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Confessions of an Indolent Curator

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Abstract

My transition from the world of literature to that of art should have been a seamless one. After all, both disciplines are part of the Humanities. The seductive composition of language, paint or sculpture can distil even the most appalling of horrors. Both deal, in various ways, with the human condition.

NIMA POOVAYA-SMITH

Confessions of an Indolent Curator

My transition from the world of literature to that of art should have been a seamless one. After all, both disciplines are part of the Humanities. The seductive composition of language, paint or sculpture can distil even the most appalling of horrors. Both deal, in various ways, with the human condition.

However, the imperatives of material culture, can seem in reality very different from the world of words. Value often resides not just in the content but also in the medium, which can be costly and rare. The value of a book is not reduced by infinite replication whereas a work of visual art is diminished in reproduction. To that extent, literature seems a somewhat purer and, paradoxically, less elitist discipline.

I was seemingly abandoning a discipline to which I had hitherto devoted most of my life. I say 'seemingly abandoned' because, of course, a literary training stays with one. It provides a critical apparatus which informs a surprisingly wide range of activities, whatever the sphere. It certainly influences the manner in which I analyse a work of art or create an exhibition. 1986 marked my entrance as a curator into Bradford Art Galleries and Museums. It was a gamble on both sides. Bradford had appointed a young woman with almost no art historical background, apart from an in-depth knowledge of the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy.

I had fondly imagined that working in an art gallery would be both civilized and stylish. People sipping Earl Grey tea but dressed in clothes with just the right touch of insouciance – after all an involvement in the arts would surely be demonstrated in sartorial imaginativeness. This pleasing prospect appealed to the indolent, superficial side of me, sadly an integral part of my make-up. Unfortunately, by 1986, art galleries in Britain had entered a period of searing self-doubt. They were under strong pressure to widen their constituency and reach out to the disenfranchised. The race riots of 1981 in Bristol, Liverpool and Brixton had seriously shaken the status quo. Curiously, Bradford with one of the highest Asian populations in the country appeared unaffected by this. Its own riots came much later, like a bolt from the blue, in 1995. The 1981 riots, however, prompted Bradford to create my post. The brief was specific. I had to research, collect and exhibit material that reflected the cultures of the South Asian communities of Britain as manifested through

tradition as well as contemporary practice.

Inner-city Bradford is mainly inhabited by the South Asian community. There has been a very noticeable 'white flight'. The dominant group is Pakistani, mainly of Mirpuri origin. However, the much smaller Hindu and Sikh communities have a clear, some might say forceful, idea of their own rights. The potential for confrontation lay close to the surface. I had to tread a fine and careful line. I had a small advantage in being a South Indian Hindu. The Asian population of Bradford is almost exclusively from the North of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent with smaller groups from Gujarat and Bangladesh. The former were merely puzzled by my obscure geographic origins. Most Northerners conflate the South with the area of Madras. The Sikhs often mused with cheerful good humour about what they considered to be Hinduism's chaotic world-view. They always courteously excluded me and, through me, all South Indians from this chaos.

It was difficult to be sure-footed all the time. Continual diplomacy was not only bland but also exhausting. Humour was an effective leaven and I used it as frequently as I dared.

The past eleven years have whirled by in a rush of dizzyingly varied exhibitions on Islamic calligraphy, Indian jewellery, manuscript paintings from the Ramayana, Sikh art, contemporary feminist art from Pakistan and saris from India. There has even been an exhibition on death and the afterlife as depicted in art. The Asian communities took a lively and critical interest in all the exhibitions. To my surprise, and slight alarm, so did other galleries in the country. The exhibitions travelled widely and the publications sold well. Any inclination to even occasionally indulge in my natural indolence was fast receding. Bradford was now viewed as an important source of non-British exhibitions. A reputation to maintain inevitably means continuing hard work.

The audience response to the temporary exhibitions served as valuable case-studies. This firmly shaped another, less visible, side of my work: building up a collection. This now falls into four loose groupings: ritual silver and gold artefacts, calligraphy from the Muslim world, textiles and costumes from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and, overarching all this, contemporary Fine and Decorative arts. Indeed, contemporary art makes frequent inroads into the other three areas, since they too have a modern thrust. While they give it context, it gives them relevance. Contemporary art also operates as a sharp brake on any temptation to retreat into nostalgia.

The primary focus of this collection is artists of South Asian descent, living and working in Britain. This, however, poses a problem about the nature of definitions. The race riots of 1981 had radicalized the thinking of a number of artists of non-British origin, particularly those of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean descent. Their work, for the first time, was treated almost as a movement with concerns unique to their state of being non-

European. Most of these artists were either second-generation British or fairly new arrivals to Britain – Sutapa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman, Said Adrus, Nina Edge, Sunil Gupta, Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce were among those whose works encapsulated an emergent, questioning identity. The articulation of a distinct identity, however, carries the inevitable danger of being viewed as marginal with the threat of exclusion from the British mainstream. The nuances of this art are as important as its overt statements, capturing, as it does, a multiracial society in a period of transition and flux. I was anxious that artists of dual heritage should be presented in a manner that acknowledged their subcontinental heritage as well as their integral role within the British mainstream. The new acquisitions initially went under the 'ghastly name' of ethnic collections; I expunged all traces of this word as rapidly as I decently could. When a permanent display became imminent, it was decided that the most appropriate term was 'transcultural'. This had a fluid quality, allowing us to oscillate between East and West, and cross-reference different cultures.

I discovered within me a secret addiction to buying. The rich cornucopia of gold, silver, glass, ceramics, textiles, even the queuing, uncomfortable satirical edge of contemporary art, held me completely in its voluptuous thrall. I began to plot, with fiendish cunning, to finance this addiction in a variety of ways. Funding bodies that supported acquisitions were approached with relentless regularity. Temporary exhibitions were toured to generate further income. It soon became obvious that the transcultural collection needed to go on permanent display. Regular consultation with the communities has been a feature of our operations since 1986. While the diverse range of temporary exhibitions was welcomed, there was an increasing demand for something less transient. It was felt that for the minority communities to have any form of serious re-engagement with their material culture, a permanent showcase was necessary. The largest area within the imposing Cartwright Hall Art Gallery was identified as a dedicated space for the rapidly expanding collection.

Adapting a gallery is an expensive business, however, and the advent of the National Lottery was fortuitous. Three lottery grants and other awards from private foundations enabled us to refurbish the gallery to a high standard, as well as commission a large number of paintings, sculpture, prints, ceramics, glass and even some gold. However, it was not all plain sailing. One of the lottery grants was for a magnificent stainless steel sculpture by the internationally acclaimed artist, Anish Kapoor. *Turning the world inside out* is a profound sculptural exploration of chaos, creation and regeneration. Sited in the very heart of Cartwright Hall, in the marble, stone and glass sculpture court, it is one of Bradford's most lucid statements on transculturalism. It has only one other companion in this majestic space, a 12-ton marble narrative entitled *Humanity Overcoming War*, completed in 1925 by Francis Derwent

Wood as a commemoration of the Great War.

The lottery award was supplemented by two grants from the National Art Collections Fund and the Henry Moore Foundation. When the lottery award was announced, one of the tabloids, the *Daily Mail*, decided to run it as a story – a hostile one. This was consistent with news coverage of most lottery grants to contemporary art, particularly single awards. The local Bradford paper decided to give the story a longer lease and made it front-page news. In typical tabloid style, the headlines were inflammatory, the slant of the main item condemnatory. A local commercial radio station picked up this item and invited people to phone in. Predictably, since the coverage repeatedly stressed Bradford's state of deprivation in matters of health and education, the response was hostile. The press never once mentioned that Bradford itself had not contributed a single penny towards the acquisition of the sculpture nor the fact that the award had come from a pot of money reserved exclusively for the arts. Neither members of the 'outraged' public nor the journalists concerned had actually seen the sculpture. Those who had other opinions were not encouraged to speak. The radio station did eventually give myself and one of the Councillors the right of reply. A number of the Asian 'community leaders' also stated categorically that the press had both misrepresented and misled them, and two of them wrote in to complain. In all fairness, some among the journalists from the local paper appeared genuinely aghast at its hysterical bias and the sabotage of their own neutral coverage of the event. The debate over the sculpture continues to erupt periodically in the local press, and I am now resigned to its having a life of its own beyond my control.

This episode, however, brought home to me how fragile my delicately poised world of humorous confrontation, diplomacy, research, acquisitions and exhibitions really was, and how powerful a force for casual evil or good the media can be. There are ironies. Like most of Kapoor's work, the sculpture is breathtakingly beautiful. Its silvery surface reflects the black and white marble floor at Cartwright. Poised on an incredibly narrow base, it belies its own weight and suggests the lightness of a soap bubble. Visitors are drawn to it like a magnet and it now has a considerable following. Perhaps one should also remember that its unlikely companion, Derwent Wood's *Humanity Overcoming War*, viewed by the local press these days as 'proper sculpture', attracted considerable calumny for the ferocity of its figures when it was first installed.

The transcultural gallery and *Turning the world inside out* were launched together in June 1997. More than a 1,000 people attended the launch, a wide multiracial cross-section of society from Yorkshire and beyond. It is tempting to think that perhaps the silent majority, that commentators claim is an increasing phenomenon within Britain in recent years, voted with their feet.