviously aligned to creativity and liberal values, and more towards the military and engineering. I was told they were shocked they received funding, but this is an important addition to the funding portfolio, as the museum reaches many people who are not usually targeted.

What would happen if the type of people who voted for Brexit were embraced? Let's ask what would make them come instead of dismissing them as lacking culture. Let's commission more work from pro-Brexit artists. Let's ask people what interests them and why they don't engage with the arts as much? Let's not assume that they are a problem to be solved and we have the solution. Engaging with the arts does not confer moral superiority on people, however much we may like to think so.

Given that much of the sector relies on public funding, it is imperative that the whole country is represented and catered to in all areas, including workforce, performers and audience. The current focus on the five areas of diversity mentioned at the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/brexit-voters-more-likely-shun-arts-research-finds>

beginning of this paper is woefully inadequate. Public funding should also address the less obvious or quantifiable areas. By measuring some areas and not others, organisations show where their priorities lie. If true equality is the goal, remove the prioritisation from diversity.

I'm not asking organisations and individuals to compromise their personal values, but the next time you dismiss an opinion, a way of working or a person, consider what would happen if everyone did that? Where would the space be for that voice? Sometimes we need to consider who we're actually supposed to serve as public bodies, not just who we want to serve, and reach out to them instead of trying to only present our views and opinions. It's okay to disagree; it's not the end of the world, but a starting point.

I would like to see Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery and other funders allocate funding across the full spectrum of diversity, including but not limited to social class, geography, socio-economic status, personality type, interests. All diversity should be rewarded.

### Is opinion alone enough without follow-through?

The spread of social media has made it easier for outrage to spread and a single opinion can have more weight than ever before. One post by a disgruntled audience member on Twitter could turn into a public hanging within a few posts. Organisations and individuals are running scared. There is a fear of causing offence that outweighs the actual reality, and controversy and dissent are seen as dangerous. Index on Censorship has set up a training course for the sector: Risks, Rights and Reputations: Challenging a risk averse culture. Is fear of risk the whole story?

Javaad Alipoor, writer of the successful 2017 play *The Believers Are But Brothers*, which delved into the radicalisation of Muslim men states:

*"There is a whole discourse and politics of risk [in] how the theatre industry works that we need to shift. We take risks all the time, but the way we are willing to do it is mega-racialised. We lionise risks that are about white people and white canon and white artists; but [not...] risks attached to black, colour, Muslim, [which] are too difficult or too hard to take."*

Jodie Ginsberg from Index on Censorship thinks that controversial opinions and subjects need support to see them through. Too often the idea is seen as enough and there isn't enough understanding of how to carry it through.

*Homegrown*, a 2015 play also exploring the radicalisation of young Muslims was commissioned by the National Youth Theatre but was never performed, for a variety of reasons including the need to protect the young people involved. This underlines the point that Alipoor makes about the racialising of risk. Some topics are difficult and uncomfortable, but that should be more reason to see them through. If we drop things when they get difficult, the question must be asked: why did we start? Was it just to position ourselves on a particular topic, or to court favour by showing a willingness to be bold?



Ginsberg referred to the 2017 Eric Gill exhibition by Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft as an example of a difficult idea backed up by preparation, planning and consultation, and a willingness to seek out a variety of opinions. Instead of the expected outrage, the exhibition proceeded with very little backlash. A lot of the difficult conversations had already happened. This to me was a great example of diversity of opinion leading to a successful outcome.

### **What do I want diversity to look like?**

The BBC defines diversity as:

“For us, [it] means all the ways we differ and it includes everyone. It includes our visible differences such as gender, race and ethnicity and visible disabilities. But it also includes our non-visible differences such as sexual orientation, social class, heritage, religion, unseen disabilities, different perspectives and thought processes, education, family status and age. At the BBC it also includes the nations and regions and where our audiences and employees live and work.”<sup>5</sup>

However, even with this bold and encompassing statement, the BBC measures the same five areas as Arts Council England. Any other ideas of how to ensure equality are not fed down through the organisation and it is up to individuals to decide what this means, which results in wildly differing approaches and priorities, leaving perspectives and thought processes at the end of the queue. Organisations need to ensure that all staff understand what diversity looks like, and that invisible measures such as value, opinion and personality are seen as equal to more visible measures. This should feed into all areas, including but not limited to recruitment and audiences.

The tech sector is being called upon to become more multidisciplinary as it realises the value that other sectors, such as social sciences and civil society, can provide. The arts can follow suit and look to other sectors for ideas and people. We need new thinkers, those not constrained by tradition or with preconceived ideas about who or what art is for. Let's actively recruit people who don't engage with the arts, and understand what they want and need.

A few months ago, as part of a panel session for Living Freedom, a residential school for young people run by the Academy of Ideas, I found myself sitting in front of a group of 18 to 24-year-olds arguing for decolonisation of the curriculum. Although the barrage of questions and opinions was daunting, I was struck by the level of engagement and the sheer range of opinions coming from all around the room, and wondered why I didn't see more of this. Debate always asks us to consider another side of an argument, whereas with discussion we can limit ourselves to one argument. Why don't we try playing devil's advocate, or thinking of another argument whenever we discuss? I think we'd be surprised by what we learn.

Depending on what you subscribe to, there are a plethora of personality types ranging from extrovert to introvert, from optimist to pessimist, agreeable to

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<sup>5</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation. Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2016–20. 2016. <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/diversity/pdf/diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2016.pdf>

disagreeable, trusting to envious. The jury is still out on the validity of each method of classification, but one thing is clear: we all think in different ways, though some of us may be more alike than others. We see the world differently as well. Some may be risk takers, some may value collaboration, others solitude, some may value speed over detail, others gravitate towards logic, some are comfortable with numbers, others better with building. We need all these people reflected in our workforce, our art and our audiences, as you can be sure they are reflected in the population who subsidise our work. It's not just about representation, it is also about making better decisions and reaching better outcomes, as more minds have looked at problems and have tried different ways to solve them.

## Conclusion

I have been quite harsh on the arts sector, and acknowledge that there are many diverse thinkers who are speaking out. I am just frustrated that we don't value this enough and aren't doing more to accept all comers.

All opinions have a place to be aired, no matter how controversial. Suppressing opinions without discourse does not make them go away. I feel it escalates them and I would rather see things discussed than censored. I grew up in Scotland in the 1980s where we were the only black family in town. Racist abuse was a daily occurrence, but it is no worse than what is happening today where people are sleepwalking into value-driven filter bubbles where they are just as guilty of discrimination. Let us not forget that history has shown time and again that opinions that are anathema in one generation can become conventional wisdom in the next.

Surrounding ourselves with voices that say the same is the very antithesis of diversity. Assuming everyone thinks the same as you is not inclusion. Thinking your opinion is more valid is not equality. We can have more diverse audiences, remove barriers to joining the workforce, and attract a wide range of performers. But if they all think the same, what's the point?

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