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BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

Abid Hussain

As-salaam alaykum everybody. Good afternoon, I come in peace from the land of Brexit!

Before I begin my presentation, I just want to share a very short video with you, which talks about some of the things I'll discuss in the next 10 -15 minutes.

(Video plays)

Art has the power to say things that society is unable to say. My name is Mohammed Ali and this is my journey so far.

This area is really where my father had his business, he worked here, the factories, we lived just up the street here, had a fish and chip shop that my mum used to run, these were the same streets that really are what I remember playing on, the kids in the street kicking a football around. Really at that time it wasn't very complicated- it was quite simple. We were in and out of each other's homes, talking with white kids, or black, Irish families, it was a very kinda mixed space where people wouldn't really define one another by race or religion, to be honest I don't even remember myself ever referring to myself as someone who was Muslim, I was just a kid growing up, so it was in these very streets that I found my purpose and my voice. Through art and hip hop culture.

Really hip hop culture and discovering that growing up, it was thing that empowered us, it gave us a kind of a doorway into the art world. Being creative, every human being needs it, and we never really had that growing up, so hip hop culture was like a ray of light for us to empower us, find our voices, and explore who we are, so we can say yes this is me, this is my story.

It was much later on when I was growing up I was drawn to my faith as a Muslim, my new found passion of my faith, if you like, and that informing my creativity, the art that I was creating, graffiti, street art, paintings that I was doing, I had something to say and at that point faith was becoming the forefront of what I was saying, it spilled out into the art I was creating, it was about exploring who we are, how we live together, how we engage with people of faith and different backgrounds.

These important elements of my life came together and it became really who I am and I began to travel, began to really learn from different communities, from Johannesburg in the townships to the ghettos of LA, I was travelling and I was learning and seeing how communities grow or how they actually, relearn from the way people have dealt with certain issues in cities or how they haven't. And actually coming back

and saying I need to benefit back to my own city, I need to give back to my own city of Birmingham.

See the problem with society- there aren't those places that can actually encourage people to just connect and have conversations. The arts, I feel, is the perfect means of bringing about those uncomfortable conversations that aren't being had in society. Birmingham is what produced me, I am born and raised here. I feel it's a responsibility I have to contribute to the place that made me, for me as an artist, whatever skill I have, whatever it is, it's incumbent upon me to go and deal with issues in my city of Birmingham.

(Video finishes)

I'm pleased to say that wasn't funded by Art Council England. It's important that we can actually share work that isn't always funded by us.

I want to start by talking about identity from a personal perspective. Identity is complex, it means different things to different people. For many of us here today, our world view, our creative practice and how we interact with each other is influenced by a multiplicity of identities, be it disability, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs or our socio-economic background.

As a policymaker it's impossible for me to disconnect from my lived experiences. Quite simply I am a product of migration. My grandparents experienced the trauma of partition in India due to religious conflict. Over 15 million Sheikhs, Hindus and Muslims were displaced, over 1 million people lost their lives.

My parents moved to England as economic migrants, my father arrived in the 60s and my mother arrived later in the 70s. They chose to settle in Birmingham and we grew up surrounded by families of Irish, Caribbean and south Asian heritage.

My parents came to the UK to escape poverty and to build a better life for their families, both in England and back in Pakistan. Growing up in the Sparkbrook area of the city I had no notion of class, but I had a very strong sense of community. A community that had spirit and resilience, overcoming racism and discrimination and making Birmingham home.

To my parents I will always be Pakistani, to my daughters I'm British and for border control at airports around the world I'm simply a Muslim with a beard! Every time I fly back to the UK my new British passport does not scan at the gates. I have been told by immigration officials that because of my name I always have to have my passport checked by officials when returning home. Something as simple as my name Abid Hussain defines me as a greater risk to society than my colleagues at work named Simon, Michelle, Darren or Lucy.

Today my gender politics is defined by being a father to three daughters, Maria, Aisha and Anissa, they inspire me to see the world differently every day. They also ask

difficult and challenging questions, sometimes I can't answer them, like 'why does Donald Trump hate Muslims'?

I want them to believe that a career working in the arts is both a possibility and something they would wish to pursue. But to do so my daughters must see themselves and their stories reflected on our stages, in our galleries and across our museums and libraries. Only then can we create the conditions for them to become our future artists and leaders. If they remain invisible they will remain voiceless and when we lose our voice we end up in the margins of society.

How can anybody here today feel a part of society if they don't see themselves or their stories reflected in its art, culture, media or wider civic life? Globally we are witnessing a shift in politics to the right. Nationalism is increasing across Europe, America, Africa and Australia. Not a day goes by without another story on Islamophobia or anti-Semitism. Too many communities continue to live in fear. Fear keeps us prisoner, hope sets us free.

Today across the globe we continue to see economic migration but also displacement as a result of climate change, conflict, political persecution and the erosion of civil liberties and rights. Being forced into exile and to seek refuge or asylum should not be regarded as a status but a situation so many people find themselves in through no fault of their own. We must not lose sight of the fact that amongst the millions of people who are displaced every year there are thousands of artists. Artists who have come to terms with their displacement and need to rebuild their lives, their networks and reputation whilst navigating new systems, hurdles and barriers. Artists that need the oxygen of their creative practice as much as they need shelter, safety and food.

As policymakers we must be brave, radical and resilient to create the conditions for real and sustainable change. Policy will always remain fiction until we deliver the changes we promise on paper. I am delighted that the organisers of today's conference have chosen to focus on the theme of inclusion.

Last night's launch of Arts Council Ireland's Equality, Human Rights and Diversity strategy is a timely and necessary intervention. I'm confident it will serve as a catalyst for change within the Arts Council itself and the sector in terms of diversifying programming, the workforce, audiences and ensuring public investment reaches artists of all backgrounds.

I was struck by the powerful acknowledgement that access to arts and culture is a basic human right. We need to have a more personal, human and sector specific conversation about diversity, we can't do it just because the law requires you to do it. A conversation that promotes the values of fairness, social justice, access and greater equity and recognises the value of diversity and creating more exciting, imaginative and innovative work.

Historically in England we talked about the legal case for diversity, the business case for diversity and the moral case for diversity. All of these are important, but failed to

address the creative act of making work. In 2011 we developed the creative case for diversity. At its heart is a simple commitment to recognise and celebrate the talent and stories of all our communities in the work that's commissioned, produced and presented by our arts and culture organisations. The creative case for diversity goes beyond representation, it's not just about having a black or disabled actor play the lead role in a Shakespeare play, it's also about presenting stories and work coming directly from communities that for too long have been invisible or marginalised.

When we present diverse stories we invest in diverse talent and create the conditions to attract more diverse audiences. The decision to appoint a dedicated equality, diverse and inclusion leader in Arts Council Ireland is a positive and necessary step. It will provide the agency to drive and deliver and implement policy and strategy that was launched yesterday.

It does come with a health warning! It is the most challenging job in any Arts Council, it is politically and emotionally charged. As director of diversity at Arts Council England it's my remit to drive through change, that is uncomfortable for some, but a necessity for others. It requires allies and accomplices at a senior level within Arts Councils and across the sector. I've been incredibly fortunate to have been supported by two incredible chairs and a chief executive at Arts Council England who absolutely believe in the value and transformative power of diversity.

My advice to colleagues in Ireland would be to strive for long-term sustainable change. There is no quick fix. For change to be permanent it must become embedded. When I took on the job of Director of Diversity at the Arts Council, I spent the first 12 months planning and engaging in conversations with internal and external stakeholders. I spent the second 12 months changing my mind about all the things I originally planned to do because of the conversations that took place! For change to be meaningful you need to change our priorities for funding and how we distribute it.

At Arts Council England we have now made contributing to the creative case for diversity a mandatory requirement for any organisation that receives regular funding. We have introduced requirements for organisations that receive the highest level of public subsidy to diversify their workforce, their boards and audiences. We have also realised the importance of developing bespoke and tailored strategic funding initiatives to advance equality and diversity, mainstreaming alone will not work.

This funding has enabled us to develop programmes like Change-Makers to invest in a cohort of black and minority ethnic and disabled senior leaders, it's also allowed us to continue our long-term support for the Unlimited programme which provides a platform to present the best work by disabled and deaf artists from both UK and around the world, and we have been supporting this over the last decade. A few years ago we recognised the lack of diverse led organisations in our national portfolio and developed the Elevate programme. It's the first time Arts Council England ever developed and launched a strategic funding initiative open only to arts organisations not in receipt of regular funding. Elevate recognised the need for change. How could we support diverse led organisations delivering strong artistic output to become more

resilient and flourish? This includes being able to pay your staff, to develop your boards and to develop strategic business plans. All the things that can be incredibly difficult to secure funding for. Investment that pays for people to have creative conversations, develop artistic partnerships, raise income and strengthen governance.

My original budget for Elevate was 2.2 million pounds. By the time we made decisions we increased that investment to 5.3 million to support 40 organisations across England. In 2017, 20 of those organisations successfully applied for national portfolio funding and are now in receipt of regular funding for the next four years. The changes we introduced to our policies, the strategic interventions we have made and signalling a shift in our priorities for funding has resulted in the current national portfolio becoming our most diverse.

Over the past four years we have openly and transparently published the equality and diversity data both for the arts Council and sector. As I look forward there's still more work to be done. I want Arts Council England to develop a more nuanced approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, an approach that recognises that progress will look different across different characteristics and across different parts of England.

For those organisations that receive more public subsidy we should have higher expectations on equality, diversity and inclusion. We need to recognise the importance of investing in talent pathways from an early stage to ensure talent on our stages, in our galleries, museums and concert halls become more diverse. That change doesn't happen overnight.

We need to become stronger, taking action when organisations that are failing to deliver on their equality and diversity aspirations, that's a message we heard throughout this morning, it has to be more than a policy.

It's too easy to separate the conversation around artistic excellence and achieving equity for under-represented groups, be they women, disabled people or those from ethnic backgrounds. We can achieve excellence at the same time as equity but only if we ensure under-represented artists get access to the same level of resources, support and infrastructure.

Making the creative case for diversity is not about achieving equity or excellence in isolation, it's about achieving both in unison. Art should be a mirror on society, however it can only be so if we allow everyone to see their reflection. Thank you.