

New ways of seeing, making and telling

Elsa James, whose Lab at the Summit addressed barriers to participation and involvement in the arts for BAME communities, provides further insight into the thinking behind and outcomes of the session.



Talking about race, inequality, visibility, representation and ‘blackness’ in Britain is an impassioned discussion I have been having since – well since as far back as I can remember! I can recall countless upsetting stories that I overheard as a child of my Windrush generation parents discussing with my aunts and uncles about the blatant everyday racism and unfairness they would encounter. Later I would encounter

institutional racism with my school years spanning the 1970s through to the mid-1980s. A tragic consequence of my childhood in 1970’s Britain, was that my sisters and I played ‘Let’s be white girls’ to escape from our realities. These discussions haven’t stopped and I continue to have them on a regular basis with trusted friends and family.

Above:
Priya Mistry
and Elsa James
running their
Lab ‘New ways
of seeing,
making and
telling’.
Photo:
Nina Thomas.

Following:
Elsa James and
Priya Mistry's
Lab 'New ways
of seeing,
making and
telling'.
Photo: Nina
Thomas.

Being invited to devise a two-hour lab to create a framework for dialogue that reflects my practice at the Social Art Summit was an opportunity to have these important issues discussed in a public forum, where I can share this context with others. I took the Creative Case for Diversity – Arts Council England's 'blueprint' and strategic approach to diversity for all those working in arts and culture in Britain – as a key point of departure, to examine how we can genuinely address barriers to participation and involvement in the arts for black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

I set about devising a lab thinking about the space as a 'whole' experience through the use of provocation, transparency, perception, territory, power and privilege. The space consisted of a composite of quotes taken from the three Creative Case for Diversity Data Reports, quotes from key figures who have contributed to its advocacy, alongside an assemblage of images displayed on protest-style placards. I opened the lab with a 'performative' introduction with my guest artist contributor, Priya Mistry aka Tropical Awkward Bastard. Delegates were then invited to anonymously comment on three questions in two voting-booth-style areas that I positioned on opposite sides of the space. If you identified as 'black, Asian or minority ethnic' you were asked to make your comments on one side of the space, and if you did not, on the other. All the completed comments were added to the gallery wall.

At the first opportunity, two attacking questions quickly launched into the filled space of 50 plus listening delegates. A white male raised his concerns regarding the grammar of the three questions. I paused and apologetically pointed out that I am dyslexic. I began to feel tense and worried where this was going. He launched his second question – why was he needed to be

segregated to make his comments? Could this perhaps have been the first time he was made to think about and be judged on his 'white identity'? My point was made. But then came a counter-attack from a number of other delegates. He was from this point on, the visible token white privileged older middle-class male. Things got hotter, so we took a break.

We resumed by moving into smaller groups with meaningful exchanges and discussion arising from the questions and comments.

'New ways of seeing, making and telling' does not end here. With 145 individual comments collected and time needed to reflect on the white male response, I am processing what framework it could become so that I can share and continue an evolved dialogue at the Social Art Assembly day taking place at Tate Exchange in April 2019.

Elsa James is an artist, producer and creative activist based in Southend-on-Sea, Essex.



