Representation of Identities in the British Arts Policy of the 1980s

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Abstract The Arts Council of Great Britain profoundly influenced the arts discourse in the 1980s Britain not only through the funding that it allocated to artists and art practices, but also through wide production of reports and documents that aimed at meticulous and detailed description of the British arts scene. In the turbulent period of the 1980s, when the concept of British art seemed to have undergone a major revision, these reports and various policy papers imposed neat division of artists and their works into ethnic and racial categories. Adopting a postmodernist approach to text analysis one may argue that these documents on the one hand describe the reality of the British art scene, which at that time was becoming increasingly more diversified and multicultural. On the other hand they shape this reality by provision of certain labels and extensive use of certain terms to refer to particular artists and their practices. Therefore, the paper features analysis of reports on ethnicity, diversity, and multiculturalism in the visual arts debate. It focuses on discussing the use of labels such as "ethnic", "black" or "British", as well as examines how exclusive or inclusive each of these terms was, and to which social groups they referred. The analysis aims at demonstrating that some arts policy documents covertly sustained the status quo which set Britishness against its ethnic or black "Other" even though on the surface it may seem that they showed black art as part of all inclusive, pluralist notion of Britishness.

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1 Introduction

In his article “The long march from ‘ethnic arts’ to ‘new internationalism’” artist and curator Gavin Jantjes observes that in the 1980s black artists in Britain were attached denigrating labels such as semi-professional or amateur. Although many were born in Britain, they remained ignored by the authorities, which would only subsidize them as “ethnic artists”. He argues that the very term “ethnic art” was coined by the dominant culture to control access of non-white art practitioners to the mainstream. Thus, the discourse of ethnic arts represented black artists as “immigrants, outsiders, foreigners and guests” (Jantjes 2000, p. 267) with the “Other” being the common denominator of all these notions and concepts. Commenting on the British art scene in the 1980s, Jantjes notes that black artists remained outside mainstream art practices, and that their work would be labeled “amateur” regardless of its artistic quality. Political activism on the part of these artists led to the establishment of an ethnic arts subsidy, which not only failed to improve the existing situation but also reinforced inequalities along racial divide, as well as strengthened the system of binary oppositions in which the dominant white culture decided on the place and role of other cultures art in the arts policy. Therefore, the paper, which features analysis of reports on ethnicity, diversity, and multiculturalism in the visual arts debate, focuses on discussing the use of labels such as “ethnic”, “black” or “British”, as well as examines how exclusive or inclusive each of these terms was, and to which social groups they referred.

2 CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) as an Anlytical Resource for Examining Identities in the Arts Policy

An effective analytical tools for close examination of the representation of identities in the arts policy is provided by one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, Norman Fairclough. As Fairclough observes in his book *Analysing Discourse. Textual analysis for social research* the term discourse renders language “as an element of social life which is closely connected with other elements” (Fairclough 2003, p. 3). Similarly to Fairclough, I view discourse as an integral component of social life. Consequently, I propose that discourse analysis be treated as a source of invaluable information on social phenomena, in particular the approach to and construction of national and ethnic identities.

Fairclough’s definition of discourse as a “form of social practice (…) in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation” (Fairclough 2007, p. 63) implies first of all that social structure constitutes discourse, i.e. that relations in a society such as those based on class, race, gender, etc. influence discursive practices. Secondly, it suggests that discourse constructs social realities “relations, identities, and institutions” (Fairclough 2007, p. 64). As Fairclough puts it, “discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 2007, p. 64). The assumption that discourse plays as constitutive role in a social structure is crucial for my analysis.

Fairclough establishes a firm connection between assumptions and ideology by noting that assumptions improve "efficiency and adaptability" (Fairclough 2003, p. 58). He also observes that power relations are best sustained by means of some shared concepts and so he links "ideological work of texts" to "hegemony and universalization" (2003, p. 58). The pursuit of hegemony is voiced in the desire to express the particular as universal, which allows to maintain domination. According to Fairclough textual representation of identities which are made appear universal reflects the struggle over hegemony. By means of filling the text with a set of background assumptions "In many texts (…) one finds the whole vision as part of an assumed and taken-for-granted background" (Fairclough 2003, p. 46). There are three main types of assumptions, he notes, and these are: "existential assumptions: assumptions about what exists; propositional assumptions: assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case [and finally] value assumptions: assumptions about what is good or desirable" (Fairclough 2003, p. 55). There are also "bridging assumptions" i.e. assumptions that are necessary to create a coherent link or "bridge" between parts of a text, so that a text "makes sense" (Fairclough 2003, p. 57).

Following Norman Fairclough's approach to discourse, I examine various arts policy texts, and investigate how and to what extent these texts shape and influence social life, particularly in the area of identity formation. As "meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit in the text but also what is implicit—what is assumed" (Fairclough 2003, p. 17), I focus primarily on the implied meaning of categories such as "ethnic minority arts", "black arts", "Afro-Caribbean and Asian arts", and indigenous, Western, European culture. What is more, I concentrate on what the documents fail to mention (e.g. the connection they establish between ethnic minority arts, Afro-Caribbean and Asian arts, and black arts) because, as Fairclough observes "what is said in the text is always said against the background of what is 'unsaid'" (2003, p. 17).

3 Analysis of Identity Constructs in Art Policy Documents

The Council Paper 762 on Ethnic Arts from the 1980 (The Council Paper 762, 1980) defines the term ethnic arts as referring to arts "associated with British populations of Black Commonwealth, Pakistani and Chinese origin". Thus inexplicitly the report views ethnic art as art produced by black artists. Although the report describes Britain as a "plural society" of "equal opportunities", which means that being British denotes openness, tolerance and multiplicity of identities, it seems to quite openly suggest inferiority of ethnic arts in relation to "Western culture", of which mainstream British culture is part. The report defends Arts Council's activities aimed at ensuring that ethnic minorities are "introduced to the best of Western culture". Additionally, point 14 of the report emphasises relative lack of professionalism on the part of ethnic artists by providing a sweeping generalisation that "(…) cultural traditions of ethnic minorities are much less reliant on professional artist than is the European cultural tradition, (…) the ethnic artist can often establish himself only with his own community". From the above quoted fragments one can infer that the report clearly defines ethnic arts as parochial, marginal and generally of lower artistic quality than European or Western art, for it is implied that such art is rarely appreciated outside the community of the artist. It seems that the main role that Arts Council performs in relation to ethnic arts is alleviating ethnic art practices to the standards of European culture. In the choice of such terms as European or Western culture one may easily trace the characteristics of universalism. The replacement of the term "British culture", which would seem much more appropriate in this context, considering that the report was written and published in Britain and for the British, may suggest an underlying assumption that British culture is a synonym of Western or European tradition. Even though point 17 of the report becomes more specific in that it refers to Britain's "indigenous population", it fails to clarify to whom exactly the phrase refers. It can only be inferred from an earlier definition of ethnic arts that Britain's "indigenous population" would be white British citizens regardless of their white ethic origins (English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish). Therefore, it seems that "ethnic arts" is a camouflage term that establishes divisions along the colour line.

The report entitled "Ethnic Arts in the East Midlands" from February 1981 (Ethnic Arts in the East Midlands 1981) defines the term "ethnic minority arts" as "the manifestation in this country of the rest of the world's culture". While the report makes it clear that "ethnic minority arts" are diverse and heterogeneous, one can easily infer from the above quoted definition that they simply denote the art of the Other. Points one and two of the report are based on the bridging assumption that links ethnic minority arts and folk arts, for they state that "ethnic minority arts" involve "traditional and 'pure' arts activities which are indigenous to other countries than Britain" or "cultural activities which represent part of the 'folk' tradition". The "Ethnic Minority Arts and Racism" section of the report represents Britain as a country with a long-established history of immigration, which for centuries not only hosted ethnic minorities, but also whose culture "owes everything to the steady influx of immigrants from the Celts onwards". Thus, Britain is represented as a melting pot and British culture comes to be established as a mixture of cultures and influences from all over the world. However, in this concoction of cultures not all ingredients seem to have blended equally well, the report suggests, and names Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities as "the more conspicuous minorities" who are victims of intolerance on the part of "present day British society". The "Recommendations" section of the report seems to further clarify the division into mainstream and "blackstream" arts in Britain, by noting that with regard to funds allocation "the present picture is one of disproportionate spending on traditional middle-class, white-oriented cultural activity (…) the facts are (…) that ethnic minority arts form a small but very important part of the wide spectrum of creative and artistic activities". Contrary to a broader definition of the term "ethnic minorities" which includes white minorities and which was proposed at the beginning of the report, the quotation seems to testify to the fact that "ethnic minority arts" are viewed as artistic activities of non-white, non-middle-class artists. Therefore, it may be inferred form the report that ethnic minority arts equal Afro-Caribbean and Asian arts, which in turn equals black arts. What is more, as far as visual arts are concerned the report stresses close relationship between ethnic minorities' visual arts and the category of craft. This may be interpreted as an attempt to deny ethnic minority artists access to mainstream art galleries, where craft work is not normally on display. Having introduced the assumption that ethnic visual arts belong to the category of craft activities, and that they are "different from the indigenous tradition" which means indigenous British tradition, the report suggests that the Arts Council should organise "appropriate exhibitions for touring in ethnic venues". By juxtaposing the above fragment with another that reads: "the working party recommends that the Association should try to put together over the next three years a series of exhibitions appropriate to small, non-gallery venues", one may discover that "ethnic venues" are more or less synonymous with "small non-gallery venues". All in all, despite acknowledging contribution of ethnic minority arts to the mainstream culture and the indigenous British tradition, the report relegates ethnic minority visual arts practice to some special places on the margins of the British artistic scene.

The report that sheds some light on the shift in the use of the term "ethnic arts" into "black arts" is the Great London Council (G.L.C.) Race Equality Unit Report from 12 December 1985 (Race Equality Unit Report 1985) . The very first point of the report states that the creation of Race Equality Unit within the G.L.C. contributed significantly to the "taking [of] black artists into the mainstream". Most importantly the report emphasises "professionalisation of black arts sector" which caused the separation of black arts from ethnic arts. "The most significant effect of G.L.C. funding on black arts has been the professionalisation of black arts and the emergence of clear distinction between what is described as 'ethnic arts' and 'black arts'". This seems to suggest that G.L.C. activities elevated black arts above the category of ethnic arts. The separation of the two and the context in which the division occurred clearly implies that unlike "ethnic arts" which remain in the domain of amateur arts, "black arts" approached the standards of professional art. This claim is supported by the following sentence: "There is now a clearly defined black art sector which is concerned with the development of contemporary art forms". In other words the report seems to indicate that "black art" exceeded the boundaries of "ethnic arts" characterised by tight connections with particular community and the culture of origin of the artist. "Black art", in contrast, entered the mainstream. "A number of highly successful key events have been organised in major art venues. This has been important in helping to establish black artists in the mainstream".

"Ethnic Arts Action Plan—Art" by Mike Sixsmith from January (Sixsmith 1987) deserves closer attention due to a frequent occurrence of the term "black artist" in the paper. The existential assumptions that one may easily spot in the text are: (1) that there exists a separate group of black artists, (2) that equal opportunities policies entail including the works of black artists in the gallery programmes. There are also the following bridging assumptions: (1) that the phrase "black artists" means artists of Afro-Caribbean or Asian origin; (2) that British mainstream art does not include non-European artists apparent in the fragment "(…) to show the contribution of non-European artists to 'mainstream' art in Britain" (Sixsmith). What is more, British born artist Sonia Boyce is classified as a black artist, as the opening sentence of point three which reads "Several Art Department Staff have attended race awareness courses, and have made special efforts to inform themselves by attending conferences, by visiting exhibitions and through discussion with black artists" (Sixsmith) is concluded by a following statement "Sonia Boyce has been appointed one of the purchases for the Arts Council Collection for the next fifteen months" (Sixsmith). The bridging assumption that logically binds the two fragments is that Sonia Boyce is considered a representative of the black art, with which Art Department staff attempt to become familiar. Section 5.1 features an existential assumption that black artists who have gone through "Western art school" are allowed access to "traditional gallery settings" (Sixsmith). At the same time a bridging assumption suggests that these artists do not create art that is in any way related to Afro-Caribbean or Asian art forms. "Most of the work shown is largely within a European context, from black artists who have been through the western art school system and who are now exhibiting in traditional gallery settings. So far we have found it difficult to attract proposals relating to Afro-Caribbean and Asian art forms" (Sixsmith).

"The Arts and Cultural Diversity. Symposium Report" form 1989 (The Arts and Cultural Diversity 1989) declares an attempt to promote diversity and incorporate black arts into the British culture. It explicitly states that the goal of the symposium was "the recognition of black artists as artists first of all, as individuals free to explore aesthetics, rather than as agents for solving political problems" (13). However, in order to account for the situation of black arts in Britain, the report does not flinch from appropriating rhetoric based on binary oppositions, whereby black arts is set against or juxtaposed to the British "mainstream tradition" (5). From a series of existential assumptions one can learn that in Britain there existed a separate area in the arts referred to as black arts, "A principal reason for the historical neglect of black arts has been the failure to place its achievements within the framework of a broad heterogeneous national culture" (7). Additionally, the report also suggests that black arts had been marginalised, underfunded and separated from the mainstream. In contrast, "the British way of life" (6) is represented as valuing heterogeneity, tolerance and openness, while "Britain's artistic life" is claimed to have been "immeasurably enriched by its cultural diversity" (2). It seems that one cannot fail to notice the dichotomy between the overtly positive image of Britain, which aims at moving from "a monocultural to a multicultural perception of the arts" (7) and the existential assumption which implies that there still prevails a division into the mainstream and the margin reserved for "people from other cultures" (5), which is expressed in a sentence "The Government is keen for people from other cultures to play a full part in the mainstream of British life without losing their own cultural roots and identity" (5). Blackness which surfaces in the report is fairly homogeneous and remains outside the mainstream tradition and by implication also outside the concept of "Britishness".

The Arts Council report entitled "Towards cultural diversity: the monitoring report of the Arts Council's ethnic minority action plan" from 1989 (The Arts Council 1989) includes a bridging assumption that "Black Arts" equals ethnic minority arts. What is more, the "Principal Recommendations" section features points whose logical cohesion depends on the bridging assumption that "Black Arts" stands for "cultural diversity", i.e. "that Council develop a strategy plan which creates (…) a place for Black Arts organisations and groups", and "that Council install a code of practice for monitoring cultural diversity". The entire report is based on the existential assumption that British national culture is heterogeneous, "Central to the philosophy of this report is the concept of a broad heterogeneous national culture, its make-up reflecting the diversity of cultural achievement issuing from contemporary society". The sentence not only implies that the concept of Britishness had lost its cultural homogeneity, but also that British national culture (and by implication also Britishness) no longer consists of a fixed cultural core to which other cultures become assimilated. On the contrary, as the report states, diverse cultural achievements are "not assimilated, but rather placed alongside all other achievements to construct through their diverse autonomies a new superstructure of cultural practice". Another existential assumption about British national culture is the assumption that it is plural: "These debates identified particular needs: to raise the national consciousness to the plural nature of the contemporary culture", that it is multicultural, and that still the representation of Britishness as a culturally diverse identity is prevented by racism. Throughout the report there appear phrases such as "black representation", "black artists", "black achievement", "black organisations", "black audience", in which the meaning of "black" is not further clarified. Bridging assumptions included in the text imply that the signifier "black" here simply refers to people, achievements, and organisations that are "culturally other" [section D of the report, point 1 (i)] and do not represent Western/Eurocentric consciousness, "The national cultural consciousness was Western/Eurocentric, even insular. Its interaction with the 'culturally other' was simply to relegate it to the margin and contain it at the periphery" [section D of the report, point 1 (i)]. By pledging its commitment to the idea of diversity, the Arts Council represents itself as fighting against insularity of the British society and culture, which is presented as hostile to any "foreign intrusion" [D, point 1, (i)]. Consequently, in the report "Black Art" and black identity appear to be foreign to Britishness, yet with the new policy of diversity this foreignness can be happily awarded a special space parallel to the mainstream arts. Hence, the report calls for the need to create "more black organisations", "black venues" and to employ more black staff. There can be no doubt that blackness and Britishness are clearly separated, where black means non-British.

4 Conclusion

All in all, the British government arts policy seems to have contributed significantly to the formation of cultural identities within the visual arts sector. The artists, who had to identify themselves as “ethnic”, “black”, or “other” in relation to the dominant British art and culture in order to secure financial support, would be forced to internalise identities that the policy discourse constructed. The analysis demonstrates that some arts policy documents covertly sustained the status quo which set Britishness against its ethnic or black “Other” even though on the surface it may seem that they showed black art as part of all inclusive, pluralist notion of Britishness. The picture of black identity that emerges from the documents analysed in this chapter stands in opposition to Britishness and is tightly connected with ethnic minorities. Surprisingly, Britishness is represented as a fairly stable identity, which yet can embrace diversity and readily accept difference. After all, as some reports seem to imply, at the very core of Britishness there lie openness and tolerance.

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