

International Curators Forum

Enhancing the international experience
and contacts of cultural professionals from minority backgrounds

Background

Black, Afro-Caribbean and Asian curators lack visibility in the visual arts field in Europe and the International Curators Forum (ICF) is an attempt to address this. The ICF was conceived to promote opportunities for emerging curators with minority cultural/ethnic backgrounds to visit several major international art events to enable them to network and gain experience for their career development. The aims were "...to initiate and stimulate international discourse on the impact of diasporic cultures on the visual arts". The initiative was the inspiration and brainchild of the curator David A Bailey and stemmed from the four year Decibel project of Arts Council England, which was a 5 million GBP scheme aimed at raising the profile of, and developing the infrastructure for, culturally diverse arts.

How it works

The ICF is both a professional development programme for emerging curatorial talent from the UK of Black or Asian origin, and an organisational platform for exploring and contesting the roles that race and cultural heritage play within contemporary visual culture and the international art scene. A plan was devised to enable emerging young curators to visit four of the major international art events of 2007: 52nd Venice Biennale, Documenta XII, Sculpture Projects Münster 2007 and the 10th International Istanbul Biennial. Particular significance was given to this initiative in 2007 as this combination of four major international events occurs only once every 10 years. An inaugural symposium 'Pan-European Encounters' was also organised during the Venice Biennale to discuss and explore the changing idea of identity and the diaspora in the 21st century. Twenty-three curators from the UK were selected to participate in the visits and 10 group leaders were recruited to accompany them. More than 20 speakers were also engaged for related symposia, seminars and debates.

Financial support covered the costs of flights, accommodation and per diems for the curators, group leaders, Arts Council Staff and speakers (some of the latter also received a small fee for their contribution). Other costs covered by the initiative included: professional fees for the management team and group leaders; the engagement of local project managers to facilitate the visits; venue hire and catering; production of documentary and marketing materials; pre-event visits by the management team and administrative support. The total expenditure was in the region of GBP 166 125. Whilst Arts Council England was the principal funder, financial support was also secured from the Cultural Leadership Programme, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and Arts Council England regional offices. Partners to the ICF included the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Black Moving Cube, British Council, Istanbul Modern and Platform Garanti.

This initiative was a tactical intervention designed specifically for Black, Afro-Caribbean and Asian visual arts curators in England; ICF focused on supporting emerging curators already in receipt of support from Arts Council England diversity/visual arts projects, in particular the decibel Curatorial awards and the Inspire programme. In addition, a small number of curators not on either programme, but who were known to the Arts Council, were also invited to participate.

Results

For many of the attendees these visits were the first time they had been to a major international art exhibition. Many described the experience as invaluable in broadening and increasing their understanding and awareness of the visual arts world. The opportunity to discuss artistic/curatorial themes and concepts of the exhibitions with their peers from the ICF group and with others in the countries visited, and to forge new links and networks was acknowledged as beneficial.

ICF is intended to be an open peer to peer network and arena to connect ideas that have migrated across the world with professional developments that are increasingly global, but particular in their impact. The next phase will seek to create a range of activity that consolidates key partnerships and explores a wider range of professional development and mobility opportunities for curators, residencies, workshops and salons. For this development ICF is seeking to work with partners and funders in England and beyond the EU.

In 2007, ICF staged two international symposia – in Venice (see above) and Istanbul. The latter, ‘Which Way is East?’ provided an opportunity for curators from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds to debate the politics and practice of curatorship and how the relationships between global and local spaces and art can be mediated by the curator. ICF’s 2008 programme of debate was continued at the 5th Berlin Biennial in April.

An evaluation of the 2007 visits was broadly positive. Most respondents had clear ideas of how their presence at, and participation, in the ICF visits would benefit the development of their careers and professional practices. Forging new links/networks and engaging in critical discourse relevant to contemporary visual arts were what most sought and gained from the visits. However, a number of respondents considered more time was needed to maximise formal and informal networking opportunities. Perhaps, not surprisingly, most respondents considered that initiatives such as the ICF were effective in providing the type of support that would benefit emerging curators careers and practice.

The objectives of the ICF were ambitious. So ambitious in fact that it was always likely to be a challenge for them all to be fully and satisfactorily achieved. On the other hand, perhaps ambitions needed to be set high if change is to be made and sustained across the dominant Eurocentric art world. It is increasingly accepted in the UK that if the talent and excellence that exists amongst culturally and ethnically diverse visual arts practitioners is to be acknowledged, the visual arts world will need to be challenged to broaden its perceptions, attitudes and practices beyond its current mindset. Nevertheless, doubts were expressed by some participants about whether the ‘positive action remit’ as practiced by the ICF is a sensible or viable way to proceed in the future; not least because of the legal ambiguities and issues surrounding positive discrimination projects. It was also necessary to acknowledge the strong opposition amongst some sections of the visual arts towards ethnic specific opportunities. Therefore, the general feeling was that it may be prudent for any future ICF initiative to become less ethnically exclusive.

It is also unlikely that future initiatives of this nature would be able to provide financial support on the scale of the first year. Financial contributions may need to be sought from those wishing to participate.

The legacy and future of the ICF is still being defined. However, it is evident that by giving a number of Black, Afro-Caribbean and Asian curators the opportunity to develop their professional experience by attending major international art events, the Forum is an important initiative for the visual arts in England and for the potential European mobility of these young professionals.

Sources

Correspondence with Terry Adams, consultant

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