



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Managing the contradictions of culture

Dasgupta, S.

Publication date

2008

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Managing diversity? Art and (the art of) organisational change

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dasgupta, S. (2008). Managing the contradictions of culture. In H. Weeda, O. Chenal, G. Chierchia, L. Mathol, & G. Wagner (Eds.), *Managing diversity? Art and (the art of) organisational change* (pp. 171-175). Mets & Schilt.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Managing the Contradictions of Culture

When one encounters the term ‘management’, the obvious question that comes up is managing what? Fortunately, one does not find one answer to this question, either in this chapter, or in the book. I say ‘fortunately’, because the confusion around identifying what one is managing is a symptom of a whole set of contradictions that gather around the word ‘culture’. And each of these contradictions is productive, suggesting different ways of thinking concretely about culture, diversity and institutional change. Some examples of this productive confusion: the Foreword to the book states the central issue of the book, and of the ECF today, is ‘managing diversity’. Thus diversity is the issue, managing it is the challenge. In the *contemporary* context of globalisation (broadly understood as planet-spanning cultural encounters, movements and practices), the question of cultural diversity is a problem within Europe. Is then diversity the problem that needs to be managed, or diversity the reality whose management is the problem, or is it both diversity and managing it, that is the problem? This is of course not theoretical nit-picking, for the political consequences of how we answer these questions is enormous. If diversity is defined as a problem, managing it is ‘purely’ a technocratic problem of efficiency. If managing diversity is a problem, then the political stakes which remain hidden in the technocratic definition become much more apparent. Second example: in the Introduction by Gottfried Wagner, what needs managing is not diversity, but the *connection* between private experiences of diversity and the public good. One is not managing ‘culture’ per se, but “*the core of culture’s role...in the power to connect these public and private spheres*”. As Wagner rightly notes “*this connection cannot be simply ‘managed’*” for the role of institutions (such as the ECF) must be re-evaluated to heighten their ability to first establish, and then further this connection, between individual empowerment and the public good. A couple of initial contradictions emerge already. The first is the problem/solution couplet, where diversity is the problem and management the solution. The second is the dichotomy between private/public, a dichotomy which becomes an opposition when the private ‘invades’ the public, in, for example the Republican discourse in France around headscarves in public institutions, or the Enlightenment discourse in the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria that sees public space in terms of *Leitcultuur* (Haider, and some German politicians) or Enlightenment rationality (Dutch politicians). I signal these *political* oppositions at the start,

before addressing the relationship between art, culture in general and diversity and the contradictions that emerge there.

Culture immediately brings up the obvious biological and medical reference of experimentation, generation and growth. Before culture was understood as a *Bildungsideal* in the term *Kultur*, or *Civilisation* in *les Siècles des Lumières*, it already carried an explicit and definite association with plants and animals, in agriculture, pisciculture, horticulture. In laboratories, cultures are cultivated in petri-dishes under controlled situations. If the contemporary global world is one gigantic petri-dish, then the cultures being generated today exhibit increasingly random, uncontrollable dimensions. The lab, one version goes, has lost control of the culture it was cultivating. Katherine Watson from Labforculture.org embraces this uncontrollable change, and highlights the necessity of a full-scale and enthusiastic engagement in the participatory possibilities change is opening up, and she is right. Fear either of change, or of engaging in technological possibilities (for her, the new media including the Internet and especially Web 2.0 applications) is no solution. But she warns that talk of 'management' is ill-advised, we "*can no longer manage change...we must live the change*". Her fulsome desire to engage with change is laudable, her eschewal of managing it is probably suspect. What is 'risky' is the assumption that change, cultural and technological, is uncontrollable and happening too fast for 'thinking'. For change could go in any and every direction and her hands-off approach generates at least two consequences. Obviously attempts to control cultural diversity can go in tragic directions, and Europe hopefully needs no reminder of its unique experiments in 'managing' culture. By the same token, using that experience as an alibi for doing nothing, but uncritically going with the flow of change, leaves the door open precisely for approaches which can, and are already, shutting down change and diversity (from the nationalist discourse of 'loyalty' around multiple passport-holders to the paradoxical use of one set of differences around women and gays for example, to vilify and generate reactionary hatred against others).

Culture as generation, growth, hybridity (yet another horticultural term) could be seen as a potential object of surveillance, control and rigid state-planning. But that is hardly the only way to understand management. Management as both the opportunity for institutions to rethink their own functioning in a changing (culture) world, and also a challenge to establishing relationships *between* cultures and their own internal hybrid character is a crucial social and political task. Institutional rethinking and the relationship between art and the world is crucial here. The history of art is the history of its engagement with the

world. Even if we limited ourselves to the tiny span of time of the last century, Futurism at the dawn of the 20th century, Constructivism after the Russian Revolution, 'Socialist' realism which vanquished this avant-garde, Dada and Surrealism – in all of these movements, which spanned literature, painting, graphic design, street posters, public sculptures, architecture – the relationship between art and the world was explicit. I am only giving post-Impressionist examples here, but can Impressionism be understood outside the Paris Commune or industrialisation? Is it just water-lilies in Giverny? Can Jacques-Louis David be understood between the murder of Marat and his role as Napoleon's official painter? Can we understand George Grosz and Otto Dix's paintings, or John Heartfield's photomontages without thinking the violence of war on the one hand, and the propaganda around *Entartete Kunst*? Could we have understood post-revolutionary Paris both after Haussmanisation and before the barricades, without thinking *together* Delacroix, Eugène Atget, Berenice Abbot and Germaine Krull? Even at the heights of modernist 'autonomy', art has been political, if only by default. To claim withdrawal from the world is an engagement with the world through denial. This hasty list of historical examples within Europe illustrates not just the link between art and the world, but the dialectical relationship between *changes* in art and in the world. The contradiction between artistic and cultural autonomy and *engagement* with the world (heteronomy) is simply an ideological ruse, blind to historical fact, as Jacques Rancière has convincingly shown recently.⁵⁸ *L'art pour l'art* and *art engagé* are two sides of the same coin. Can we think of art's autonomy as *precisely* what allows an engagement with the world of cultural change? To think this contradiction between distance and autonomy on the one hand, and engagement and the market on the other, is another paradox which needs to be thought together.

If art's relation to the world, and its constant registering of change within both is acknowledged, then the historical present, as Odile Chenal observes, is marked by a paradox. For institutions created for the people, such as foundations, grass-roots groups, and NGOs, seem far less successful than the culture industries in engaging with cultural diversity. The shift from art to culture can be seen as a shift from the art-world to the culture industry. Is the market then ideally suited to tracking, registering and facilitating change, because ironically profit margins rather than *le peuple* determine what gets on screen and what gets pulled off, in the society of the spectacle? We know that market discourse says "we simply give people what they want", another 'hands-off!' discourse on culture, by the way. But accepting this counter-intuitive paradox is to be hasty. Firstly, there is nothing intrinsic in either non-profit or capitalist institutions which makes one or the other better in managing

58 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004)

diversity or the links between private empowerment and public good. It is precisely here that 'managing diversity' becomes crucial. For one can rightly ask: "On what terms does representation of cultural diversity take place in the culture industry?" Even a first-year media student and, I suspect, a half-savvy TV viewer knows only too well that the logic of commodification structures the production of culture. You don't need to read Adorno (though it might help) to recognise this. No one denies the packaging of exoticism in all its sexist, racist and stereotypical forms; these days, we *begin* by simply acknowledging this fact, and move onto 'pleasure'. Ironically, the controversies around seemingly banal pop culture items like cartoons (*Jyllands Posten*) and reality TV (*Celebrity Big Brother* UK) have shown that the 'pleasures' of pop culture work in opposite directions: one person's parodic camp reading is another person's state of injury. Here, globalisation and cultural diversity return, with a bite, dividing an increasingly enmeshed world into shifting camps, based on rancour, abuse, violence and conflict. Dealing with, interrogating, thinking over, facilitating cultural diversity is not just a risk, but increasingly, a *responsibility*.

Clearly, articulating the terms for a non-abusive yet conflictual process of exchange and encounter to address cultural diversity and facilitate its possible futures becomes precisely a challenge that cannot be avoided. Can capitalist institutions make *this* their goal, rather than an accidental by-product of their headlong rush towards ratings? Can non-profit institutions engage with and facilitate cultural diversity precisely by deepening the "*democratic management of diversity*", which, as Robert Palmer reminds us, is the goal of the Council of Europe? The antennae of organisations like the ECF can be trained to reach not just the culturally competent groups who can write proposals for grants (Flood), but can also facilitate connections with 'lived' democracy, by honing on the weak signals of groups falling below the radar, encouraging their participation and thematising their concerns. Surely the autonomy of art is no solution, not because it is not political (since it is), if simply through withdrawal. Rather, art *and* culture (industry product or not) is part of the life-world (*lebenswelt*) of Europe for all its differentiated inhabitants. If we think of the autonomy of organisations outside the culture industries not as elitism, but as the space of relative freedom from market pressures that allows the development of crucial sectors of the European lifeworld that escape official discourses and capitalist marketing of target audiences, then this autonomy is precisely what allows for change. The crucial 'management' issue is to identify *who* it wishes to engage with, what shape engagement takes, how to understand and evaluate this engagement. An answer to the 'who' question is not singular or homogenous, contemporary cultural diversity

in Europe has made that clear. No *a priori* single strategy can be decided – the situational specificity, the group(s) in question, the reasons for the engagement – all these factors determine the mode of managing diversity.

Brecht had a good word for this process – *Umfunktionierung*, re-tooling. His advice to artists to change their functional role in society is precisely what cultural organisations need today, i.e. not just expansion through new themes and subjects, but changing the very functioning of art's *relationship* to the world. For the culture industry, the themes and subjects of diversity are happily engaged with through representation, but does this greater *visibility* change culture's relationship to the world beyond stereotypes, superficiality and the thrill of the senses (not just advertising, but politicians and now even academia flaunt the 'subversive' pleasures of affect, feeling and emotion, in an amnesiac language that forgets how well these same things were deployed for devastating ends on this continent)?

Umayya Abu-Hanna's experience in curating in the museum is one strategy where the institutions can literally translate public space as a site for projecting diversity, as the *first* step in promoting cultural encounters and inter-cultural dialogue. Here the public/private, and autonomy/engagement paradox is undone. The "/" is not just what divides but what connects, the meeting point where the autonomy of institutions such as the museum, or foundations, is precisely what enables engagement. That this translation of separation into contact takes place, through a retooling of the function of art and culture with the world, can begin only when we undo contradictions and make them opportunities. Obviously a few pages of commentary cannot provide any magic answers. But the undoing of the paradoxes mentioned above, and the divergent approaches in this chapter go some way towards addressing the challenges of our changing world. Art as cultural object, culture as product, and cultural practices as strategies of everyday life can be rethought and re-mixed to think situation-specific policies towards managing diversity and diversifying culture.

Sudeep Dasgupta is Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam.