

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

*'This, then, is all. It's not enough, I know.
At least I'm still alive, as you may see.
I'm like the man who took a brick to show
How beautiful his house used once to be.'
Brecht (trans. John Willets)*

Two sample headlines from the front pages of the Daily Express during the last few days: 'ASYLUM: WE ARE BEING INVADED', and 'REFUGEES: FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES'. I didn't read any further, just caught a glimpse when picking up my Guardian, whilst passing early morning pleasantries with Mohammed who runs my local garage. They echoed through breakfast, as I listened to John Humphries and various politicians talk as if the country were under siege by people we must keep out at any financial or human costs, rather than struggling to cope with the aftershock of conflict and oppression. Literally not a day has gone by whilst I have been writing this piece when the 'problem' of asylum has not been on the news.

It's clear that some people are engaged in a war. Far from creating art in a protected cloister at Durham Cathedral, Geoff Broadway has found himself reinventing the residency as something if not on the front line, then at least somewhere in the war zone, with himself a kind of the war artist or reporter gathering and manipulating stories and images. Stemming from his discovery of a 12th Century Knocker which could be used to request sanctuary for up to 40 days, (no one was refused, all had to give up their own clothes and stay within rooms at the Cathedral) he has looked outwards from the Durham Peninsula at one of the most pressing changes in local life since the closure of the pits: the dispersal to the North East of a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees from some of the many troubled parts of the world: Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Bosnia, Croatia. The week after an Iraqi Kurd had been murdered in Glasgow, and after reading those headlines, listening to a rough cut of the voices heard in this exhibition was a sobering, humbling and uncomfortable experience. I suspect it will be likewise for those visiting this exhibition.

'The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.... In what sense is the statement always collective even when it seems to be emitted by a solitary singularity like that of the artist?' Deleuze & Guatarri

The voices you hear are 'deterritorialized' in a much more literal sense than that used by Deleuze & Guatarri. These are people whose land has been taken from them, and who are expressing themselves in a foreign tongue. Their comments thus become fascinatingly paradoxical: at once naïve in their expression, and thus 'sincere', the haltingness of the English adding extra layers of poignancy (perhaps unwanted layers), but also artificial and constructed in a way mother-tongue testimony might not be. Although the individuals here speak passionately, bitterness is only apparent in one or two: those whose English is most impressive. It is as if the control of language allows for this expression, this emotion; as if a more rudimentary facility somehow keeps those negative emotions in check, or merely from being expressed – or heard. Of course, much of the testimony betrays the wordless fear and loss that night and silence bring. Broadway's installation, poised on the cusp of dark and light, silence and confession or testimony, is an eloquent evocation of the hope and despair implicit in the double-edged concept of refuge.

The installation also freezes patterns of movement – of the people whose voices we hear, but also of the water, clouds and sky they inhabit. It gives the illusion of a still point on a journey, the darkness and stillness providing almost a mythical quality. The night by a pool thinking of what has been left and what might await. It is a moment of both optimism and fear, the duality within the flight of the refugee. (Just as the truly unlucky people don't reach a place of refuge, the truly despairing maybe don't even try. The Afghanis feared by Eurotunnel and the Government are both desperate and optimistic.) The title of the piece makes clear the reference to journeys. Read in one light it holds out an appearance of choice – almost an ironic echo of Microsoft's slogan 'Where do you want to go today' (capturing globalisation's

neat paradox perfectly, the surface freedom of choice in a world of plenty, the hidden monopoly and enforced purchases from the company shop). In another light there is the edge of trapped despair. (Interestingly, the viewer is very controlled in *where do I go from here?* – compelled to enter the work in a certain way, not given any freedom over what is heard or seen, in contrast to earlier, interactive work which the viewer could 'steer').

The title is the question the asylum seeker may ask before leaving their home, and the one they may ask themselves – or indeed the authorities - in the temporary homes assigned to them in this country. It is a question which is impossible to answer, given the small amount of power and autonomy of the refugee. (Most viewers will give the same answer, smugly or guiltily, or both: home.) Those earlier 'asylum seekers' who sought security at Durham Cathedral exchanged danger or persecution for confinement, one echoed by Broadway's piece. Contemporary immigrant asylum seekers suffer a similar dilemma, dispersed according to government policy to precisely the places in Britain where they are often least able to settle – where they experience the kind of racist abuse described in the piece, inflamed by tabloid prejudice and politicians' siege mentality and careless language. (The exhibition opens in Sunderland, where the British National Party received worrying levels of support in the recent General Election, and where the BNP recently organised a march to protest against asylum seekers.)

*'Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.'*
W.H. Auden 'Refugee Blues'

Broadway has a fascination with the base elements of life: salt, earth, sand, sky. *Where do I go from here?* consists of three pools of water, with the recorded voices of asylum seekers now living in the North East played through a number of small speakers, each with a light attached to it, reflected in the water, which is edged with slate native to the North East. Upon this water plays a repeated film consisting of resonant images of those elements as found in the North East – the hard edged spring sky, the beach at South Shields with its own fugitive pleasure seekers passing by, the cold cold sea.

John Berger has spoken of the sky in the photographs of Sebastian Salgado, an artist whom Broadway admires enormously. Berger describes how its beauty is not simply a compositional element, but a constant reminder of the last resort of the poor, the migrants Salgado portrays. The sky, the heavens, will always accept the pleas, the appeals, the sleep, dreams and nightmares – though whether they reply is another question. *Where do I go from here?* unites sky and earth, sand and water in a search for some court of appeal which will hear the truth from the refugees Broadway has met. The piece is very much concerned with elementals, including the pain described, making the highly wrought nature of his work, which is made possible only by the advanced technology of the western world, almost self-contradictory.

*'But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of
infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to
what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance.'* Zadie Smith

Broadway says he is 'only political with a small p', though this is clearly not true in any sense than it is always true for an artist: this is work dealing with one of the most controversial and politicised issues in Britain today. (It is simplistic to think asylum is *simply* a matter of compassion or otherwise. It is ruled by political and economic priorities. Why else would Canada accept, for instance, 82 % of applicants from Sri Lanka as refugees according to UN definitions, whilst Britain considers only 0.2% of applicants from Sri Lanka eligible.) Perhaps this is what he means by that: this is not a sloganeering work. There may be pity here, but it is within the viewer not the work. (Wilfred Owen's 'The Poetry is in the pity' applies but only so far.) This is not simplistic oppositional art, it has a belief in order and beauty, and in honesty in language. The work lets people speak through themselves in clarity and some atmosphere of tranquillity. Visitors to the installation must guess at the long hours of conversation and trust building involved in achieving the materials for this work. Like Owen, Broadway's work breaks

through the clichés of representation in order to freshen perceptions dulled by degraded language and imagery. It also seeks to preserve unofficial truths. For all the acres of newsprint, and the hours of tv and radio devoted to asylum, the stories of refugees – the very heart of each person’s journey - are seldom heard.

But if the refugees are preserved, what almost disappears in this work is the artist himself. However, although concerned with the stories of others, the work has a number of other resonances. Firstly, there are echoes of Broadway’s previous pieces – *The Salt Passages*, which looked at contemporary voices from Teesside, exploring the virtual reality of multimedia montage, and *The Glass*, where his interest in global economics and representation of individuals and cultures within them came into sharp focus. There are also, however, echoes of Broadway’s own situation as an exile. He is currently without firm home base, and has over the last several years been resident in Derby, Middlesbrough, New Zealand and Durham, carrying out his practice in a variety of artist residency situations. *Where do I go to from here?* takes on another layer as a title when applied to the artist about to leave the Cathedral residency. This may be a second level reason why Broadway was attracted to the themes of exile and refuge. It is certainly the case that on his return to Britain in 2000, after a year in New Zealand he was struck by the rise in intolerance towards asylum seekers, the prominence of asylum as an issue, and the increased numbers of refugees in the North East. It was as if time had been compressed as in his installation and the changes and developing fault lines could be seen with new clarity. In a way this work attempts to reproduce some of that sensation for the viewer.

*‘You are impertinent, they said to me.
I’m not impertinent, I said; I’m lost.’
Brecht ‘Emigrant’s Lament’*

Broadway is uneasy with the work being tagged as ‘oppositional’, although the longer I delayed writing this piece the political significance of a work dealing with this subject, containing this material, in the North East of England in Autumn 2001, has become greater and more urgently needed. He is concerned with composition and making and manipulating, and does not attempt to hide it. This *is* a highly wrought piece of work, despite the rawness of the tales which can be heard. It is concerned with the creation of beauty, with, therefore an aesthetic of pleasure and sensuality rather than a simplistically mimetic one of dislocation and anguish. This seeming contradiction bothers Broadway, makes him uneasy about exploiting people who are now his friends, but he is ultimately not prepared, as an artist, to give up striving for harmony within the experiences shared with him. He does this by putting aside straight realism or documentary for something more exploratory, juxtaposing words and images within a contemplative setting which demands both physical and emotional commitment from the audience.

Much of our reaction to the ‘problem’ of asylum seekers stems from an ignorance which this work may do a little to combat. Its chances of doing that rest, I think, not on the testimony of the voices you will hear, affecting as that is, but on your willingness to kneel or crouch low enough to let stories be whispered into your ear in the dark, and to look at the sea and the sand and the sky projected upon the water, and your ability to imagine that this is both a mirror (refocus: you can see yourself, and the night sky of exile behind you) and a wishing well. This contemplation is your only place of refuge, of appeal. This is not a sensationalist work, or a liberal work appealing for special treatment, it is essentially a tool of compassion, of *feeling with*, made *for* feeling with. This is the sense in which Broadway’s nervousness about his own political agenda is resolved, and what makes this a truly suitable work to emerge from a residency at Durham Cathedral. If the World Heritage Site of which the Cathedral is the centre means anything it must surely include a link back to the traditions of shelter, succour and compassion which Broadway identified in the Cathedral’s Sanctuary Knecker. The North East must, whether it relishes the prospect or not, find ways in which to continue this tradition in the 21st century, rather than similarly ancient strains of ignorant intolerance.

Mark Robinson
2001.

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