

Response to Awkward Bastards 2

by Poppy Noor

When I arrive at the Awkward Bastards second symposium I am not sure what to expect. The event, hosting radical artists across two days promises to be one filled with diversity and difference. But as a non-white woman who spent my teenage years living in homeless hostels, I never know what to expect when people say the word 'diversity' anymore. It feels like a word that's always said to me – normally by someone who is middle-class, white, and probably male. But I don't feel like a particularly 'diverse' person, I just feel that I am normal and I want to be represented.

Lewis Davey, an artist who stands for a 5-minute rant at the end of the day, sums this feeling up perfectly and with brilliant humour. [He is talking about an American Footballer, who was criticised in the States for not standing when the National Anthem was played,](#)

"It's just some guy's favourite song." He retorts. "[Trap Queen by Fetty Wap](#) is my favourite song. Imagine if I asked you to stand every time I played it!"

The line is funny because, for those of you who don't know, Fetty Wap is an African-American rapper who is blind in one eye, has tattoos on his face, and sings about "getting high with [his] baby, and "getting fly with [his] baby." Just thinking about all of the people that I so frequently see at galleries, with their knee-length skirts and stiff-upper lips having to stand to that song makes me equal measures giddy and uneasy. But of course, he has a broader point: this is what being forced to try to appreciate art that wasn't made for you is like.

It's something that Frances Morris, who refers to the Tate as "warm" and "safe" in her keynote speech could do with remembering. When [artist Jamila Johnson-Small](#) calls out these comments in a panel discussion for performing "illusory false empathy, which perpetuates erasure" she reminds me that a lack of diversity is about so much more than just being underrepresented. When I go to the Tate, I don't just feel underrepresented: I feel as if my culture, and the people I grew up around simply didn't exist at all. The panel brings to light how discussion around diversity in these spaces is so often more than just complacent – it also sustains the narratives that prevent inclusivity from happening.

Diverse art means the ability to inform and educate. It draws us away from seeing people, multi-faceted as they are, in the singular boxes which mainly act to

undermine those who do not fit into the pre-packaged, heterosexual, able-bodied, white form of 'normal' that we are constantly fed. But at Awkward Bastards, I realise how we can all too easily fall into the trap of viewing art through the lenses of familiarity and privilege. When artists take to the stage to lament the lack of disabled artists' works displayed across the country, I realise how little I have questioned the fact that rarely have I seen such art displayed outside of hospital walls and school hallways. "My art is not therapy" [says Sarah Watson, a multi-media artist with a learning disability](#). "If it was therapy, I'd be paying for it. This is my job."

Trite arguments about simply choosing "the best" artists are ripped to shreds by panellists on the day. One ranter scorns the official artwork commissioned for the Paralympic Games, a colourful drawing of Big Ben by an able-bodied artist from the States. "What does it even represent?" she asks. What's most shocking about this is how much good quality art could have been commissioned in its place. When I see Sue Austin's "[Deep Sea Diving](#)" installation about life in a wheelchair, it isn't magical because she's in a wheelchair. It's magical because Austin conjures up emotions, insights and sensations in me that I could have never brought up myself. When she presents on how 3D technology could meaningfully bring art to audiences otherwise unable to access it, it is innovative because she speaks from a place of understanding what it is like to have that access so frequently blocked from your life. It's not the checkbox of diversity that feels good about the event, it is how diversity is facilitating me to understand and think about things in a way that I hadn't before. Isn't that what art is supposed to be about, after all?

At the end of the symposium, I think about how I have felt most validated at times when I have felt reflected in art and broader culture. It feels like being written into a story that you long knew you should have been a part of. But reflecting on the performances which came from experiences most different to mine, I realise that reading someone else's story can, in the end, be so much more interesting than reading your own.