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CHAPTER 1
Dislocations: Participatory Media with Refugees in Malta and Ireland
Anthony Haughey

Introduction

As long as we think of refugees solely as victims, we do a grave injustice to the facts of refugee experience, for loss is always countermanded by actions – albeit imaginative, magical and illusory – to regain some sense of balance between the world within and the world without.1

In March 2007 I was invited to produce a video project with a group of sub-Saharan African refugees living in a former school near Valletta in Malta. Whilst working there I was struck by the similarities between Ireland and Malta. Both islands are peripheral locations on the western and southern edges of Europe. Historically both countries have experienced significant outward migration of its citizens, who live all over the world. There are more Maltese and Irish people living outside their respective islands than in each country itself.

Citizens from both countries have experienced other cultures either directly or indirectly through their diasporic family networks. But for the first time both communities are facing the challenge of living in close proximity to the newcomers. In Ireland hospitality to strangers was once considered a fundamental human right under Brehon law.2 But hospitality is a contested concept. Derrida has argued that hospitality is based upon unequal power relations between the host society and the foreigner and is ultimately connected to maintaining the nation state and physical borders, "by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away from the very threshold of the right to hospitality."3

In this chapter I will describe and critically frame several strategies and collaborative working methods I adopted with migrant co-collaborators in Malta and Ireland. From the beginning of each project I considered my co-collaborators as agents of change, not as passive victims; together we were engaged in a dialogical and transformative process. The production of cultural artefacts is viewed as living and contingent. Participation is central to this process, beginning with periods of intensive engagement with refugees in Malta, and asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers in Ireland. Audiences are also considered to be participants when they engage with completed projects in various public contexts both inside and outside of museum and gallery settings.
The audience is implicated within the structure of each project, either directly in the video project How to be a Model Citizen (2007), featuring African refugees interviewing Maltese citizens, or indirectly, through the blog site and video project Progress II, where the dinner table guests are transnational migrants, who discuss the reception they have received from their adopted host country citizens in Ireland. The central theme of this chapter is connecting citizenship. It is not only migrants who are subjected to increasing surveillance, biometric measuring and restriction or exclusion from crossing international boundaries; the erosion of citizens' rights and citizenship is inextricably bound with global migration policies.

My attempt to describe a series of encounters, collaborations and relationships was fraught with difficulties and contradictions. The main impetus for each project was the production and public dissemination of visual media artefacts. Therefore words and images can only partially convey some of the complexities, negotiations and processes in play during the production of a video, photography or sound project. As David MacDougall acknowledges: "Apparition is knowledge of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable.\textsuperscript{4}\" This is also complicated by the unavailability of visual examples for the reader to cross-reference each project cited in this chapter. Furthermore, language and categorisation, particularly when describing my co-collaborators, is also deeply problematic. The classification of migrant groups using terms such as "asylum seeker" and "refugee" have entered the everyday vernacular largely through sporadic and gratuitous media headlines and state-sponsored essentialism. Michael Jackson has recognised the difficulties of writing about transnational migration when he comments: "To what extent do we, in the countries of immigration, unwittingly reduce refugees to objects, ciphers and categories in the way we talk and write about them, in roughly the same way that indifferent bureaucracies and institutional forces strip away the rights of refugees to speak and act in worlds of their own making.\textsuperscript{5}\"

Like Jackson I am interested in the existential subjective experience of migration. He argues that trying to "have" refugees is analogous to the colonised not wishing to conform and become universal. Refugees want to participate in the decision-making processes, be removed from the margins of society and integrated as equals.\textsuperscript{6} Participatory media can go some way to addressing this issue by encouraging active "informal citizenship".

Part I: How to Be a Model Citizen: A video project with African refugees in Malta

These are people who "are between several names, statuses and identities; between humanity and inhumanity; citizenship and its denial.\textsuperscript{7}\" Given the plethora of academic essays, white papers and comprehensive monographs devoted to refugee issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experience of refugees themselves?\textsuperscript{8}

I am haunted by a photograph published in the Guardian and The Times (London) on 28 May 2007. The photograph represents the harrowing plight of twenty-seven African refugees clinging to a tuna can in the Mediterranean Sea. These "irregular migrants", as they are referred to by the Maltese government, were literally hanging on for their lives after the boat they were travelling in sank somewhere between Libya and Malta. Meanwhile, the governments of Libya and Malta argued over who was responsible for their rescue.\textsuperscript{9} One of the oldest humanitarian maritime laws clearly states that it is "an obligation to provide assistance, regardless of nationality or status of persons in distress at sea.\textsuperscript{10}\" The twenty-seven migrants were eventually rescued by the Italian navy and taken to the Italian island of Lampedusa. The shipwrecked Africans had spent six days at sea and more than twenty-four hours clinging to the tuna cans on the tusks.

Nearly 6,000 immigrants have died on the frontiers of Europe since 1988. Among them 1,883 have been lost at sea in the Sicilian Channel between Libya, Tunisia, Malta and Italy.\textsuperscript{11} Migrants pay unscrupulous smugglers €1,500–€2,000 to travel by "floating coffin" from North Africa to Italy. The journey can take more than five days in vessels inadequate for the task; usually wooden fishing boats often with more than thirty men, women and children on board. In a recent essay Martin McCabe suggested that we might be forgiven for thinking that borders in Europe do not mean much anymore. He commented: "Of course that depends who you are and where you are. Fortress Europe, with all of its medieval connotations, is still a powerful and structuring ideological formation at work in Union policy. The bodies of young African men being washed ashore on the beaches of Lampedusa near Sicily are testament to this.\textsuperscript{12}\"

I visit the Malta Independent Online regularly and when I type "migrant" into the archive search engine,\textsuperscript{13} I am horrified by the litany of disasters at sea. Almost every day in the summer months, "irregular migrants" are rescued from near fatal incidents in the Sicilian Channel. These daily human catastrophes appear to go largely unnoticed by the international media. A Sudanese refugee I met in Malta, who had survived the perilous journey almost two years earlier, said:

"If only people back home knew what was ahead of them, they would never leave. Even if you are lucky enough to survive the journey, life in Malta is very tough. We never wanted to come here, we were heading for Italy but we ran out of fuel and our boat started taking on water, we were going to drown. Now we can't go forwards and we can't go backwards, we are stuck on this small island with no job, no money and no life."

In April 2007, artist and curator Mark Margion and the British Council invited me to work with refugees in the Malta Open Centre near Valletta in Malta to produce a video for an exhibition called Search for a Space 3, Asylum Seekers.\textsuperscript{14} This was one of a series of public art exhibitions, installations and interventions designed to question the role of socially engaged contemporary art practices inside and outside of the museum and included work by Ruth Bianco, Mark Margion, Chris Sant Fournier and Steve Vella.

Asylum Seekers addressed issues of movement, race, displacement, dispossession and integration using the visual arts within the context of this transient and unstable refugee camp environment. The project culminated in a series of interventions, artistic workshops, and performances, which occupied the everyday living spaces of the residents.
This involved negotiation and collaboration with the refugees living in Marsa to temporarily place artworks within the various buildings. I was particularly interested in placing the video installations How to Be a Model Citizen in an area of the Somali restaurant where the residents had placed comfortable sofas and a television to create a living-room environment. I wanted to create a minimal intervention to respect the established daily routine of the residents.

Ruth Bünsow produced a video installation, Maryam and Rahima (2007), and placed it in a building that was being used as a makeshift classroom. Her video was based on an interview with a Somali mother and daughter currently seeking asylum in Malta. This work was a poignant reminder of the current practice of separating families. On arrival in Malta, men, women and children are sent to different detention centres.

Mark Mangion’s Bocci Pitch (2007) was a site-specific intervention. Mark had observed that the outdoor areas of Marsa are dusty and inhospitable. The residents had no access to communal areas for social interaction to break the monotony of long days of inactivity. Bocci is a traditional Mediterranean sport that has been played in Malta for many centuries. Mark set out to encourage the residents to participate in both the construction and cultural exchange of learning how to play this Maltese game. It was important to Mark that the residents would quickly assume ownership and at the same time transform the physical appearance outside this former school. He commented: “I decided to set up this pitch, which would become an oasis within this dusty and dirty environment. This slight and temporary intervention created amazing activity for a period of time before it was finally recycled for other purposes by the residents themselves who assumed total ownership of this space.”

Mark also produced We Are Here Now (2007) a “performative” collaboration with five refugees from Togo, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia and Congo for the exhibition Forbidden Spectacle, Search for a Space 3, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Malta. The museum houses a collection of mostly European artworks from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The five men were invited to walk around the exhibition randomly, engaging in discussion with Maltese guests. “They were invited to talk about anything they wished on political issues to culture and football in their countries.” One of the participants, Ibrahim, reported a positive outcome from his experience:

“I spoke with maybe nine or ten people. I talked mostly about cultural things in my home country. Sudan. The Maltese told me about aspects of tradition in Malta. There was no problem; everybody was friendly and willing to talk to me. I have seen some of these people on the streets in Malta since then. We wave to each other and I have had a conversation with two of those people since then.”

This intervention was designed to facilitate social interaction between the Maltese host community and the African refugee residents. The museum offered a catalyst for participation, cultural dialogue and exchange that would be difficult to achieve outside of this temporary intervention given the tensions that exist between the refugees and many of the islanders. The museum environment created a “safe” space in which to explore the historical, social and cultural richness of African and European traditions. At the same time, however, the juxtaposition of refugees and eighteenth-century European paintings is striking; one is reminded that these sub-Saharan Africans are excluded both historically on the walls of the museum and outside in the streets of Malta.

Temporal performative events and participatory interventions such as Mark Mangion’s We Are Here Now are well established in museums. Contemporary artists often shift the emphasis away from formal passive viewing of artifacts within the museum and place the audience at the intersection between perception and participation. But the museum is nonetheless a culturally coded and mediated space for the viewer.

Artists also choose to work outside of the museum, producing projects in locations which can generate an immersive, critical and political context for their artworks. By moving outside of the museum in Malta for the exhibition Search for a Space 3 we placed the audience in a vulnerable position, like asylum seekers and refugees — the terrain vague of unfamiliar territory bewildered them. The placement of cultural artifacts outside of the museum in the homes of Malta’s unknown guests and inviting the host community to enter and participate in the construction of meaning generated a temporal shift in power relations: Maltese citizens unwittingly became the foreigner, placed within this temporal zone and confronted with the “terror of uncertain signs”. The audience was forced to find a way to understand the insecure position of being the “other”.

We Are Here Now, performance at the Museum of Fine Arts, Malta
© Mark Mangion, 31 May 2007


Although refugees exist in a state of "limbo"; they do forge alliances, friendships and social networks.

The forum ones who are granted asylum and subsequent refugee status will find it impossible to achieve full citizenship in this part of Europe. Malta operates under the system of jus sanguinis (right to citizenship by bloodline). Theoretically it is possible for a non-Maltese person to gain citizenship but naturalisation is at the sole discretion of the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs. Although refugees exist in a state of "limbo", they do forge alliances, friendships and social networks. Sasa Sassen describes this position as "informal citizenship," undocumentated immigrants who can move between multiple meanings of citizenship. She argues that the definition of citizenship has changed, especially in the wake of globalisation. Legal rights previously only enjoyed by the nation-state citizen are being expanded and challenged by international human rights law, which empowers the individual rather than governments.

However, the insecure position of refugees living on the periphery of Maltese society and similarly in other European countries infrers no legal rights. When an asylum seeker applies for leave to remain on humanitarian grounds this often leads to inaction whereby the claimant can spend years in limbo in a detention centre waiting for a decision for leave to remain. I know several asylum seekers living in detention in Ireland who have been waiting for a decision for more than six years.

Most migrants I have spoken to in Malta and Ireland maintain a longing to return home when the home country becomes conducive to sustaining personal security and economic viability. Long periods of detention and waiting can often lead to serious psychological problems. Julia Kristeva identifies this as the trauma of displacement, stating that: "Between human beings and citizens there is an open wound of the other. Can he or she be considered as a full human being when he or she is not a citizen?" 29

As part of the process of becoming a citizen many European countries are adopting national citizenship tests. For example, Life in the UK Nationality Test is a series of multiple-choice questions to test the knowledge of aspiring British citizens, an induction to "becoming more like us." At the time of writing the British government announced further measures to test the 'commitment' of aspiring citizens: these will include a period of 'probationary citizenship.' The British Prime Minister Gordon Brown added: "We will emphasize what binds us -- showing that our tolerance and fairness are not to be taken advantage of." 26

This suggests that countries adopting similar citizenship tests for migrants have an idealised notion of the "model citizen" — the title I adopted for my own work in Malta. The reality for many migrants I have spoken to and worked with over several years is that they have been forced to leave their home country because of conflict or brutal political regimes — and in several cases under threat of death. A major issue for asylum seekers arriving in Malta is the immediate isolation and exclusion from society, with little or no access to a public forum in which to express grievances. The ever-present fear of deportation discourages political resistance.

As an European citizen I maintain my democratic right to express my opposition to unjust government policies. But this basic human right is denied to asylum seekers. "Jilali, a 27-year-old Iranian who was granted asylum in 2001, is one of many asylum seekers who have been in Ireland for many years. He is granted a new visa each year and has no right to be in the country. He is one of many asylum seekers who have been granted asylum but are unable to work or access the public services available to citizens." 21

David Levi Strauss articulates this problem further in his observation that the vast quantity of images and texts circulating the globe mitigates against the possibility of political critique; however, he suggests an alternative strategy to this problem when he states: "In order to counter statistical thinking, one must focus on individuals. Not a million deaths, but one death, not a thousand refugees in camps, but one survivor at a time with a name and an image."

Levi Strauss' suggestion that to counteract the media's tendency to represent refugees negatively we should engage the audience differently mirrors the process I was engaged in with the residents of Marsa. We had decided to confront the Maltese public directly by inviting two of the participants to go into the streets and adopt the role of a television reporter to raise questions concerning the difficulties faced by refugees.
We had decided to confront the Maltese public directly by inviting two of the participants to go into the streets and adopt the role of a television reporter to raise questions concerning the difficulties faced by refugees.

The method adopted was a media participation process. I was fortunate to meet several individuals who already possessed a cultural and political understanding of what was at stake for Malta’s refugees. Some of the group I worked with had already publicly criticised unjust policies in relation to asylum in Malta and one participant had significant experience as a cultural mediator between fellow refugees and various state bodies in Malta.

Access had already been negotiated between the curator, Mark Mangion, and the management of the refugee centre. From the outset I envisaged potential problems of adopting a collaborative method for this project. Clearly it would not have been possible to engage in a fully equalised collaborative relationship with this group in such a short time frame. Instead I adopted a method of complicit action, whereby all participants engaged in discussion and subsequently agreed to a shared vision for this short-term project.

There was also a question of privacy and potential repercussions for residents who participated and openly appeared on video, expressing a point of view in opposition to the state authorities. In practice, however, most of the contributors maintained a balanced perspective, carefully negotiating personal opinions and perspectives. Although it became very clear during the production process that residents had little or no fear of retribution from the Maltese government for speaking freely about their predicament, this was emphasised by Warsame, one of the refugees, when he said: "There is nothing to lose or gain by speaking in public" because just imagine spending 18 months in terrible conditions in detention and then realise that you are trapped and your life isn't getting better." 

A recurring theme that was clearly articulated as a major problem for the refugees was the lack of opportunity to have an open discussion with Maltese citizens. As Warsame from Libera noted:

"I think if the Maltese should highly accept us, things will be better but I see some sort of racism ... Some sort of ethnocentrism and some kind of lies that are not making our stay here to be fine because they are not really accepting us a human. You are counted as inferior to the society ... If you see somebody and you really want to know how this person is, the best way is to talk to the person so that from exchanging of ways you could see how and if that person is a good man or a bad man ... Getting in touch with us will solve more problems." 

Most of the refugees I spoke to wanted to leave Malta and travel on to other parts of Europe but under current EU policy and the Dublin II Convention the first country entered by an "irregular migrant" must take responsibility for processing and holding that person. This is to prevent multiple applications throughout Europe. The Maltese government is currently lobbying the European Parliament for EU immigration quotas to allow for dispersal of migrants throughout the rest of Europe.

Malta has not developed official policies to deal with "irregular migrants" issues. As incidents arise they are dealt with in an ad hoc way that often leads to confusion. Refugees are not informed about their "civic responsibilities" and what is expected of them as "informal citizens.

Returning to the cultural production process, it is useful to refer to Jacques Rancière's notion of "The Distribution of the Sensible" in regard to my working method. "The Distribution of the Sensible" is described as "a system of self-evident facts of sense perception". It defines places and forms of participation in a common world. "Arisotle states that a citizen is someone who has a part in the act of governing and being governed ... Or those who have a part in a community of citizens." "The Distribution of the Sensible" acts upon that which can be perceived, and is a form of community participation.29

How to Be A Model Citizen is an "informal citizens" action performed by people without status in order to be heard, to have a voice. As Rancière has written, quoting Aristotle, "A speaking being, is a political being." Warren Neidich has argued that artists also create their own distribution of the sensible:

They use their own historical referents, materials, processes, apparatus, spaces and performances, to create complex assemblages that together compete with institutional arrangements for the attention of the brain and mind ... They inhabit the same spaces and temporalities as the institutional arrangements that characterize the institutional understanding. Their presence however acts to bend and contort it, in the end, altering its static and rigid arrangements in significant ways. Works like installation art, performative sculpture and urban geographies act to redistribute the facts of this distribution of the sensible.27

Extending Neidich's observations, artists can also work effectively within state institutional spaces as independent observers operating outside of the commercial and editorial constraints exerted upon the media. They can deliver fresh perspectives and open up dialogues with individuals and groups who are often suspicious of speaking to the media. I am not suggesting a reductive instrumentalisation of the cultural production process here. The process we were engaged in was a dialogical exchange. The individuals try to work with on all of my projects can be described somewhat ironically as "active citizens". Under normal circumstances these are people who play an active leadership role in their "home" communities. Even within the confines of their current status they continue to mediate and negotiate to improve both their own situation and the lives of fellow refugees.

During the production process of this project the desire for individuals to perform and articulate personal stories and histories emerged. According to Hannah Arendt, "the political is best understood as a power relation between private and public realms, and that storytelling is a vital bridge between these realms - a site where individualised passions and shared views are contested and recombined."38
Three key voices emerged from my conversations and complicit relationship with the residents in Marsa. The project was led by these encounters. In the first video sequence a young Somali man, Sadik, invites us into his temporary home; we follow him up the stairs into one of the former school classrooms. The camera pans around the room revealing details of the material culture within: overcrowded bunk beds with blankets draped over the sides, cardboard boxes and makeshift furniture. Sadik introduces us to his meagre home comforts: a rusting fridge, basic cooking utensils and a camping gas cooker. He is dignified and hospitable, reflecting Derrida’s suggestion that hospitality is a form of self-identity. The antithesis of his own experience of the denial of hospitality on arrival in Malta. Sadik ends this short opening sequence by looking straight at the viewer and saying, “This is our only home, so we have to love it.”

It is also clearly important to Sadik to have an opportunity to tell his story. Sitting on one of the beds, he reflects upon his disempowered position. He reveals his reasons for leaving home – to escape the conflict in Somalia – and generates a context for the viewer to share his personal story, in doing so he asks the viewer to consider the question of humanitarian responsibility.

In the second video sequence Hakim from Liberia is standing at the water’s edge in front of the refugee centre; the harbour is behind him and two huge industrial cranes visually frame him. Hakim adopts a defiant position; he is confident and outspoken. He reflects upon his situation and that of his fellow refugees. He informs the viewer that dialogue is the key to understanding and accepting refugees in Malta. This articulate young man insists that refugees must have a chance to offer Maltese society if they were only given a chance.

In the third video sequence the internal world of the migrant turns towards Malta, society as Wario and Ibrahim take to the streets to interview a cross-section of Maltese citizens and international tourists. Warsame from Somalia opens the video sequence and adopts the role of cultural mediator. He dressed in a smart suit and speaks eloquently. He immediately dispels the myth of the uneducated, dilute refugee. He is acutely aware of what is at stake for Maltese refugees and frames the issues for the viewer before asking a series of questions to young refugees. A Maltese woman, two university professors and a civil servant. As the viewer watches the video sequence there is a subtle power shift: Warsame is no longer an ‘anonymous statistic,’ refugee, or irregular migrant’; he is in control, empowered and equal to his subject – Maltese citizens.

Wario is no longer an ‘anonymous statistic,’ refugee, or irregular migrant’; he is in control, empowered and equal to his subject – Maltese citizens.

The questions posed in the series of interviews with the Maltese public were discussed and agreed with Warsame and Ibrahim prior to filming. Together we decided on the questions format. The first question asked was, “What is your idea of a model citizen?” This question could be interpreted as a desire to belong, to understand how to be accepted by the host country and to reflect the increasing legislation and control exerted upon refugees in order to gain citizenship. Subsequent questions were based upon human rights, for example: “Is it important to have freedom of speech?” “Is it important to be able to travel freely?” “Is it important to be with your family?” The questions were adopted and interpreted in different ways by Warsame and Ibrahim and were designed to ironically point to the predicament of asylum seekers and refugees in Malta. The questions they were asking of their interviewees were considered fundamental human rights, normally taken for granted in democratic societies.

Sometimes the irony of the questions appeared not to register with the interviewees and in several interviews led to moments of confusion. The visual framing of the video images was also essential to the overall meaning of the work. For example, by placing the coastline in the background of some of the interviews there is a clear reference to the geopolitical position of Malta on the frontier of Europe and an allusion to the perilous journey by boat from North Africa. In a further sequence the viewer can see the exterior of the parliament building in Valletta, directly implying governmental responsibility in the fate of so many migrants.

The three completed video narratives were finally installed and placed in close proximity to each other in the Somali restaurant. The juxtaposition of the three narratives created a ‘conceptual dialogue’ between the refugees and Maltese citizens. The overall effect was designed to generate an intersubjective dialogue with the viewer and generate a safe space, a virtual public forum where the two constituencies could meet.

The second dissemination point was a Maltese newspaper, Mark Gambier, the curator of Search for a Space, had previously negotiated a full page of Malta’s Sunday Times to produce a series of artist interventions and reach a large Maltese audience. I used this opportunity to transcribe some of the interview material from How to Be a Model Citizen and it was subsequently published on 13 May 2007. The transcribed material was printed verbatim and anonymously. The texts revealed the migrants’ experience and attitudes both positive and negative towards Maltese citizens. This was a significant incursion into a politically mediated public forum and served to provoke a self-reflective response from the reader.

To conclude, I return to one of the video sequences from How to Be a Model Citizen, in which Ibrahim, a refugee from Sudan, assumes the authoritative voice of the interviewer and asks a disarmingly simple, yet profound question to three young Maltese men sitting on a beach. In the background the viewer is directed towards the Mediterranean Sea, where every year thousands of African men, women and children risk their lives in a desperate attempt to reach Europe. Ibrahim asks, “Is it good to live in a better place?” The men are perplexed and do not fully understand the relevance or meaning of his question. Finally one of the group replies, “Yes, the ultimate aim in life is to live in a better place.”

When we are confronted by images of migrants from African countries in the media, it is difficult to reach beyond the anonymous statistics. We have become conditioned to considering migrants as alien, uneducated and poor, even a potential threat to our well-being. The reality, however, is very different. They are just like us, with families and friends, who share the same dream ‘to live life in a better place’.
Part 2: Between: Contested citizenship, migrant narratives and participatory media in Ireland

In June 2004 Irish citizens were invited by the government to vote in a referendum to amend the 1922 Constitution of Ireland. The outcome of the referendum would decide the fate of transnational migrants who successfully entered the state to seek asylum and subsequently gave birth to a child. Before the constitution was amended all Irish-born children were entitled to the same rights as Irish citizens on the grounds of jus soli, whereby nationality is determined by place of birth. An overwhelming 79 per cent of the population voted in favour of the government-proposed amendment, thereby complicity signing a deportation order for thousands of African, Asian and non-EU Europeans.

The Republic of Ireland was until very recently a largely homogeneous population, a country which experienced famine and mass migration in the mid-nineteenth century and continuous population decline until the early 1990s, when Ireland's economic recovery—referred to as the Celtic Tiger—began to attract inward migration for the first time in the young state's history both from returning émigrés and from asylum seekers worldwide. In line with many other countries in Europe the Irish government has established state-run "Reception Centres", an Irish euphemism for detention centres. Many „irregular migrants“ have lived in a state of limbo for more than five years, waiting for a decision to stay—or the alternative, deportation.

For more than four years I have been producing a series of participatory art and media projects in collaboration with a group of asylum seekers living in the Mooney Reception Centre and elsewhere. This particular Reception Centre was formerly a Butlin Holiday Camp, established post-Second World War by the British entrepreneur Billy Butlin, with the slogan „a week's holiday for a week's pay.“ The façade of this former holiday camp is uncanny in its resemblance to historical missionary architecture. The site is critically explored to reveal a temporary global community where residents exist between two worlds — rejection of the home country and the desire for citizenship in the host country where the state exerts its will to control, contain and decide the fate of these transient residents.

Although Mooney contains more than 800 residents from forty-nine countries, it is for the most part invisible to Irish citizens. In Ireland asylum seekers are often held in detention and denied permission to work for a considerable period of time pending a decision by the Minister of Justice. A schoolteacher from Zimbabwe said to me that she should be „awarded a PhD in patience“, given the length of time she has lived in Mooney (almost six years) without a decision being made regarding her asylum application.

Postcards from Mooney: A collaborative art intervention

In 2006 I co-collaborated and I produced Postcards from Mooney, a discursive art intervention which attempted to open a dialogical interaction between asylum seekers living in the Mooney Reception Centre, Irish citizens and the Department of Justice. I was invited by Belfast Exposed Gallery to participate in an exhibition and series of public discussions called Migrations during the summer of 2006. As an artist I am critically aware of my role in this context. The problems facing asylum seekers in this reception centre are complex and beyond the scope of a well-intentioned art project. However, by collaboratively and critically entering a dialogical process over a long period of time (four years) it was possible to learn and share knowledge, ideas and actions, thus building strong allegiances and shared goals with the community in Mooney. The majority of the individuals who participated had a strong desire to actively negotiate and lobby for human rights in relation to unjust governmental policies regarding the asylum process and migrant rights.

Grant Kester has recognised the problems that artists have to deal with when working with marginalised groups such as asylum seekers and refugees. He is critical of „well-intentioned“ artists who often inadvertently become an instrumentalisating agent for the state. He argues for discursive strategies when working in collaborative contexts, suggesting that the artist should be a „collaborator in dialogue rather than an exploitative agent. He argues strongly for an „emancipatory political vision“ to ameliorate the philosophic and otherwise misguided tendency of socially concerned artists.

The invitation from Belfast Exposed Gallery to produce an art installation for the exhibition and public seminar series Migrations offered an interesting opportunity to test the potential of a political art intervention within the Mooney Reception Centre to draw attention to the issues facing this marginalised and hidden community. The method we adopted was to revise and restate an historical and nostalgic connection between the site as a former holiday camp and its former visitors — the Irish public. In Northern Ireland there is also a strong historical link between Mooney and working-class families. It was a regular holiday destination for thousands of families from Northern Ireland and the Republic until the site was acquired by the Department of Justice in 2000 to house asylum seekers.

I was aware of this collective memory and carefully selected an original John Hinde postcard depicting Mooney as a holiday camp. The postcard acted as an aide-memoire to trigger an empathetic response from the audience. We distributed the postcards to asylum seekers in Mooney and invited the participants to write a personal message to the Irish Minister of Justice (responsible for decisions in relation to asylum applications). The response was ispressive. The postcards were written, stamped and mailed to the gallery in Belfast. An empty gallery wall in early July soon filled up with personal messages including criticisms, appeals and angry complaints.

As a result of the overwhelming response from Mooney’s asylum seekers and considerable interest from visitors to the gallery the duration of the exhibition was extended. This was to encourage visitors to attend a series of public seminars organised to address issues raised by the Migrations exhibition. At the end of the exhibition all the postcards were gathered together and sent to the Minister of Justice in Dublin for a response. Unfortunately, despite repeated efforts, a response never came. This may have been due to unfortunate timing, as it coincided with a general election in Ireland — resulting in the Minister of Justice being ceremoniously dumped from office.
My intention is to repeat the exercise but this time through a public forum in the Republic of Ireland to generate a more direct response in closer proximity to the Irish government in Dublin.

Progress II: An after dinner conversation with transnational migrants in Ireland

In a further development of my work with refugees, asylum seekers and transnational migrants in Ireland I recently produced an experimental participatory media project, Progress II. In January 2008, together with artist Suzanne Bosch and supported by filmmaker Kevin Duffy, I invited ten individuals to participate in this project. All of the group had recently migrated to Ireland (north and south) from countries including Brazil, Nigeria, Somalia, Poland and the Czech Republic. The project generated a series of inter-subjective encounters reflecting Bourriaud’s notion of relational aesthetics. These encounters continued between the participants throughout the cultural production process and will enter the public realm between the participants and the audience when the completed video is presented in various public contexts. The first stage of this project was to create a dialogue between the participants. This was achieved by generating a blog site and inviting each member of the group to respond to a series of questions relating to the experience of being a migrant living on the island of Ireland.

The questions and discursive exchanges, which can be read by visiting the blog site, supported each participant towards generating a personal narrative, which was later used to inform and generate a ‘conversation’ performed in a communal setting, around a dinner table. The event was documented by video with the intention of installing the completed video within a museum or gallery environment.

What unites these powerful and diverse multi-ethnic voices is the collective knowledge of their personal experiences and stories of contemporary migration. Storytelling and orality is a tradition in Ireland. It features throughout historical and contemporary Irish culture, including theatre, the novel, poetry and film. Writer Michael Jackson reminds us that storytelling is also a way of participating in the world, creating a sense of belonging and reasserting dignity and self-respect when one becomes uprooted and displaced. He writes, “To reconstruct events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination.”

In the completed video Progress II the audience is invited to engage with and extend the intersubjective process. Watching the video, viewers can observe and listen to the dinner-table conversation. The camera moves continually around the table. The constant movement creates a spatio-temporal frame, reminding the viewer of the transient position of the participants as guests in the host country. The individual dialogues explore the in-between space and transcultural connections between ‘home’ and the host country. There is talk of loss, misunderstandings and conflict between cultures, the reality of everyday lived experience for migrants in their adopted country. Some of the stories are humorous and some are tragic, describing the will to survive in the most dangerous and urgent of times. Meaning is contingent and never closed or fully resolved.

The viewer is also the subject of discussion and therefore implicated within the conversation, an ‘imagined community’ actively invited to participate and reflect upon their own position as host country citizens in relation to the dreams and anxieties of the migrant dinner-table guests. In doing so the audience is encouraged to move beyond the aesthetic surface of the video production. I am
again reminded of Derrida’s notion of hospitality. In order to be hospitable the receiving community must be altruistic and open to his advocacy of “toute autre”.

Returning to the June 2004 referendum, one could be forgiven for thinking that the majority of Irish citizens do not want inward migration. However, the Irish government’s political decision that closed the referendum at the time may have unduly influenced the outcome. This has led to uncertainty and anxiety as many asylum seekers continue to wait.

Irish sociologist Ronit Lentin argues that Irish people have developed an incapacity or blind spot for dealing with the “migrant” other. She cites the Irish famine and subsequent mass migration to America in the mid-nineteenth century as a painful memory inhibiting Irish citizens from giving an empathetic response to the newcomer.16

My own anecdotal evidence of working directly with migrants over several years in Ireland would suggest that Irish people are receptive to newcomers and live quite happily with them. At an institutional level, however, the situation is very different; sub-Saharan African migrants often report the lack of equality and especially opportunities for jobs. Missing from much of the debate is the issue of the right to self-representation. Who speaks for whom? And how are migrants represented to the host country citizens?

Meanwhile, back in Malta the summer has arrived. The Malta Independent continues to report the daily arrival of sub-Saharan Africans, while Amnesty International and other NGOs criticise their reception of asylum seekers. In Ireland the anonymous asylum seeker who has been waiting for almost six years for a decision on her application has finally received a letter from the Department of Justice: she has been granted leave to remain. It will take her at least another five years to gain citizenship, with little prospect of a job, and no access to university education for her or her children ...

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CHAPTER 2
Envisioning the Return: Participatory Video for Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration
Melissa Brough and Charles Otieno-Hongo

In 2005, following the much-awaited signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for South Sudan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partners began ramping up for the repatriation of refugees from Africa’s longest-running civil war. If successful, this movement, entailing up to half a million refugees in six surrounding countries, could serve as an example for future repatriation efforts in the region and other parts of the world. Yet despite the renewed sense of hope brought about by the peace agreement, refugees waiting just below the border in the Kakuma Camp in Kenya expressed sentiments ranging from distrust of UNHCR, partner agencies and the fledgling government of South Sudan, to pessimism about the likelihood of a sustained peace, to fear of returning to an unrecognisable country that many had left as children. Indeed, the repatriation process itself was just one part of the equation: anxieties about successfully reintegrating in the war-torn country were high. Refugees expressed a need for information about the support they would receive in the repatriation process, the conditions they would be returning to in South Sudan, and how to overcome challenges to reintegrating and rebuilding their communities.

In an effort to support the process, as well as to involve Sudanese refugee youth in mobilising the refugee community, FilmAid International turned to participatory video, a methodology for promoting social change through individual and community empowerment. Through video-based activities, youths were engaged in dialogue and awareness-raising about repatriation and concerns critical to reintegration.1 Drawing also on youth development and “media for development” methodologies, the programme enabled the youths to produce short videos and newscasts that were shared with the Sudanese community in Kakuma at large. The authors assisted in the development, implementation and monitoring of the project. Here they reflect on innovations, challenges faced, and how lessons learned might be applied to future projects using the power of video to help ensure a voluntary return and a sustainable reintegration.

Background

FilmAid International

Founded in 1999, FilmAid International is a non-profit organisation that utilises film and video to promote health, strengthen communities and enrich the lives of the world’s forcibly
MUSEUMS AND DIVERSITY
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Changes in Museum Practice
New Media, Refugees and Participation

Edited by Hanne-Lovise Skartveit and Katherine Goodnow

In the big mega-cities of the world, museums are acting as vehicles of mediation - reaching, touching and connecting a variety of social structures at different levels of an increasingly multi-cultural society. In today's world, the museum is a metaphorical open space where artefacts are not simply considered objects to treasure, store, preserve and display but important spaces to connect and reconnect refugees and communities.

By examining the ways in which museums involve refugees and asylum seekers, Changes in Museum Practice: New Media, Refugees and Participation explores the opportunities around new media. Leading artists, curators, and academics come together to outline different degrees of participation by audiences and communities and explore a range of topics from video games to theatre, from photography to participatory video and digital storytelling. Case studies are used throughout to highlight the unique ways that various approaches to inclusion and participation can be used successfully.