



Margareta Kern

What Remains? Visual Arts and Refugees

In 2003, coinciding with the Refugee Week, I organised an exhibition by the title of [Leave to Remain](#) whose main aim was to bring together work by contemporary visual artists who are also refugees and asylum seekers. This writing is as much reflection on that experience as it is an invitation to explore questions that arose from it.

I was becoming increasingly frustrated at the continuous negative portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in the media, and even more upset at the increasingly xenophobic immigration policies of the Labour government. Having come to the UK fleeing a civil war in the former Yugoslavia (in 1992); then training at Goldsmiths College and now practicing as a visual artist, I was keen to open up those two areas - my political status with my creative work. By organising an exhibition by artists who have been forced to migrate, I wanted to provide visibility to their/our works and issues they/we were grappling with, and to try and shift the negative perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. With a zest and certain kind of naiveté of a person who has never organised an exhibition before, I jumped into deep waters.

The exhibition showed eleven artists whose works ranged from painting, sculpture to installation, connected by a thread of enquiry into notions of belonging, home, identity and displacement. After three showings, one of which was at the BBC London, Leave to Remain eventually grew into an initiative; I continued to edit an e-letter showcasing art and cultural events whose subjects were connected to issues of forced migration and a group artists most of whom participated in the exhibition continued to meet.

However, after two years of editing the nEws-letter, speaking at conferences and advocating the issues of refugees and the arts I started questioning my position as a visual artist who was becoming increasingly labelled as a refugee artist. A pattern was beginning to emerge - when there were events relating to the refugees and/or arts, I would be called upon. And as much as that meant more visibility, it was beginning to concern me what kind of visibility, under whose conditions and who is benefiting.

Looking around me, several funding streams have sprung up, that were in one way or another based on ethnicity and race - such as [decibel](#) an Arts Council England initiative which works to support and raise the profile of artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent in England (source: www.artscouncil.org.uk) and [Diversify Project](#) which was set up by the MA in 1998 to encourage minority-ethnic people to take up a career in museums and galleries (source: www.mla.gov.uk). An organisation such as [Refugees and the Arts](#) initiative has begun its work, using the term [refugee artist](#) with an apparent lack of self-consciousness: [RAI](#) aims to support refugee artists who wish to continue their professional development and contribute to the cultural wealth in the United Kingdom. (source: www.artsinitiative.org.uk)

An art world is incredibly competitive and complex, one needs to not only excel in one's work, but also weave a web of contacts. It is tough to rise above the noise and be heard. So, it can be especially difficult for an artist whose English is a second language, who has gone/is going through a trauma, and whose political status is in limbo adding to an overwhelming insecurity of financial survival.

Aligning oneself with one label or another ([refugee artist](#) , [culturally diverse](#)) may provide an artist with opportunities (funding and exhibitions) that may not be ordinarily available for a complex set of reasons (class, language). In her recent report [Boxed In](#), Sonya Dyer further explores the impact of class on accessibility for black and minority ethnic artists. Very few graduates from non-white backgrounds choose to study a 'creative arts' subject at university but this is because of class, not race. The majority of black people, like white working class people, cannot afford the typically low-paid work in the arts. (full report can be downloaded from: www.manifestoclub.com)

Access to funds creates opportunities and possibilities to make work, to take risks, to see and be seen. However, it can also further marginalise those artists by showcasing them only in those exhibitions and initiatives that highlight their ethnicity or political status, whilst keeping the mainstream at bay.

As Richard Hylton writes in his recent book *The Nature of the Beast: From ethnic arts to culturally diverse arts*, Black artists have been, if not in large, at least significant numbers, consistently accepting of what I would consider to be dubious forms of arts patronage. Participating in poorly conceived exhibitions and initiatives reflected their apparent complicity with a system that consciously or unconsciously, was marginalising the practices of the majority of these same Black artists, ([The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector, a study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006](#))

When it comes to Arts and Refugees, it would seem that funding bodies are recognising that the interest in this area of work, on the part of policy makers, funders, arts practitioners and the voluntary sector, has grown considerably. Arts Council England in partnership with the Baring Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Trust have recently commissioned a report into [Arts and Refugees in the UK- History, Impact and Future](#). What the report will set out to outline when it is published in Autumn 2007, is a coherent history of this field of work, since the mid 1980s; a summary of the research into the impact of the work on its intended beneficiaries, on arts practitioners and on policy makers and funders and recommendations for the future development of this work.

I was intrigued to hear that such report was being commissioned and wonder what its implications will be for arts practitioners? Judging by the past behaviour of funding bodies to separate in order to empower, I need to be forgiven for my cautiousness. I wonder if it will formalise labels such as refugee arts or refugee artist and further marginalise those artists that tick the box, in order to simply get on and make art.

Organising Leave to Remain exhibition has been an empowering experience and part of its power derived from the fact that it was self-organised and self-initiated with the first showing funded mostly through a [fundraising walk](#). It was a necessary rite of passage, allowing me to move on and question the efficacy of such activity. I remain passionate about my interest in the way politics on the grand scale influences our personal lives, focusing on those questions through my practice as a visual artist. However, I also remain aware of the precarious balance between [art and politics](#), and between policies that control the arts from those that allow it to flourish.

Margareta Kern, 2007

www.margaretakern.com

Comments

1) Our country has reaped the benefit of immigrant artists and intellectuals, from medieval cathedral builders, through Dutch painters and German composers to the huge influx of Mittel European intellectuals in the last century.

One of the latter not only enhanced the quality of our political thinking but even produced TWO members of the present Government. With such evidence of benefit under their noses it is sad to see the fear of the foreigner so evident in the new labour mix.

2) Kern seems not to be aware of the context within which R&AI has been working in the last few years, although trying to look through it in this article as with the knowledge of the person within:

"An organisation such as Refugees and the Arts initiative has begun its work, using the term refugee artist with an apparent lack of self-consciousness: RAI aims to support refugee artists who wish to continue their professional development and contribute to the cultural wealth in the United Kingdom. " Did she realise that the quote is part of the documentation required for submission to Charity Commission and alike and see plethora of audio and visual material challenging the definitions associated with "refugee artists" on the same website? Taking the quote out of the context of the whole purpose of the organisation is just weakening it and we, artists who are exiled, do not have many other companies to rely on. This article is not only unproductive for artist from a refugee background, but sidesteps the point by promoting other organisations and documents produced by the government bodies which bring us right back to the author's identity as "a

refugee artist". Is she writing out of the context because she is not in it?

3) It is indeed a dilemma. As someone who studied art, and who now works supporting young asylum seekers and refugees, I can see that it is important to recognise both the artists' background as well as their ability as an artist in their own right. It is offensive for it to be implied that an artist, who also happens to be a refugee, cannot compete with all artists on the UK scene today. As far as integration goes, it certainly would seem a more positive move for initiatives to promote artists who are refugees to be involved in the wider art scene as an equal. This way their work will reach an audience not only intending to see artwork dealing with certain issues, but bring those issues to a forum for everyone interested in art to see, helping to promote a wider understanding of today's Britain. I feel that art is a fantastic vehicle for sharing and communicating, particularly in a field where such ignorance prevails.

As far as the art scene itself, surely a variety of cultures and backgrounds would produce different styles and approaches to the artwork which would only enrich and refresh it as a whole.

At the same time I understand the tendency for financial and other support to be packaged up in boxes specifically aimed at certain groups, and although the intention of this seems good, often it only tends to marginalise when the opposite is what is really required. A lot of the young people I work with now shy away from activities planned for asylum seekers and refugees as they just want to be seen as anyone else who lives in Glasgow (where the Project is based), and be able to interact with all sorts of people.

While funding opportunities are available for asylum seekers and refugees, surely these must be taken if for no other reason than to make the life of any struggling artist less difficult. It seems there was definitely a place for refugee art initiatives when no other opportunities were available and I think it is important not to take away from a lot of hard and valuable work done along these lines. However, I hope that the label of refugee artist begins to disappear as the art and artist gets recognised for the quality of the work and not to fit in with a government scheme or to pitch the art at a politically correct angle. As time and attitudes move on it would certainly be a more real reflection of today's Britain to integrate all artists and cultures into the art scene as a whole, rather than having pockets of separate subjects to be addressed. I look forward to seeing how this is realised.

4) I have been working in the field of asylum, immigration and human rights for 9 years now. I have seen first hand, the trauma, grief and sheer desperation of the refugees in their plight for acceptance in the UK and protection from persecution from their own countries. The public perception of refugees can only be improved if they are better informed. The fusion of visual arts and cultural/ethnicity provides the ideal platform to change the mindset thus promoting greater understanding and encouraging cohesion within the mainstream and refugee communities who are currently ostracised as a result of the constant propaganda by the government to justify increasing draconian laws.

5) I pity the poor refugee, who seeks compassion here,
Entrapped by jealous xenophobes, there's no escape from fear.
Assailed by headline bigotry a scapegoat for all spites,
As institutional fascists violate her human rights.

I pity the poor refugee, who flees to these cold shores
From persecution to destitution and cruel hard right laws.
Here tabloid politicians take mean spirited command:
The helpless torture victim jailed in my alien heartless homeland
