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## Dislocations: Participatory Media with Refugees in Malta and Ireland

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## Chapter 1: Anthony Haughey

**'Dislocations: Participatory Media with Refugees in Malta and Ireland', published in *Changes in Museum Practice New Media, Refugees and Participation* (eds.) Hanne - Lovise Skartveit and Katherine Goodnow, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books (2010) pp. 1-16.**

### 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 countermandered by actions – albeit imaginative, magical, and illusory – to regain some sense of balance between the world within and the world without.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2007 I was invited produce a video project with a group of sub-Saharan African refugees living in a former school near Valletta. 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 Brehan law.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson, M. (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen pg.79

<sup>2</sup> Brehan Law was enforced by Celtic Pagan Society and stated that; "all members of the tribe are required to offer hospitality to strangers. The only exceptions are minor children, madmen, and old people." It was considered impolite to ask anything in return for hospitality. Available at <http://www.ancientsites.com/aw/Article/617978> Accessed 30.5.08

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, J. *Of Hospitality* Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond, Stanford University Press, California 2000 pg. 55

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 consider 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 blogsite 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 contesting 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 citizen's rights is inextricably bound with global migration policies.

My attempt to describe a series of encounters, collaborations and relationships is fraught with difficulties and contradictions. The main impetus for each project was the production and public dissemination of visual media artefacts. Therefore words 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 McDougall acknowledges, "Appearance *is* knowledge of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable."<sup>4</sup> 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 spurious and gratuitous media headlines and state sponsored essentialism. Michael Jackson has recognized the difficulties of writing about transnational migration when he comments:

To what extent do we, in the countries of immigration, unwittingly reduce refugees to

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<sup>4</sup> MacDougall, D. (2006) *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*. Princeton University Press pg. 5-6

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.<sup>5</sup>

Like Jackson I am interested in the existential subjective experience of migration. He argues that trying to 'save' refugees is analogous to the colonised not wishing to conform and become civilized. Refugees want to "participate in the decision-making processes." To be removed from the margins of society and "integrated as equals."<sup>6</sup> 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**

Insert fig1 (no caption req)

These are people who 'are between several names, statuses and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial'<sup>7</sup>

Given the plethora of academic essays, white papers, and compendious monographs devoted to refugee issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experience of refugees themselves?<sup>8</sup>

I am haunted by a photograph published in the Guardian and The Times (London) on May 28th, 2007. The photograph represents the horrific plight of twenty-seven African migrants clinging to a tuna pen 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 traveling in sank somewhere between Malta and Libya. Meanwhile, the governments of Libya and Malta argued over who was responsible for their rescue<sup>9</sup>. One of the oldest humanitarian maritime laws clearly states that it is "an obligation to provide assistance, regardless of nationality or status of

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson, M. (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen pg.80

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* pg. 84

<sup>7</sup> Ranciere, J. (1992) *The Politics of Aesthetics* Continuum Press, London and New York, pg. 61

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, M. (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen pg.80

<sup>9</sup> Bompard, P. (2007). Available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article1848148.ece>. Accessed 21.8.07

persons in distress at sea.”<sup>10</sup> 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 on to the tuna nets.

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.<sup>11</sup> Migrants pay unscrupulous smugglers €1,500-2000 euro 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.<sup>12</sup>

I visit the Malta Independent Online regularly and when I type “migrant” into the archive search engine.<sup>13</sup> 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.

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<sup>10</sup> The SOLAS Convention (2006) humanitarian law at sea. Available at <http://www.imo.org/Facilitation/mainframe.asp?topicid=398>. Accessed 16.8.07

<sup>11</sup> Article, (2006) *Nearly 6,000 Immigrants Died on the Frontiers of Europe since 1988*, The Malta Independent Online Available at <http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=43517> Accessed 23.8.07

<sup>12</sup> McCabe, M. (2006) *Topographies of Suspicion and Memory*, in *Disputed Territory*, A Haughey, Gallery of Photography and Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin

<sup>13</sup> The Malta Independent Online (2007) Available at: <http://www.independent.com.mt/mainpage.asp>

In April 2007, artist and curator Mark Mangion and the British Council invited me to work with refugees in the Marsa Open Centre near Valletta in Malta to produce a video for an exhibition called *Search For a Space 3, Asylum Seekers*.<sup>14</sup> 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 Mangion, Chris Sant Fournier and Steve Vella.

*Asylum Seekers* addressed issues of migration, race, dislocation, 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 interventional artworks and films, 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 installation, *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 Bianco produced a video installation, *Maryan and Rahma* (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, and 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

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<sup>14</sup> Mangion, M. (2007) *Search For a Space*, Available at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/malta-events-search-for-space.htm> Accessed 23.8.07

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.<sup>15</sup>

Insert fig 3. Caption: *Bocci Pitch* Installation, Marsa Open Centre for Refugees, Malta, April 2007, © Mark Mangion

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 5*, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Malta. The museum houses a collection of mostly European artworks from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 from 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.<sup>16</sup>

Insert fig4. Caption: *We Are Here Now*, Performance at the Museum of Fine Arts, Malta, © Mark Mangion, 31.5.07

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

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<sup>15</sup> email exchange between M Mangion and A Haughey, 28.2.08

<sup>16</sup> Telephone conversation between Ibrahim and A Haughey, 14.3.08

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 artefacts 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 artefacts outside of the museum in the homes of Malta’s unwelcome 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”.

Marsa Open centre for Refugees is a dilapidated former school, which was condemned as unfit for Maltese schoolchildren. The building sits on the water’s edge of an industrial harbor giving the impression that the new residents have barely gained a foothold on European territory. African men, mostly young, live in the old classrooms. Blankets draped over the side of the overcrowded bunk beds offer a small degree of privacy. In the summer it is impossible to sleep as the Mediterranean sun heats the rooms to inhuman temperatures. I spoke with many people from Sudan and Somalia who had left home to escape from life-threatening conflicts in Darfur and Mogadishu. These “irregular migrants” who survived the hazardous journey across the Sahara Desert to the North African coast and onwards by boat towards Italy are increasingly choosing longer and more dangerous routes to avoid the pan-European Frontex border patrols.<sup>17</sup> The boats

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<sup>17</sup> Frontex is a European border security network based in Warsaw. It deploys patrol boats, helicopters and surveillance methods to protect Europe’s sea borders and intercept “irregular migrants” forcing boats to return to the point of



often run out of fuel and provisions before reaching the Italian islands. The Maltese authorities monitor these *ghost vessels* as they enter Maltese territory hoping they will continue on past the island to reach Lampedusa and Sicily. The boats that flounder within Maltese territory are reluctantly rescued by patrol boats and brought ashore. Men and women and children are separated and immediately imprisoned in detention centres such as Hal-Safi a former army barracks. These African asylum seekers can be held for up to eighteen months in deplorable conditions before being deported or transferred to an open refugee centre such as Marsa where residents become stranded, still dreaming of citizenship in Europe or beyond.

The fortunate 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 naturalization 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. Saskia Sasson describes this position as “informal citizenship”, “undocumented immigrants [who] can move between multiple meanings of citizenship”.<sup>18</sup> She argues that the definition of citizenship has changed, especially in the wake of globalization. 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 infers 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

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departure

<sup>18</sup> Sassen, S. (2002) *The Repositioning of Citizenship: Emergent Subjects and Spaces for Politics*, in *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 46.

there is an open wound: the other. Can he or she be considered as a full human being when he or she is not a citizen?”<sup>19</sup>

During 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, this 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.”<sup>20</sup>

This suggests that countries adopting similar citizenship tests for migrants have an idealized 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 a 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. Iranian poet Abbas Amini powerfully demonstrated the frustration experienced by asylum seekers when in May 2003 he stitched his mouth, ears and eyes closed in a desperate attempt to draw attention to the voiceless predicament of asylum seekers in Britain.<sup>21</sup> This ‘mute’ gesture became an iconic image circulating widely in the media. Amini’s protest was situated within and for his own constituency. He was offered leave to remain by the British authorities, but he continued his protest and re-stated his commitment to all asylum seekers regardless of where they come from, to be treated with dignity and respect.

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<sup>19</sup> Fletcher, J. & Benjamin, A. (eds.) *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990 ADD title of Kristeva chapter and p.# of quote.

<sup>20</sup> Article, *British Citizenship Tests Planned*, BBC News Channel 20.2.08 Available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7253933.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7253933.stm) Accessed 1.5.08

<sup>21</sup> Azad, S. (2003) *Abbas Amini Gets Leave to Remain but Continues his Protest*, Available at <http://www.irr.org.uk/2003/may/ak000016.html> Accessed 21.8.07

On arrival in the host country asylum seekers have little or no recourse to civic or political advocacy and are often represented by the media in terms of anonymous statistics and negative stereotyping.

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.”<sup>22</sup>

Levi Strauss’s 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.

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 equalized 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

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<sup>22</sup> Strauss, D. (2003) *Between the Eyes; Essays on Photography and Politics*, Aperture, New York pg. 102-103

negotiating personal opinions and perspectives. Although it became very clear during the production process that residents had little or no fear of recriminations from the Maltese government for speaking out publicly 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.”<sup>23</sup>

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 Hakim from Liberia, 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 as 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.<sup>24</sup>

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 often leading 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

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<sup>23</sup> email exchange between Warsame Ali Garaare and A Haughey 23.2.08

<sup>24</sup> Video conversation with Hakim from Liberia, Marsa Open Centre for Refugees, Malta 5.4.07

participation in a common world. “Aristotle 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.<sup>25</sup>

*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 Ranciere has written, quoting Aristotle, “A speaking being, is a political being.”<sup>26</sup> Warren Neidich has argued that artists also create their own distribution of the sensible,

They use their own historical referents, materials, processes, apparati, 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.<sup>27</sup>

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 reveal 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 I 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 stasis they continue to mediate and negotiate to improve both their own situation and the lives of fellow refugees.

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<sup>25</sup> Ranciere, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, New York, London pg. 60

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* pg.60

<sup>27</sup> Neidich, W. (2007) Press Release for the exhibition, *The Re-distribution of the Sensible*, Gallery Magnus Muller, 10 /12, Weydinger Strasse, Berlin, 10178, April 13- May 26 2007

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.”<sup>28</sup>

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 temporal 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 meager 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.<sup>29</sup> This was 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 reason for leaving home, to escape the conflict in Somalia and generates a context for the viewer to share his personal story and in doing so asks the viewer to consider the question of humanitarian responsibility.

In the second video sequence Hakim from Liberia is standing at the waters edge, in front of the refugee centre, the harbor 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 have much to offer Maltese society if they were only given a chance.

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt cited by Jackson, M. (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, J, Dufourmantelle, A. (2000) *Of Hospitality*, Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, Translated by Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press

In the third video sequence the internal world of the migrant turns outwards towards Maltese society as Warsame 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 is dressed in a smart suit and speaks eloquently. He immediately dispels the myth of the “uneducated, illiterate refugee.” He is acutely aware of what is at stake for Malta’s refugees and frames the issue for the viewer before asking a series of questions to a young 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.

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 questioning 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 reflects 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 towards the predicament of asylum seekers and refugees in Malta. The questions they were asking of their interviewees were 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 image was also essential to the overall meaning of the work. For example, by placing the coastline in the background of several of the interviews there is a clear reference to the geo-political 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 Mangion the curator of *Search for a Space 3* had previously negotiated a full page of Malta's The 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 May 13, 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 II, 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% of the population voted in favour of the government proposed amendment thereby complicitly signing a deportation order for thousands of African, Asian and non-EU Europeans.

The Republic of Ireland was until very recently a largely homogenous population, a country which experienced famine and mass migration in the mid nineteenth century and continuous population decline until the early 1990s when Irelands economic recovery referred to as the Celtic Tiger<sup>30</sup> began to attract inward migration for the first time in the young states 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 Mosney Reception Centre and elsewhere. This particular Reception Centre was formerly a Butlins Holiday Camp, established post Second World War by the British entrepreneur, Billy Butlin with the slogan 'a weeks holiday for a weeks pay'.<sup>31</sup> The façade of this former holiday camp is uncanny in its resemblance to historical missionary architecture. The site is critically explored to reveal a temporal 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 contain, control and decide the fate of these transient residents.

Although Mosney contains more than eight hundred 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 Mosney (almost 6 years) without a decision being made regarding her asylum application.

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<sup>30</sup> American investment bank, Morgan Stanley, in the early 1990s, first described the Irish economy as the *Celtic Tiger*

<sup>31</sup> Butlins Holidays used the slogan *A weeks holiday for a weeks pay* in advertising literature in 1945 to attract working class families

### **Postcards From Mosney: A Collaborative Art Intervention**

In 2006 together with my co-collaborators we produced *Postcards From Mosney*. A discursive art intervention which attempted to open a dialogical interaction between asylum seekers living in the Mosney 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<sup>32</sup>. 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, share knowledge, ideas and actions building strong allegiances and shared goals with the community in Mosney. 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 in relation to the asylum process and migrant rights.

Grant Kester has recognized the problems that artists have to deal with when working with marginalized groups such as asylum seekers and refugees. He is critical of “well intentioned” artists who often inadvertently become an instrumentalising agent for the state. He argues for discursive strategies when working in collaborative contexts, he suggests that, “the antinomy between empathy and negation can be at least partially resolved by recourse to a discursive aesthetic which conceives of the artist primarily as a collaborator in dialogue rather than an expressive agent.” He argues strongly for an “emancipatory political vision”<sup>33</sup> to ameliorate the philanthropic and often 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 Mosney 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 N. Ireland there is also a strong historical link between Mosney and working class families. It was a regular holiday destination for thousands of families from N.

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<sup>32</sup> Further information about this exhibition and the *Migrations* exhibition and seminar series available at <http://www.belfastexposed.org>

<sup>33</sup> Grant Kester advocates Littoral practice as an effective collaborative strategy for socially engaged art practice in his essay, *Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art*, Variant issue 9. Available at [www.variant.org.uk](http://www.variant.org.uk)

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 Mosney as a holiday camp<sup>34</sup>. The postcard acted as an aide memoir to trigger an empathetic response from the audience. We distributed the postcards to asylum seekers in Mosney 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 impressive. 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 Mosney'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 unceremoniously dumped from office!

Insert fig 5. Caption: *Postcards From Mosney, Migrations* exhibition, Belfast Exposed, © A. Haughey, July 2006

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 Susanne Bosch and supported by film maker, Kevin Duffy we invited

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<sup>34</sup> John Hinde was a British photographer who produced an extensive series of colour postcards for Butlins Holiday Camps post Second World War until 1976. He is also largely recognised as a pioneer of constructed photography

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 intersubjective 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 blogsite and inviting each member of the group to respond to 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 blogsite<sup>35</sup> 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

Insert fig 6. Caption: *Progress I*, Production Still, Dublin, 8.3.08 © S. Bosch and A. Haughey,

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 reconstitute 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."<sup>36</sup>

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

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<sup>35</sup> To read the original narratives please visit <http://interfacefilming.blogspot.com>

<sup>36</sup> 2006 Jackson, M. *The Politics of Storytelling, Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Denmark, pg. 15

connections between 'home' and the host country. There is talk of loss, misunderstandings and confusion 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 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 *tout autre*.

Returning to the June 2004 referendum one could be forgiven for thinking that majority of Irish citizens do not want inward migration. However the Irish government's political rhetoric that clouded 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 eliciting an empathetic response to the newcomer.<sup>37</sup>

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 NGO's criticize

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<sup>37</sup> Conway, B. (2006) *Who Do We Think We Are? Immigration and the Discursive Construction of National Identity in an Irish Daily Mainstream Newspaper, 1996-2004*, *Translocations* | Autumn 2006 | Volume 1 | Issue 1 | pp. 76-94  
*Translocations: The Irish Migration, Race and Social Transformation*. Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland, Maywood. Available at <http://www.imrstr.dcu.ie> Accessed 8.3.08

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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