What are we talking about? Who's 'we' anyway?

> "Who counts as 'us' in my own rhetoric? Which
> identities are available to ground such a potent
> political myth called 'us'?"
> Donna Haraway[1]

Middle England
In a recent address given at the last decibel conference,
Sarat Maharaj commented on Middle England, a cluster of
circumstances and states of mind, historically based,
present and pervading. He said Middle England expands,
it tends to be everywhere, present in the Home Counties,
at the Polo Club in Lagos, at the Grand Hotel in Delhi. I
thought of Laputa, looming over it's own fiefdom, a huge
magnetic entity, casting a giant shadow, pulling all the
compass needles towards itself (and thought also of the
happy semantic synchronicity linking La puta to
Babylon...)

In the places that come under its attraction, Middle
England is where all the compasses are pulled to,
indicating North, the true centre, and the origin of all
standards. It is very difficult to make a case for there being
other centres, other standards, other measures of what's
real and what's important from within the system that
denies this in the first place. By default one is in a position
of weakness, and of complicity; and by default this
undermines those very claims to parallel (or indeed
superior) authority, parallel power, parallel validity, one
may be trying to make. Also, the impetus for change is
surrendered to the superior power; and change is seen to
occur as a random act of liberal benevolence. "Let's give

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[1] Donna Haraway "A Cyborg Manifesto"
www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html

these little people what they want: because we're enlightened."

Historically the benevolent impulse proves fragile.

However, as it is in the nature of Middle England to control, to conquer, to absorb and to grow, the conquered territories become part of it: Middle England itself is the engine of it's own transformation. Its natural (naturalised) population includes diverse groups of people who find their own compass needles wavering, stubbornly and unexpectedly, hinting at another North. They have another centre, and the certainty of it's parallel authority, at the same time as they exist as a product of Middle England. They exemplify - they embody - the concept of double consciousness, that state of being an insider and an outsider at the same time. There is no question of their right to be here - they are part of the process through which Middle England becomes itself. If Middle England wants to understand its global, relational, present self, rooted in the consequences of history, then it must understand how these people, these diverse groups, are part of itself.

Cultural diversity
Phrases that describe the condition of living among, being influenced by, to a greater or lesser extent, all manner of cultural influences of different origin, slip in and out of favour, by a slow process of semantic and social change.

Current now, 'cultural diversity' is still an arguable term, as anyone who has tried to debate its meaning, or the pragmatic application of strategies informed by its supposed meaning, will know. Francois Matarasso has a productive definition; by productive I mean it could be fruitful in producing new ways of doing things. To him, at

least as I understand it, cultural diversity is inherent to the city as a site of meeting and exchange, and through the city, to the wider nation at large.

This is a definition that does not grant special dispensation to one way of cultural being over another, but includes them all, in all their legitimate particularity, under the care of civic process. It is a definition that avoids one of the pitfalls of past discussions of the association between equality and cultural diversity, where it can seem to the majority group that a special dispensation is being granted to any group that isn't them; and it also sidesteps quite neatly the obverse of that special dispensation, a tendency by those granting it to succumb to the temptation to exoticise, to fetishise, to make inappropriate allowances and exhibit otherwise misguided behaviour towards minority groups - to be patronising towards them, in other words, from the moral high ground.

Matarasso's definition, by acknowledging difference as common to all groups - this isn't such a facile statement as it appears - forces an examination of why equality of opportunity might or might not be happening. It has the advantage of including majority groups for consideration. After all, if equality is not for everyone, what's equal about it?

> "I prefer to see cultural diversity as a measure of the variety of cultural expression within a given society, and particularly the degree of legitimacy given to different voices and values by the state itself. Instead of being a term of classification applied to certain people, groups or works, leading to the nonsense of 'culturally diverse arts', we can approach cultural diversity as a defining characteristic of the cultural life of communities or states. We can then consider the quality of cultural diversity, as evidenced in the

variety of legitimated forms of cultural expression, in different places, societies and times.
This approach has the advantage of including all voices within the concept of diversity, including dominant ones."
Francois Matarasso
"Getting On; Culture, Diversity and Belonging"
National Museums of Scotland, January 2003

Telling stories
Popular consciousness might be defined as a common understanding of the world through stories. Stories percolate through popular consciousness by many means - some by deliberate manipulation, some more haphazardly, orchestrated by a diversity of intention, different strands of narrative intertwining to create a matrix of understandings. There are the big, global stories - and cinema has been a major carrier of these - and I think all the big stories, including the fascistic ones, are powerful, glamorous, seductive.

The different strands of media tell a multiplicity of stories. They feed into, nourish, are supported by and/or undermine each other in a turbulent and unpredictable dynamic. Human beings understand themselves and their place in the world in relation to this network of global and local stories. These stories are what make our lived experience coherent to us: they give us a set of reference points, a point at which we can weave ourselves into the matrix of imagination and lived experience, an anchoring point from which our own stories make sense.

Some stories we perceive as true, those told by the apparatus of journalism. Stories about spirituality and ethics are told through the impulse towards philosophy and religious faith. And art tells mythical, poetic, emotional

stories, and combines the subject matter and the methodology of all the other storytelling systems, to encompass stories about the divine, the mundane, the global, the domestic, the silly, the funny, the playful, the pleasurable, the serious, the totally not-funny at all, in a network of transcendence and integration, driven by metaphor.

But if the stories of a whole group of people are missing from popular consciousness, our understanding of where and who we are is skewed. The implications of this are massive. It is not simply a question of limited imagination - or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, limited imagination potentially has deadly serious implications. If, for example, the stories of half the population are missing, this has enormous consequences for the conditions under which they live their lives - and there are enough highly visible current events right now, the summer of 2004, to make this statement without even evoking the obvious example of the history of feminism and women's rights in general.

New space
> "What has happened with the Internet is that cultural dynamics that were at one time radical or subversive have been deracinated from their social and political contexts and most importantly, they have been removed from the public sphere where their social repercussions would be evident; instead, in the virtual domain they can be rehearsed ad infinitum with little effect"
> Coco Fusco [2]

Virtuality, fluidity, processability, networkability etc. etc. etc. There has been a lot of speculation about the potential of digital space to enable new forms of relating,

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[2] http://www.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/statem/e-fusco.html

and thus new forms of community, and thus new ways of being a person, and of choosing what one's personality will consist of.

For someone not of the West, it can appear that the more utopian of these speculations are entirely misguided, basing an uncritical ideal of omniscience and disembodiment on a set of physical circumstances that has everything to do with what kind of body the user possesses, and what specific cultural class they belong to. Futuristic fantasies of the machine age appear as an affront to present global realities of disenfranchisement, dispossession, hunger, war.

However, to be wary of the whole complex of ideas about the cyber-super-hyper-meta Brave New World does not necessarily lead to rejecting the promise of those ideas. Digital space, with its hybrid opportunistic connectivity, remains an important site for real-world action, and for fantastic dreaming, and for the hope of different outcomes.

Examining the conditions created by digital space, Donna Haraway[3] noted the formation of a new means of expression, a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" as a radical invention, born of necessity and compromise, an emerging system of communication that establishes an equality of strangeness for those who come together in digital space. Enabling change and exchange, it is whatever has been bastardised from the intentions of the technologist and the needs and desires of the user. It creates the conditions sought after especially by those digital practitioners who come to their work through the traditions of community art and community media.

Speaking recently of culturally diverse arts practice, or rather, of a practice that recognises the complementary

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[3] Donna Haraway, op cit.

symbiosis of competing voices, Sarat Maharaj echoed an appreciation of emerging language as a tool for more egalitarian exchanges, advocating a "transcendental pidgin" as a fertile, radical, generative bartering space for the exchange of ideas and opinions. Pidgin, borrowing nuance from both its contributing languages, shears words away from an accretion of familiar historical assumptions, imbuing the most commonplace notions with a jolt of strangeness, a tiny conceptual window where 'difference' is normal, and the routine reaction is to adapt to it, and to absorb it.

Shared preoccupations with new use of language, new forms of collaboration, new terms of engagement and new constructions of identity mean that the concerns of digital arts practice and 'culturally diverse' arts practice resonate with one another. Interrogation of the way in which conceptual digital space affects the real world echoes critical enquiry into the connection between imagination and action, and may provide instructive analogies. As digital space (which includes but is not limited to the Web) expands in popular consciousness, its potential as a transformative site increases.

What has art ever done for us?
> "...arts activities are evidence that people are thinking metaphorically. And change, transformation, is only possible if you can think flexibly, laterally, metaphorically. Where are the somewhat miraculous events?"
> Gerry Moriarty[4]

Perhaps it is arguable whether consensus and a change in living conditions change the story, or whether it is the story that changes everything else. But the activist preoccupation with reclaiming, naming and new ways of

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[4] http://www.e-mailout.org/moriarty.htm

speaking, as well as the well-established tactic of oppressive regimes to first silence their opponents, would seem to indicate that always, the story comes first.

If half the stories aren't told, the integration of our understanding with our imagination and our experience, our choice of narratives to understand the world by, is a poor, limited, limping shadow, and we are much less than we could be. It would be like being invited to a feast where you only get to eat lemons. Or being on *that* diet that's taken off so spectacularly, where you can only eat protein, which makes you smelly and hard to be near, as you would be if the only stories you allowed yourself to be fed by were meaty tales of imperialism and western cultural supremacy - which would be enough of a punishment in itself if not for the horrible consequences for everybody else.

But - why settle for less when you could have more?

"What the universal civilization I dream about would be, I really don't know, but I know what it is not. It is not what is being presented today, which is clearly just European and American. A universal civilisation is something that we will create. If we accept the thesis that it is desirable to do, then we will go and work on it and talk about it. We have not really talked about it. All those who are saying it's there are really suggesting that it's there by default -- they are saying to us, let's stop at this point and call what we have a universal civilisation. I don't think we want to swindle ourselves in that way; I think if we want a universal civilisation, we should work to bring it about. And when it appears, I think we will know, because it will be different from anything we have now."
Chinua Achebe[5]

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[5] http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba2000-08-02.htm

Question by Raimi Gbadamosi

What is the role of the mediocre?

Society, in the face of difference, makes it difficult for new experiences to appear. In part this disavowal is systemic, but it is also a strategic defensive mechanism to protect established forms of cultural practice. As the argument that emerging works are of low-quality becomes untenable, the presence of acceptable, yet mediocre, works within gallery spaces raises questions and deserves scrutiny.

Does the mediocre act as a buffer, protecting entrenched interests from the 'new', the 'different', the 'transgressive'?

Mediocrity, often seen as an insult, is after all a marker for the undistinguished, for the 'normal' aspects of creative activity. Simultaneously mediocrity acts as a backdrop for excellence, especially where excellence stems from the desire to challenge the mediocre. Being of no exceptional value is the question mediocrity has to constantly address; that which is considered mediocre shifts with time and place.

What is the role of mediocrity as cultural gatekeeper? How do you see mediocrity in the future of the arts in relation to new and emerging practices?

Semantia wanted to answer like this: that postmodern theory has enabled a deconstruction of questions of value in art, which allows excellence to be seen not as a quality of the work, but as a function of the relation between artist, audience, tradition, innovation and expectations. And

location and stuff. She would have explored how assumptions of value may be mediated by different particularities, commented on a kind of conceptual slippage between terms denoting 'new', 'different' 'transgressive' and 'significance'; and sniffed a little at the tenacity with which academic privilege maintains itself using the very weapons - the language of deconstruction - seemingly destined to dismantle it. Ending with an exposition of how the explosion of current standards and definitions of value has led, in fact, to a fragmentation of discourse and much confusion. This is actually a difficult position from which to plead that some standards are better than others.

But I thought to myself, O for permission to be mediocre, without that being a blameworthy thing. To relax, to be myself, not to strive for anything. What would that be like? I sit here in the corner of the cafe, a small square table in front of me. I have ritually arranged in sequence the objects that will assist or distract (if I prefer) my contemplation: a white mug of strong tea, a packet of Benson & Hedges neatly in the same horizontal axis. Beyond is the salt and pepper, placed not to disturb my writing arm. Soon I shall have to put the ashtray beside them.

I sit forward. The edge of the black metal chair digs into the back of my thighs. One foot rests on the heel of the other, which is tipped up so that only the toe of the thick crepe sole of my boot keeps me stable, aligned in harmony with gravity. I lean my head on my left hand and my fingers are cool against the wrinkles on my forehead. I feel textures: my cotton shirt a ghosting touch, becoming more material in the stiffer fabric at my wrists. Clutching my pen, I feel the slight variations of resistance as the ink flows and sticks along with the curvature of letters forming on the page.

I see my hand, square, wrinkled, small. My too-long nails, ragged and nicotine-stained, flare out in a disreputable flourish at my fingers' ends, at odds with these otherwise workmanlike hands. The sight reminds me of my uncle - his hands are the same shape as mine, though being better cared for are more elegant; and now in my head, not concrete but still real, is conjured the inter-continental tangle of family, loyalty, heritage and estrangement that brought me here to sit in the corner of the cafe, wrestling with intractable questions about what the hell art is, or truth, or reality, and why should anyone care?

What else nudges my awareness in this utterly mundane moment? How is it that I have selected, (without which the record would be unintelligible) before even being aware of it, which parts of the visual, sensory and mental stimuli I'm constantly blasted with will filter down to the page; the page which is the switch, the box, the intersection, the point of transference, the spark, the shock, the junction, the place where you and I touch?

There are things I am aware of that have influenced the selection. This sentence: "As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans." (Hemingway, A Moveable Feast)

This sentence: "(Henry Louis) Gates yields too much ground.... in "Wonders of the African World" to a notion of "greatness" in human history and culture which has for far too long ruled out of hand much of the world's rich heritage in non-elite creative thought and action." (Biodun Jeyifo, Greatness and Cruelty).

These sentences: "Many students block their imaginations because they're afraid of being unoriginal. They believe they know exactly what originality is, just as critics are always sure they can recognise the avant-garde... Suppose Mozart had tried to be original? It would have been like a man at the North Pole trying to walk north, and this is true of all the rest of us. Striving after originality takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre." (Keith Johnstone, Impro)

And this memory: my child comes in from playing in the sun. I press my nose to the back of her neck, the colour of caramel pudding. A sparse fleece of body hair tickles my nose. I smell salt, and a hot smell with a scorch round the edges, and person, meaty but not heavily so. Where I touch her I can gauge the thickness or her skin. I sense the slight electric charge about her, and the eddies, turbulence, where it glances against mine. I tell her, "I love the way you smell."

So here, I attempt to demonstrate to myself, because I had forgotten, the things that bring to bear on the recording of a most ordinary moment, a mediocre moment. Before I get sick of the didacticism of it all, I may derive precepts from the example: that it strikes me that what I find worth communicating is awareness, openness, rigour in selection, and a certain amount of risk, i.e. not being afraid of what presents itself as worth noticing. In recording it, I try hard to use what expressive skills I have as best I may. I try to be aware (I have done this, a sort of daydreaming, for as long as I remember) of what comes to mind and how it got there, what it sparks, where the tangents go; I know that my culture and history act to define the immediate moment of consciousness before I can notice it. I try to track this here, to demonstrate, as Semantia would say, my own particular situated

subjectivity . How you react depends on yours. There may be pragmatic reasons why I should want to talk to you: I might want you to go somewhere, or look at something, or - god help me - fund something. But why I should want to do this - why people in general talk to and touch and play with and fight with one another, why I'm not happy to stay alone with myself in my own head (a condition fairly close to autism, I should think) - why I want you to know what's in my head and I'd like to know what's in yours, and if we communicate, we'll end up having new stuff in both our heads - I have no more idea of why this is inherent to being a person than using language or laughter is. But, having reduced this to the simplest possible language, suddenly I see that the pleasure is in the change, the development from imaginary to real and back again, and start wondering (with a nod to Levi-Strauss and co.) if this is the basic human transaction, from one person to another.

"Imagination is how we create a reality." Hannah Cox. Which of course cuts both ways, we could create Hell; though for Hannah, imagination is truth, and a bad reality is one without enough truth in it.

It is useful for me, just at this moment, to conclude that maybe art, making something from what's real that also makes huge ripples in imaginative space, is an act of witnessing what it is to be a person. Whether I succeed, I am actually unable to judge. It is a completely different activity to reach out, to communicate with you, to try to touch you, than to think about how and why and whether it worked. I do have aspirations towards effectiveness, internalised standards of what communicates meaning, and what holds interest - I may have failed to live up to them. How will I understand failure? That the reader (if there is one) has not felt the ghost of the slats of my chair across their own arse? That the reader remains irritated at

this inconclusive unresolved ramble? Actually, what I would take as failure, more so even than someone stopping reading at the very first sentence, would be the reader who didn't retain an interest, however slight, in puzzling over the process of finding value in art, after reading this. So I have some questions, ways in to approach a consideration of the function of mediocrity, which is all about what art is and what it does and why, and who gets to say what's good or bad and why anyone should let them -

What has to happen to make a person have a mediocre experience of Shakespeare?

As technological options available to artists keep getting more and more elaborate, does that make it more difficult to distinguish the quality of having excellent production values from the quality of being 'excellent'?

How vigilant should one be about the possibility of misreading the signifiers of 'high art' (as, for example, being very large, being in a prestigious venue, being looked at by a lot of people, having essays written to explain it and being by somebody already famous) as an infallible guarantee of quality? I tried to turn this question round and came up with: under what circumstances would a person find fascist art to be meaningful, true, relevant, moving? And apart from the obvious answer ("You'd have to be a fascist,") there is something about collectivity, community, the visual manifestation of shared ideals and an implicit yearning towards transformation, that is uncomfortably close enough to themes explored in certain forms of public art to be worth interrogating.

Does it make any sense at all to draw examples about art from one method of expression, the verbal, to apply to a completely different method of expression, which may be non-verbal?