

# The Art of Social Change



## The Arts of Social Change: **MIGRATION**

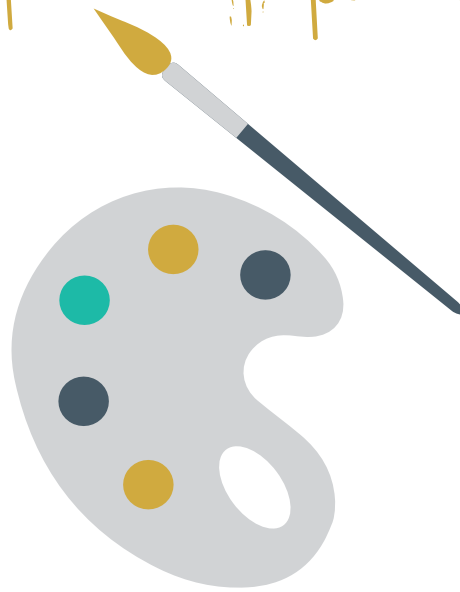


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The gentle countryside of rural Devon seems far from the controversy of migration and forced displacement. Not so, says local activist, Jill Lewis, a participant at the Migration Learning Exchange (MLE), held in the gracious surroundings of historic Dartington Hall in October 2016. The two-and-a-half day event brought together artists, activists, a couple of courageous funders and a wealth of experience. Insights were shared; ideas tested and participants modelled their perceptions in coloured paper, pipe-cleaners and figurines. Organised by Counterpoints Arts, the gathering focused on approaches to engage with refugee and migrant experiences through arts and cultural programmes. The event was co-produced in collaboration with Dartington Hall Trust, which itself has a long-standing record of public programming and progressive education in the field of 'arts and social change'.

# ACTIVISM



## WHEN ART MEETS ACTIVISM

Almir Koldzic, Co-Founder of Counterpoints Arts, welcomed the participants and set the agenda as *'the beginning of conversations'* and a chance to *'meet people doing similar work in the field but coming from different angles'*. His Counterpoints Arts partner, Áine Ní Bhriain, welcomed artists as activists, as well as artists working with activists. Referring to the politics of the year, she argued the need to galvanize voices, with arts not an elixir in themselves, but a means of interrogating public narrative. Voices are important – particularly in terms of knowing *'what forces are sustaining them? What forces can change them?'*. The voices heard at Dartington were multi-national in accent and probing in nature.

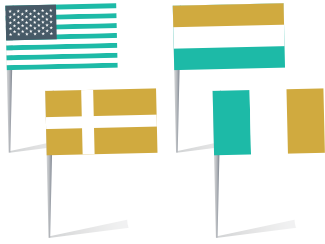
The question of when, and where, art meets activism was addressed in a series of short *'provocations'*. Maurice Wren, (Refugee Council) argued that there were no refugee specific solutions, but that solidarity had to be built across issues, such as homelessness and poverty. He welcomed the activism within local communities that welcomed refugees, as well as increasingly shown by town and city authorities. This stands in marked contrast to those that advocate a *'fortress UK'* mentality. Cilla Baynes, (Community Arts, North West) agreed, suggesting that people needed to be supported when they consciously reject racism.

Spinning the discussion into the global context, Gilane Tawadros, (Stuart Hall Foundation) threw out the challenge of re-thinking difference in the context of globalization. *'What, she asked 'does national sovereignty mean in a globalized world? It is too easy to single out young, white men as racists?'* There is a need for profound consideration of democracy, difference and the narrative of assimilation and multi-culturalism. Freelance journalist, Ismail Einashe, shared his personal experience of the journey of a refugee. He reflected that *'lines of transmission'* of the knowledge garnered by previous refugees were important, as was the fact that *'integration'* cannot ignore human connections with diaspora communities.

How arts can support local dialogue was demonstrated by the stories of *'The Glasgow Girls'*, shared by Amal Azzudin (Glasgow Girls) and Alketa Xhafa Mripa (*'Thinking of You'*) as refugees themselves who engaged in public mobilization.



*‘What’, she asked ‘does national sovereignty mean in a globalized world?’*



## DRAWING ON INTERNATIONAL VOICES

Contributions from Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and the USA spiced the conversation. Niels Righolt, (Danish Centre for Arts and Interculture) referred to the need for ‘*caravan conversations*’, but also recognized the importance of ‘*giving stories back to the people who gave us the stories*’. Work with migrant and refugee communities should not be one-off in nature, but on-going. Niels praised the programming of the national museum in Malmo, which adopts a conscious outreach approach. Speaking for the European Cultural Foundation, Lore Gablier, shared an initiative planned for May 2017 – ‘We are Occupying the Border’. An Irish perspective was offered by Helen Casey (Fire Station Arts Studio) and Amel Yacef (European Network against Racism), with a specific emphasis on working with young people.



While Ellen Schneider (Active Voice Lab, US) explained how the media and film can be leveraged to put human faces on complex policy issues, poetry and music attracted local Totnes residents into timbered Great Hall at Dartington. Syrian kanun playing complemented the poetry of Kayo Chingonyi and local woman, Alice Oswald.





## GETTING CREATIVE

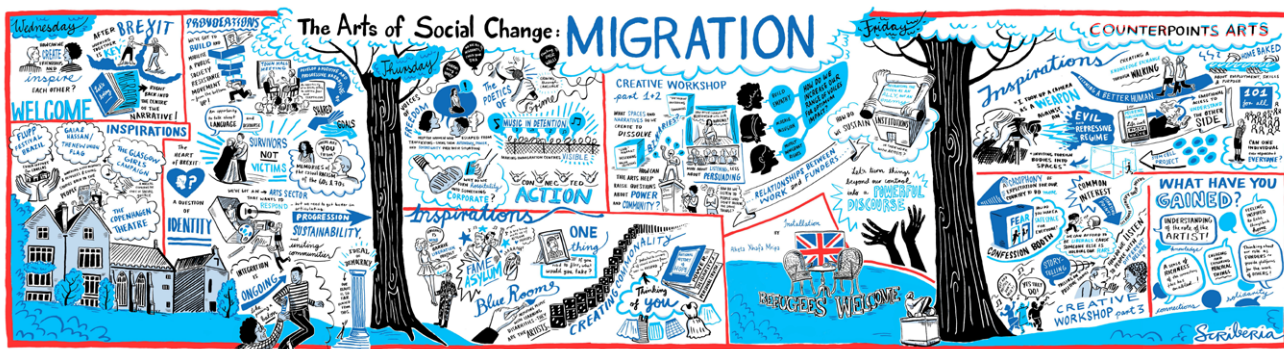
True to its belief that doing is the order of the day, participants were challenged to model their priorities around a number of shared themes. One theme that was persistent was that of binaries: the poor and the rich; the deserving and the undeserving; us and them. Another discussion refresher were questions around how can the arts create space for voice? How can space be generated for encounters and challenges? What spaces and narratives are required to create or dissolve binaries? How do we talk, and listen, to people who take different positions on refugees and migration? How do we change the relationship with audiences?

An insightful comment by one participant suggested *'I can be as liberal as I am because somebody else is carrying my risk'*. The necessity of crafting inclusive approaches was recognized in the suggestion that the idea of fragmentation should replace that of binaries, with an acknowledgement that all voices *'are as important a part of the audience as is the migrant community itself'*.

Creativity can emerge in many forms. Richard Dedomenici explained how when he became disillusioned with mass protests, he took to balloons to underline his message. 'Free Balloons' are over printed with appropriate messages and distributed. *'It is hard to confiscate message-carrying balloons from a child in a shopping centre'*, he explained. A new take on the British flag was shared by Gil Mualem Doron through his 'New Union Jack' initiative. Fashioned from a pastiche of all the traditional fabrics of countries in the British Empire, Gil created a talking point to encourage discussion of immigration in a non-confrontationalist manner. Alketa Xhafa-Mpira's installation in a container trailer, to re-imagine the perilous journey of many refugees, also caught the imagination. By necessity, more physically constrained, the programme designed by Music in Detention served to make audible young people detained in UK centres through the medium of song. The power of laughter also had its place – even in Calais, where 'Borderline' clowning project provided respite.



With Counterpoints Arts arranging for Julia Scheele (Scriberia) to record the full proceedings in cartoon form ([Visual Minutes – http://counterpointsarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/16.10\\_COUNTERPOINTS\\_5th-OCT.pdf](http://counterpointsarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/16.10_COUNTERPOINTS_5th-OCT.pdf)) creativity remained the order of the two-and-a-half days.



## TAKE AWAYS

Drawing the threads together, conference facilitators, Tim Finch and Denise Charlton, identified some pressing issues –

- ▶ The need for a clear consensus about the urgency of working in a connected and strategic way across organizations, siloes, sectors and regions.
- ▶ The need to bridge arts and culture work with advocacy and policy in order to find ways to both sustain current work and to create a more unified narrative.
- ▶ The need for arts gatekeepers to take a bolder approach to arts commissioning and supporting artists and cultural activists working in a variety of locations.



There was underpinning agreement about the importance of providing social movements with stories and strategies that can move people and impact on public narrative. Storytellers can curate memories but can also reach beyond the choir of activists that are already committed. It was acknowledged that people's existing assumptions (often unstated) act as narrative filters. Arts and stories have a way of disrupting the settled frames to create new spaces.

[www.counterpointsarts.org.uk](http://www.counterpointsarts.org.uk)





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