

# Essay

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How a fellowship at MIF made me face political issues of curating

By Tanja Hylling Diers

I will remember. I will most likely also mis-remember. I will remember and misremember by organising memories that are separate and scattered. I will take this dismembered collection of memories from my many trips to Manchester and present them to you to the best of my ability. I will remember what has been dismembered. I will make myself a member alongside other members of the story I gather through an ongoing process of ascribing meaning to my re-member-ing. This is remembering through writing.

It is the summer of 2019. It is long before the Covid pandemic changed our lives in so many ways, causing pain and fear, making travel extremely difficult and gatherings of large groups of people forbidden. Before our experience of presence and distance was turned upside down, and the global and local had merged in unforeseen ways, and it is before the UK left the European Union. At this point in time, Manchester, where I am about to take part in Manchester International Festival (MIF),<sup>1</sup> is still an ordinary English post-industrial city, and I am still a freelance dramaturg and curator with a fellowship mandate and a grant from the Danish Arts Council.<sup>2</sup> I am in Manchester to broaden my knowledge about festival curation based on what I presume are strong artistic choices, but what I get is deeper insight into *diversity work* in cultural organisations and an understanding of the critical importance of the place in which and the people for whom you curate. My interest in the field of curation and how it is practiced has its roots in personal observations from within the theatre industry in Denmark. In my professional experience, curatorial processes are very seldom discussed and programming by artistic directors very seldom questioned. Most artistic directors are males or females in their 40s making artistic decisions based on personal taste and opinions about what they consider 'good' art. What the theatre industry loses as a result of this curation practice is a conversation about how choices regarding programming are what define the values of a theatre and enable it to move forward, driving the development of not just the individual theatre, but the industry as a whole. The curatorial process, however, has much more potential, as Storm Møller Madsen explains, with reference to Swedish curator Maria Lind's definition of *the curatorial* as a practice closely related to what Chantelle Mouffe calls *the political*. This linking adds qualities to curation that make it antagonistic in nature by placing *divergence* and *dissent* at its centre: "At its best, curating as a practice has the potential to take on unsettling the hierarchies and norms that

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- 1) MIF is a biannual festival that programmes only new commissions with a budget of approx. 18 million GBP. John McGrath has been the artistic director since 2015. In 2019, MIF presented new productions with Yoko Ono, Philip Glass, Idris Elba, Tania Bruguera, Ivo Van Hove and Laurie Anderson, to name but a few prominent international artists. The programme is in itself very diverse, aiming to engage as many people as possible as well as attract an international audience.
  - 2) The fellowship aims to create a foundation for exchange of knowledge, bringing knowledge home to the performing arts scene in Denmark and establishing longterm relationships with UK-based institutions. Together with this assignment, I am awarded a grant totalling 75,000 DKK to cover expenses for 6 to 8 weeks for travel, accommodation and per diem, as well as a small fee for me as a freelancer of 2,000 DKK per week.

have embedded themselves in the institutional and disciplinary art world relationships“ (Madsen, 2020, p. 37)<sup>3</sup>. When these aspects are added to curation, it becomes clear that curation has the potential to democratise art if the right questions are asked. Questions to begin this process could be: What kind of conversations do we want the art we present to start? Who do we want to have these conversations with? Who are we not talking to at the moment? And next, to find these people and ask them: What is art to you? In my work, I aim to ask questions like this, not only as a curator, but also as a dramaturg. For me, the two positions are therefore very closely related, overlapping on many points in the artistic process of conceptualising and contextualising a performance.

The term *diversity work* is an overarching term for the work many cultural institutions do to ensure a fairer representation of citizens in the arts. The term points to democratisation and more equality. I base my use of the term diversity on Sara Ahmed’s field work studies in *On Being Included* (2012). Ahmed explains how the term is useful because it is the term many cultural workers in the field use rather than equality or equity (Ahmed, 2012, p. 61). Diversity becomes a term to which many meanings can be ascribed. Ahmed also points to how diversity as a term can be problematic because it can so easily be slapped onto mission statements and lead to consensual behaviour without making real structural changes or discussing issues like inequality for minority groups. With Ahmed’s work in mind, it is clear that diversity as a term can contribute to a consensus-seeking position in which all can agree on more diversity, so nothing needs to be done and no discussions are necessary. Policies are written but no action is taken. I suggest adding intersectionality<sup>4</sup> to any diversity work in order to nuance the conversations and recognise the many layers of privilege – because opening up conversations and recognising complexity are key to successful change. The question of diversity can often get stuck on issues of ethnicity or sexuality, leaving issues of class or ability untouched. When skin colour and diversity become synonymous, discussions can become polarised between absolute positions of artistic freedom and political correctness. Meanwhile, if you openly acknowledge the complexity and layers of privilege and how you yourself are entangled within it, this allows collaborators who experience discrimination to lower their guard. Only from this point are conversation and exchange possible. I therefore find it necessary in my work to initiate discussions that dare to deal with the complexities of diversity, to take time to share experiences and, in doing so, to expose my own learning trajectory and allow for the possibility of failure. This is key to working in a political field of curation that aims at a more democratic art scene. And while these conversations are important, they are also not enough – issues such as democratisation, discrimination and equal rights must be tackled on a theoretical, practical and structural level in order for these values to support diversity work and prevent it from passing simply as a feel-good concept or a provocative statement.

One of the things I remember is the first time I arrived at the MIF office. I am asked to fill out a questionnaire that MIF uses for internal statistics on all staff. In the questionnaire, I must fill out my gender and class affiliation. Okay, no problem. Then race affiliation, “Caucasian”, “Asian”, “Afro/English” and many more categories I cannot remember. Okay, I am Caucasian. Ticking the

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3) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by the author.

4) Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in the context of Black feminism and critical race studies. The term was originally developed to point to the interconnection of race and gender. Crenshaw aimed at describing the double-fold oppression of black women in society – double meaning oppression for being both women and being black. With a focus on a broad range of social and political factors and how they often overlap, Crenshaw provided a framework for understanding how discrimination and privilege is affected by gender, class, caste, disability, sexuality, religion and physical appearance.

box makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, but on the other hand, everyone can see what I look like. I start wondering why they need to put me into all these boxes. The next section in the questionnaire is sexual orientation. And this is too personal for me. I find it irrelevant for anybody to know. So, I pass. The questions continue, now about physical health and mental health. I feel uneasy. I simply indicate that I have no health issues. My personal boundaries have been crossed. The situation is uncomfortable for me because it is unfamiliar, because I feel exposed and because my privileges become undeniable to me. To admit that I am white did not cause me trouble. Being white is not something I have given much thought growing up. White skin was the norm. I was a part of the majority. White was equal to normality, and in this sense, it passed as neutral. In retrospect, what I experienced filling out the questionnaire was an example of ‘white fragility’<sup>5</sup> triggered by the exposure of my ‘white privilege’<sup>6</sup> – a privilege that I am accustomed to as being invisible and natural, not something that is questioned. Perhaps my experience could more precisely be called ‘privilege fragility’. My emotional reaction to the situation is important, not because I felt it, but because “the personal is structural”, as Sara Ahmed points out (Ahmed, 2016). My experience is part of something much greater than me, which is why I must dare to share it. Admitting to automatic reactions of resistance and uneasiness and understanding my own embeddedness within the issue when working with diversity is crucial to making changes and ultimately creating more equality. You cannot put yourself outside of the situation. Doing so is a “manifestation of dominance” (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p. 140) or of “white supremacy” (Rankine, 2019, p. vii).

The point of the questionnaire is not for MIF to provoke feelings of discomfort, but to keep track of how well they measure up to their own equality goals, and this type of questionnaire is common in many UK institutions. MIF’s aim is for the organisation to reflect the population of Manchester in terms of who they hire. They need statistics to ensure that they reach their equality goals, lifting their good intentions around diversity to actual measurable achievements within equality. The discourse surrounding diversity in the UK is quite advanced in both scope and nuance. In Denmark, on the other hand, the use of statistics in the arts is not common practice. One reason for this difference could be that the British Arts Council demands that institutions that apply for funding live up to certain standards in terms of diversity and equality. This ambitious, long-term strategy is called *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* (2010-2020) and is underpinned by a desire to “maintain and enhance England’s status as a leading cultural force in the world” (British Arts Council, 2013, p. 10). The way to do this is to make “the leadership and workforce truly diverse, reflecting the population and able to support the right talent to make great art for the country” (ibid, p. 6). Institutions that apply must adhere to five goals in order to achieve funding. These softer goals have recently been accompanied by statistical goals. One goal in particular catches my attention: “4. The leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries are diverse and appropriately skilled (ibid, p. 39). The four other goals are: “1. Excellence is thriving and celebrated in the arts, museums and libraries. 2. Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries. 3. The arts, museums and libraries are resilient and environmentally sustainable. 5. Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience

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5) Robin DiAngelo coined the term ‘white fragility’ in 2011 as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves”. The term is explored in depth in her book from 2018 *White Fragility – Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*.

6) ‘White privilege’ is known through Peggy McIntosh’s writings as a term to make visible the invisible systems of racial dominance among whites: “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (McIntosh, 1988).

the richness of the arts, museums and libraries” (ibid, p. 39). In the UK, statistics generated by questionnaires such as the one I was asked to fill out have long been used as a tool to assess whether changes are happening in accordance with set goals. The exposure of inequality and privileges that I experienced can cause discomfort and uneasiness. For me these feelings are rare, but as we learn from Claudia Rankine, Audre Lorde and many others, these are feelings minority groups are faced with daily. As a privileged individual, I am fortunate enough to suffer this discomfort only momentarily, and perhaps I am able to learn something from the experience.

### Remembering a Pandemic

I visit Manchester several times. Each time, I stay in a new part of the city – I remember Ancoats, Salford, Hulme, New Islington – and with each time and each place, I feel that I understand a bit more about the city and the people who live in it. I start to dream that I could become a member of this multicultural city. The culmination for me are the two weeks the festival runs in the summer of 2019. One particular event I remember is *The Drunk Pandemic* by Chim↑Pom and Contact Young Curators (CYC).

I remember standing before the underground entrance of Victoria Train Station as part of a small group of eight people waiting to attend *The Drunk Pandemic: Brewery Tour*. The performative brewery tour I am about to embark on merges a historic cholera pandemic and current British drinking culture in a co-production between MIF and Contact Theatre.<sup>7</sup> The work is made by Chim↑Pom<sup>8</sup> – a Japanese art collective. Chim↑Pom has been selected by CYC – a group of five young, emerging artists from Manchester.

We are led into a tunnel system underneath Victoria Station, which is, I am about to learn from our tour guide, a mass grave for 40,000 working class people who died during the cholera epidemic in the 1850s. The disease spread rapidly, we are told, and was therefore hugely feared. A father could go to work at the brewery in the morning, leaving his family at home in fine health, and return that same evening to find them in coffins. For some reason, however, the people working in the brewery did not get sick. Later, it was discovered that dirty water was the source of contamination, but that the process of brewing beer killed the bacteria. Hence, while those who drank from the city’s water reservoirs got sick and died in huge numbers, the brewery workers remained healthy.

The tunnels are dark, lit just enough for us to be able to see where we put our feet. There is a pervasive smell of mould, dampness and decomposition. The next stop on the tour is a passage with three large wooden vats in which beer is being brewed. Next to the vats a man sits in white disposable coveralls, a mask and gloves. He is making bricks from dirt and a fluid contained in a large plastic tank beside him. He works slowly, filling the moulds. All the bricks are marked with Chim↑Pom’s emblem and arranged in large piles resembling Japanese burial sites as a gesture to honour the many victims of the pandemic. After this project, the bricks will be used in other projects, incorporated into walls around Manchester and other cities where Chim↑Pom creates work in coming years. The idea is to reuse materials from one art project in the next and connect the project to the city of Manchester on a long-term scale.

As we are taken back outside to breathe the fresh air, I am wondering when we will be served

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7) Contact Theatre is a Manchester-based young people’s theatre, not to be confused with the Copenhagen-based C:ntact

8) Chim↑Pom (chimpo – Japanese for penis) is a Japanese art collective formed in 2005 in Tokyo by Ryuta Ushiro, Yasataka Hayashi, Ellie, Masataka Okada, Motomu Inoka and Toshinori Mizuno.

beer on this brewery tour, and thinking about my interview with two of the CYCs just a couple hours earlier<sup>9</sup> – Grainne Flynn, a 21-year-old actress and director studying her BA in acting, and Wesley Thistlethwaite, a 28-year-old writer, podcaster and box office officer. Present were also Head of Creative Development at Contact Theatre Suzie Henderson and Executive Producer of MIF Tracey Low.

When asked why CYC was established, it is clear that for MIF, it is about diversifying their programme and targeting a younger audience group. For Contact Theatre, the project is a direct continuation of their practice of putting young people at the heart of decision-making<sup>10</sup> and creating opportunities for young people to learn new skills that can benefit them in their careers ahead. This practice has proven extremely effective in turning around their audience numbers.<sup>11</sup> Suzie concludes: “If you change the people that are making the decisions, if you change the lens of the perspective of those who are given that power, then different people will feel welcome and different people will want to engage”.

The amount of money that MIF grants to CYC is substantial – equal to Contact’s annual programming budget. Wesley explains how the large budget gave weight to the project and “almost professionalised us in a way, naturally”. Before CYC started, the five members had taken part in other Contact projects but had never before curated. During the two-year programme, they received training from the artistic leadership of MIF, learning what kinds of questions were important to ask, focusing especially on what the people of Manchester would find interesting and how to situate a particular artwork within the broader programme of the festival. On the basis of discussions about what culture meant to them, the group compiled a list of three criteria for their work. Wesley explains:

We decided we needed to find someone that John McGraw wouldn’t know or wouldn’t have thought of for the festival, which was a big, big kind of first challenge. The second one is we wanted something that would appeal to Mancs and the people of Manchester that wouldn’t normally go to the festival. And the third one was we wanted this kind of Manchester humour or feel, or the wildness of it. And I think that’s largely why when we ended up finding Chim†Pom in the end, that’s what kind of sold it for us.

I was interested in understanding what it was like to curate as a group. Grainne Flynn answers:

I think it’s always important to be working in a group, because you can’t really predict what an audience wants when it’s just you having the conversation. You need to listen to the people around you and your team. If I was really excited about somebody, we would always imagine how that would be, would people come, and we would always challenge that. I don’t think you can challenge yourself if you don’t have people around you.

Wesley Thistlethwaite adds that the fact that the group was “truly diverse” in gender, sexuality, class, ethnic background and artistic background made the work even more interesting.

In response to the question of the future prospects for a project like CYC, Suzie Henderson explains that MIF and Contact have continued their collaboration, but not CYC. This project

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9) The three remaining Contact Young Curators are Adam Ali (20), a television actor, Ayesha Gwilt (29), an actress, Elmi Ali, a writer, director, facilitator and translator.

10) This is a practice Contact Theatre has developed over the past 20 years with former artistic director (now director of MIF) John McGrath as one of the leading forces.

11) Suzie Henderson explains how 70% of Contact’s audiences are below the age of 35 (which is much younger than at a normal UK venue), while 40% of participants and about the same percentage of audience members are Black and minority ethnic.

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remains a one-off. In the past year, they have invited a group of people from Manchester aged 16-70 to help curate a two-day talk programme. In 2022, when MIF's new mega-venue The Factory<sup>12</sup> opens, the plan is to collaborate on an expanded curatorial project through which local people across age groups will co-curate The Factory. The trajectory of these three projects clearly shows progress in terms of collaboration: from starting in 2017 with five young artists learning about curation to a large group of Mancs appointed co-curators of an all-year venue-programme in 2022. So despite the fact that the leadership of MIF has stayed the same, opportunities are provided to share the curatorial power and democratise the arts.

### Becoming a Member

When we leave the underground tunnels, I remember it was time to taste the beer. Outside was a shed of the sort you find on construction sites. Inside the shed were sinks and mirrors on one side, and a tiny bar and refrigerator with beer brewed especially for *The Drunk Pandemic*. The space could just barely fit eight people. In the corner of the shed was a toilet stall with only a pissoir. We were all offered a beer served by one of the Japanese artists. I remember it was too bitter for me, but I drank it anyway. And as is normally the case after drinking a beer, you soon needed to urinate. Men and all others were invited to donate their urine to the project by taking a piss in the pissoir. After finishing my beer, I wanted to take part in this final element of the work, to gain a form of membership. I was handed a so-called PeeBuddy – a substitute member<sup>13</sup> for the penis I do not have – allowing me to participate fully in the work. I edged my way past other audience members into the small booth next to the bar. I remember how hard it was to pee, but finally, after a while, what a relief! My urine was led from my provisional member into the pissoir, and from there through a tube into the plastic containers inside the tunnels, ultimately providing fluid for the brickmaking. The circle was complete. I had contributed a part of myself to the artwork – a part of me will thereby go into the bricks and potentially be used to build MIF's new venue The Factory.

My curatorial practice has been heavily influenced by the experiences I had in Manchester. I am in the process of understanding my own position of power. I understand that I must view myself as an insider and a member, not an outsider. From the inside, I can use my privileges to change the visible and invisible power structures in the field by pointing to how inequality and misrepresentation are produced. First, I must be willing to change myself, to tolerate discomfort and place myself in messy situations where unpopular issues such as inequality for minority groups can be discussed. Diverse representation is not only important among artists, but also in the organisation and especially in the decision-making. These are the learnings I remember.

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Thank you to Sara Hamming for inspiring conversations about *member*, *remembering* and *dismembering* during our collaboration on the audio-installation *English Speakers 2019-20*.

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12) The Factory is MIF's new multi-functional year-round arena encompassing a concert hall, auditorium and an installation space as well as an outdoor public area, opening in 2023.

13) The word *member* has several meanings: a body part, a penis, something or someone who is a part of a group or a unit of a sentence or clause.

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