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BLACK ARTS IN LONDON AND THE GLC: THE END OF AN ERA?

KWESI OWUSU

Contact me

Kwesi Owusu talks to Parminder Vir Ethnic Arts Advisor to the GLC. Black Arts in London have taken some significant steps forward in the last two years. Despite the economic recession and the reactionary strategies of the Arts Council to recapture the nostalgic England of Kipling's glorious garden something is slipping from the grip of the establishment. Black Arts have seen some interesting developments in the fields of video, visual and performing arts and major events such as the International Bookfair of Radical, Black and Third World Books have also made a significant impact. In particular, the synthesis of a new organisational dynamism coupled with a critical and aesthetic awareness has encouraged creative innovation, hinted at possible future departures and produced some remarkable work. *will go to press on Monday*

This weekend on 951-3787 (Kwesi)

Thanks

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These developments may not be unique in themselves but they add an important dimension to the ability to consolidate on the fragile but resilient cultural infrastructures which have emerged relatively autonomous of state institutions. In the main this is the result of longstanding struggles by Black artists to control the mode and means of artistic production; struggles given such effectivity by the new political climate engendered by the 1981 uprisings which swept the country from Brixton and Southall and state concessions made in the aftermath.

The most significant development within state institutions has no doubt been the emergence of the Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee at the GLC following the Ethnic Arts Conference in May 1982. The ensuing release of resources has helped many black groups to operate more effectively whilst the launch of an Anti-Racist Year has certainly improved the public profile of Black Arts in addition to raising consciousness against racism. GLC funding has also helped to reduce dependence on less sympathetic funding bodies and encouraged more independent initiatives.

This has had a destabilising effect on the 'ethnic arts industry' which has been a major obstacle to the development of more creative black art forms. The move to effectively challenge this industry is significant because, in its public funding profile, Black Arts have for a long time encountered a discriminatory state welfare provision informed by a liberal multi-cultural policy. As part of the wider multi-racial political consensus articulated in the early 1979's by feted politicians such as Roy Jenkins this policy was to create the basis for a more 'racially tolerant' Britain.

This ideology of consensus politics is now effectively dead, ^{rendered} less and less relevant by its own contradictions and not least of all by Thatcher's repudiation of all its intentions and purposes.

Not incidentally, the biggest threat to the consolidation of recent gains in Black Arts comes from Thatcher with the possible abolition of the GLC looming on the horizon. The general feeling ^{amongst Black artists} about the future is one of ^{some} apprehension.

PV: We've worked these two years developing and putting resources into the Black community ^{only} to feel it may all be wiped out. But I don't believe it will.

Black Arts are vibrant and the fact that they've survived for so long is a proof of their strength and ^{endurance}.

KO: What do you think can be done now?

PV: One of the things we can do is to equip Black arts groups and artists with the skills and information to negotiate effectively with funding bodies. This is important irrespective of whether the GLC is going or not.

KO: Looking back over the last two years what do you think have been the effects of GLC funding?

PV: I think we have to do a breakdown of the groups which came to us for funding. Some were well established like Tara Arts, Tomba Theatre, the Black Theatre Co-operative; others were just starting and needed to be developed. The effects have therefore been different and varied. Funding has generally been positive. It can only be positive. We started with a budget of £300,000 in 1982/3 which really was a drop in the ocean. This has increased to £2 million. Some of this money has helped to provide a solid foundation for a number of Black groups. It has also resulted in the development of underfunded and underrepresented art forms such as the visual arts, crafts, film and video, literature and publications.

KO: What specific developments have taken place in film and video?

PV: In addition to the established Black film makers like Menelik Shabazz and Horace Ove there has been an influx of people leaving college having studied film. Some have organised themselves into collectives. Our policy of funding strategic resources has enabled us to fund workshops which has enabled these groups to seek a franchise from the ACTT. In London we now have Ceddo as an established workshop with its own resources; Retake, with a film and resources under its belt, ^{which} Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa are also running training courses for the community thus making the facility more accessible to black people.

KO: To what extent has there been a link-up with developments in Channel 4 television?

PV: In Channel 4 Alan Fountain, the Commissioning Editor for Independent Films and Video has been very sympathetic to these developments. He has invested money in Retake, Sankofa, and is considering other applications. The commitment has been demonstrated and it must be maintained and developed.

KO: There is a feeling among some established Black film makers that they are being denied commissions which are going to white companies making films on the black experience and new Black film makers. This makes it difficult to inform contemporary film practice with the sort of experience that has been accumulated over years.

PV: I think there may be a change with Farrukh Dhondy taking over as Commissioning Editor for Multi-cultural Programming ^{in Channel 4}. I hope he will be ready to take risks and commission those film makers who have been around for a long time. It is also important to look at the contribution of the workshops. There is room for both. I am pleased to see more film makers on the scene. Issac Julien from Sankofa has just finished 'Territories' which is an excellent film. It's important for black film makers to organise themselves both individually and collectively to challenge Channel 4 and fight for their rights.

KO: The results of funding performing arts have been encouraging. Would you agree, as some are now arguing, that there is now a professional stratum of Black artists in London?

PV: I think there has been a professionalisation of Black arts in the sense that with more adequate resources Black artists can now provide better organisational back up like publicity for the presentation of their art forms. This shows in the increase in audiences ^{for} Black arts events like plays at Tricycle, Theatre Royal Stratford, African Music Village at the Commonwealth Institute, Poetry events at the Africa Centre.

KO: The GLC controls quite a few mainstream arts institutions, for example, on the South Bank. These have rarely provided space for Black arts. Have you had any impact on them?

PV: I would say very little but a report was taken to Committee which outlined what the GLC itself could do and expect in terms of Black representation in management, programming and employment. This report was endorsed and all leaders of these institutions were asked to provide written statements of their Equal Opportunity and AntiRacist Policies and how they generally proposed to redress these imbalances. I would see the results in the next long months but this issue has certainly been a major concern for the arts and recreation department. Certainly, there have already been some changes in programming at the South Bank with the series of concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Royal Festival Hall. We've also made proposals for the Hayward Gallery which has never put on

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KO: The Anti-Racist Year is drawing to a close. Many would say the GLC has made an impact in London but what about the structural racism within your own committee structure. I am referring to the fact that the GLC's Community Arts Sub-Committee is entirely white and does not consider applications from Black community artists and groups.

PV: There were always bound to be anomalies and contradictions in this kind of structural division which ends up with a Community Arts committee consisting entirely of white artists and Ethnic arts committee consisting of black people. I see a justification for having an all black Ethnic Arts Sub Committee because it was the first time black people were given resources and the opportunity to make decisions without being policed by white community artists. I see no justification for an all white Community Arts Sub Committee given the history of black groups like Steel 'n Skin, ^{The} African Dawn and others who work both in the white and black communities and fit the definitions and criteria of community arts. It says something about the inherent racism in the community arts movement. We have applications which had 'ethnic dimensions' offered to us even from the projects which have been white controlled. We have made it clear what the ^{responsibility} of community artists is to Black Arts. The question to ask now is whether these committees have outlived their roles and whether we shouldn't be thinking of new structures to carry out new policies.

KO: What are your views?

PV: For the Ethnic Minorities Unit we need to rethink funding criteria and priorities in the light of developments over the last two years. Do we need to prioritise the strengthening of the new structures which have emerged or fund Black arts which have been socially functional to the communities. A question to ask is where are the art forms which are challenging the status quo emerging from? We need to define Black Arts as a political concept that comes out of our experience living in racist Britain. If we are also saying that community arts need to strengthen Black representation within its structures then these committee divisions may not be necessary. I think its time to abolish the two committees and think of a new one which sees Black arts as part of ^{mainstream} ~~mainstream~~ arts. Within the mainstream however it is crucial to recognise that Black Arts start from a disadvantaged position in terms of access and lack of adequate facilities.

KO: GLC policies are further ahead than those of the Arts Council. Is there any way of reconciling them?

PV: There are two ways of dealing with the Arts Council, one is to hit one's head against a brick wall and try to change their attitudes. Many of us tried that as people who sat on some of the panels. The other is to set an example as to what happens when you put resources into a starved community. I think the GLC has done this and the Arts Council has to take notice of the groups who have had a taste of funding and know that with some resources they can organize effectively and make an impact.

KO: These developments are taking place in London. Don't you think the GLC is re-inforcing an existing imbalance as far as the regions are concerned?

PV: There are two ways the GLC has had an impact in the regions. Local authorities all over must be waking up to the fact that Black Arts need supporting. More importantly by giving resources to Black groups we've enabled them to acquire the freedom to take their art outside of London which many have done. Their presence encourages local groups to organize and fight for resources from local and regional authorities.

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