Has BLM really changed the arts?

A year after the murder of George Floyd, black creativity and inclusion in the sector are more vital than ever, writes the founder of campaigning group Inc Arts

Still from Helina Metaferia's video performance piece, 'Slow Dirt' (2016) © Courtesy Addis Fine Art

Amanda Parker 5 HOURS AGO

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In September last year, during the small window of opportunity when live theatre emerged from lockdown, a socially distanced performance took place on a south London basketball court. It sold out as soon as tickets went on sale. A creative response to George Floyd's murder, *846 Live* was remarkable not just because of the speed at which the production was realised, but also because the entire cast and creative team were of African diaspora heritage.

In a year that has seen some of the world's largest ever mass demonstrations against racism, triggered by a reprehensible crime and amplified by the Black Lives Matter movement, inclusion and diversity have been on everyone's lips.

The intersection of art, culture, pandemic and blackness has created high awareness of societal disparity, but how profound an impact it's had in the arts sector depends on where your finger rests on the globe and on the skin in which you live.

Across the UK, the outpouring of statements of solidarity among predominantly white-led arts organisations led to widespread trauma among black creatives, who shared privately and publicly the painful contrast between the solidarity being expressed by industry leaders, and their personal experiences of decades of marginalisation at best, and racist harm at worst.

The fallout has been akin to the most ugly of public divorces, with both sides stunned by the lack of understanding shown by the other.

At Inc Arts, an organisation that works towards diversity in the arts, we felt we were in the eye of this storm: in our role advising arts leaders on equality, holding confidential support groups and providing free counselling for those affected by racism, we found ourselves navigating the anger, shock, dawning realisation, contrition and in some instances stubborn refusal to give a name to what had been going on for decades: racism.

The pandemic has triggered redundancies, which in turn removed swathes of ethnic diversity from the arts sector — because so much of the sector's diversity lies in hospitality, stewarding and in early-career roles.

But as the arts gear up to return, black creativity has never been more visible than now. Many are enjoying a hitherto unknown experience of having multiple work offers: while all musicians have seen their income drop, at Inc Arts we have strong evidence (through a soon to be published survey of musicians) that the drop in income for the UK's black musicians has been comparatively less severe.

This is in part due to the hard self-reflection, and subsequent increased understanding, by white gatekeepers. Commercial theatre producer John Brant is passionate about his role in making positive change. "We've all learned so much in the last year — stuff we should have known already. I know that we can do so much better to make producing more inclusive and I'm personally up for it." It's also been driven by a step-change from funders: funding body Arts Council England has made inclusivity and relevance the new guiding principle in its grant-giving decision-making.

But as Clary Salandy, a producer at London's annual Notting Hill Carnival, says, "They're quick to offer us creative projects, but it looks like the same people handing out the commissions." There's been very little change in leadership of the larger national organisations. Ethnically diverse leadership remains prevalent mainly in smaller organisations. While everyone wants black trustees and ethnically diverse artists in performance, there still seems a reluctance to hand over the keys of leadership.

Michael Elcock in '846 Live', performed last year on a south London basketball court © Stephen Wright

Jamaican-born writer Kei Miller lives in the UK and works in the US. He believes the UK's response is rooted in its own ambivalence about its colonial past. "You have to remember that British slaves were tucked away on an island far away — it wasn't in your face in the same way that it was in the US. And it's why Britain is vocal in its response to George Floyd's murder, but not nuanced in its response to racism on its own turf."

So while the US's National Football League has the Rooney Rule — a clearly articulated strategy for increasing ethnic diversity in coaching and other roles — in the UK a common thread across all creative practices is a lack of confidence in legislative power. The UK's 2010 Equality Act offers a practical framework for organisations to take inclusive action, but when it comes to rethinking how work teams are structured and how the work is divided beyond onstage roles, no arts organisation wants to be the first to test the parameters of the act.

Hence the contrast between onstage diversity and the glacial pace of change in arts business roles. And there's further dissonance in the different global approaches to cultural programming.

Currently having a moment is art that focuses on oppression narratives — often based on the artists' lived experience. US artist Helina Metaferia's 2016 video performance piece "Slow Dirt" is an explicit, intimately personal piece that references her Ethiopian heritage, the political advocacy of her parents, and her engagement with the racialisation of identity.

> **Where's the space for us to make art that's not about being in a black skin? That is light, joyful or even irreverent?**

Explicitly honouring ancestry and loss, it's a piece that's perfectly configured for today's avid, race-aware collector. Rakeb Sile, whose gallery Addis Fine Art represents Metaferia, confirms that international interest in her work has dramatically increased as black protest and anti-racist allyship took centre stage in the pandemic. Sile notes, "There's particular interest in African work that is political, that speaks to activism."

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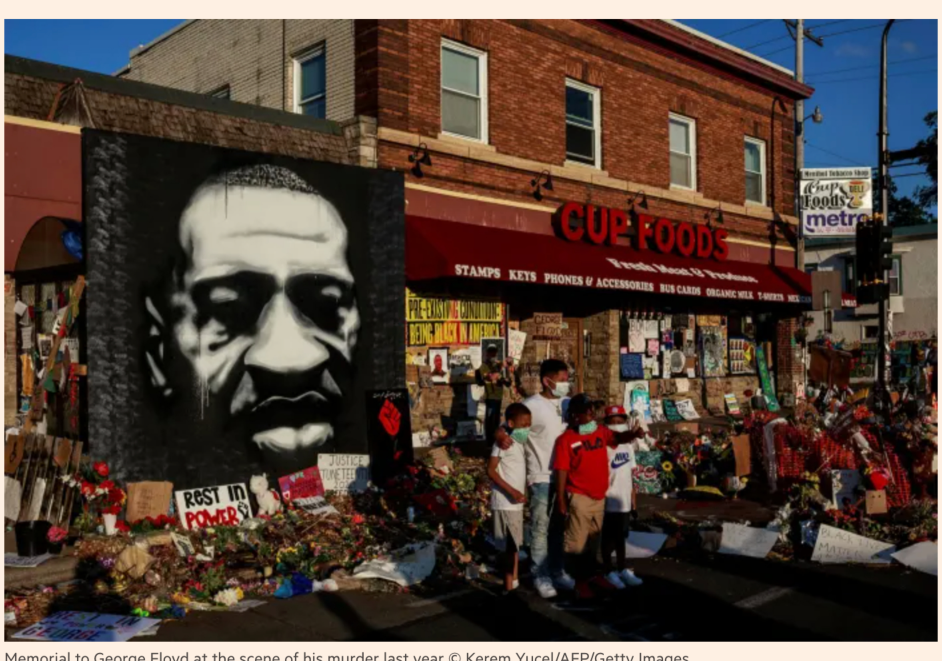
But as US-based writer-musician Joy Jones points out, "Where's the space for us to make art that's not about being in a black skin? That is light, joyful or even irreverent?"

What if one's art is not "about" the white gaze of "blackness as burden" but instead is about everything and anything? Will organisations continue to look to artists to mine the trauma of lived experience?



Memorial to George Floyd at the scene of his murder last year © Kerem Yucel/AFP/Getty Images

This lack of agency in decision-making has led many ethnically diverse creatives to look to Africa, not just for inspiration but as a blueprint for self-determination.

Diane Henry Lepart is a venture capitalist and cultural adviser working on large-scale cultural regeneration strategies in Abu Dhabi. "The commercial art market has been following this trend [African diaspora creativity] for the past decade or more but now we have Africans on both sides of the table, as collectors, producers and makers."

An increasing number of ethnically diverse creatives are choosing to look towards markets that already value their worth and where ethnicity is not the currency of value. Worldwide, the African diaspora is increasingly choosing to eschew the mainstream and work within already diverse markets. Whether that's on the basketball courts of south London, or the expanding ambitions of Nigeria-based EbonyLife TV, ethnically diverse creatives are working away from what increasingly feels like a refreshed, postcolonial, but still patrician lens.

Arts leaders are watching the UK government closely for its lead on redressing decades-long disparities in funding, profile and opportunity for ethnically diverse arts practitioners. There is a palpable nervousness about government's appetite for diversifying culture.

Amanda Parker, founder of Inc Arts © Sasha Damjanovski

In a closed meeting in February between UK culture secretary Oliver Dowden and some of the UK's leading cultural organisations, government explored issues around anti-racism and sector-wide attention to decolonisation. Museums and galleries wait with bated breath to understand what activity may fall foul of government leanings.

The fruits of global activism may yet be the weaving of an inclusive new landscape, where personal expression is welcomed, and where creatives can

landscape, where personal expression is welcomed, and where creatives can choose to work within their own affinity groups or engage within the wider global cultural landscape. For the UK, this can begin with a clear signal from government that encourages cultural curiosity and encourages arts leaders to have full and confident use of the legislation that's there to support a diverse and thriving return to culture.