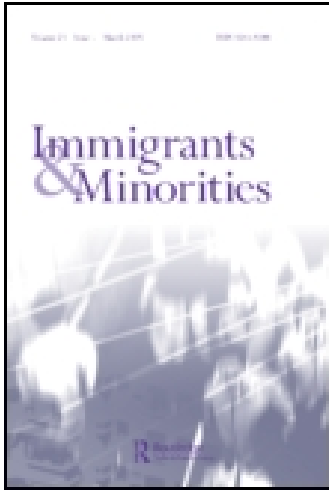


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### From 'Asylum-Seeker' to 'British Artist': How Refugee Artists are Redefining British Art

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# From 'Asylum-Seeker' to 'British Artist': How Refugee Artists are Redefining British Art

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*This essay takes a case-study approach to examine how culture may be transferred from immigrant cultures to a so-called host culture. Considering the work of three visual artists who came to the UK as refugees but who are now considered 'British artists', it examines the effect this curatorial definition may have on gallery viewers. The author proposes that looking at work that previously might have been viewed as 'exotic' or 'foreign' but that is now classed as British forces viewers to reassess and renegotiate their understanding of the nature of 'Britishness' and indeed of place-Britain. Drawing on the ideas of Edouard Glissant and also of contemporary geographers about the nature of place, the study proposes that place-Britain, like all places, is in a constant and never ending state of production. The work of artists from refugee populations, shown now as 'British art', becomes a dynamic part of this process and a means by which new elements are transferred and added to an ever-changing British cultural fabric*

**Keywords:** artists; British art; cultural diversity; cultural transfer; Glissant; place; refugees

My contribution at the end of this 'history book' brings us to the contemporary moment. As such, it offers an opportunity to reflect upon and to examine certain processes of cultural transfer as they are at work: to look at and to attempt to 'unpick' these processes while they are actually happening. With a background in visual culture and a particular interest in the work of professional artists who have come to the UK as refugees or asylum-seekers, I have chosen examples related to artists and to works of

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art. More specifically, I have been watching with particular interest the changing way that the work of artists from refugee populations has been curated (and hence presented to the public's gaze and viewed) during this first decade of the twenty-first century in the UK. Curatorial practice is a subtly powerful instrument that helps shape viewers' responses both to the work they are looking at and to the broader culture to which artworks and exhibitions belong. So when viewers go to exhibitions of 'British art' they are offered an opportunity to reflect not only upon the artwork in front of them but the cultural frame in which it is presented – one which, in this case, prioritises the Britishness of the art. Works that might previously have been shown in a different context – one that drew attention to their 'exotic' or 'foreign' qualities perhaps, very often along with the specific ethnicity of the artist – encourage a reconsideration of the nature of Britishness when they are shown as 'British art'. Viewers may find themselves reflecting upon and even re-negotiating their understandings of place-Britain in the process. It is on these issues that I focus in this study as I examine possible ways that artists from refugee populations may, consciously or more probably unwittingly, affect the transfer of elements of the cultures from which they have come into the broader, so-called host culture in which they now find themselves.

### **'Cultural Difference' and British Art**

Given that my specific focus for this task takes the example of artists from refugee populations currently living in the UK, a brief note on my use and understanding of the term 'refugee' is perhaps in order at this juncture. This is an extremely contested term, with the supposedly unambiguous – and oft-quoted – United Nations statement of 1951 being seen as increasingly anachronistic and inappropriate in the context of the twenty-first century. It is also apparent that the international law that this and subsequent United Nations (UN) definitions create is becoming ever more problematic in its implementation.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, UN statutes support the case of refugees with case law from the European Court strengthening their position still further, making it illegal to repatriate someone to a country where their suffering may be deemed 'inhuman', even if this suffering comes from apparently natural causes such as famine rather than political persecution. Katherina Röhl describes these individuals as 'basic needs refugees'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, while, for example, the term 'environmental refugees' is starting to achieve recognition (one thinks of the Tuvalu islanders, who will be forced by rising sea level to leave their homes by the mid-twenty-first century with no physical nation to return

to), they as yet still lack legal status as refugees. In short, as Mike Mecham argues, even if laws exist that support these individuals in terms of their human rights, the reality is that these laws remain marginal to the lives of most refugees and do very little to ease their plight.<sup>3</sup> Resources are far more likely to be spent sequestering and deporting refugees than on their support. £72 million was spent sequestering and deporting people in the UK in the year 2004 alone. Figures for the Netherlands show that in 2004 it cost the Dutch Exchequer €120.7 million to deport 14,590 individuals, at an average cost of over €8,200 each, and there is little to suggest that the process in the UK was any less costly. In comparison, in 2002, the UNHCR spent \$1 billion caring for 20 million displaced people, averaging \$50 per person.<sup>4</sup> The Jesuit Refugee Service documented 216 dedicated incarceration centres holding approximately 100,000 refugees without charge in Europe in 2004.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of these disturbing statistics, I have not felt disposed as an academic researcher to probe individuals about their precise political status. Instead, I have taken a loose definition that relies on the subjective view of the individuals concerned: one in which they let it be known that they have felt forced to leave the countries of their birth to secure the safety of their and their families' lives elsewhere, with the UK being the 'elsewhere' in this instance. I am in agreement and sympathy with Amnesty International's statement that 'there are no voluntary refugees'.<sup>6</sup>

For most of the 'noughties' I gathered the personal stories of artists from such populations and looked, primarily, at their work. I have been trying to document how this work has been received and accommodated (or not) by the various infrastructures that make up what we may loosely call 'the British art world'. These include funders, curators, galleries, critics, and ultimately viewers. Since I started looking at these artists who have come to the UK as refugees and their large and diverse body of work in the early 2000s, some significant changes have occurred. Until very recently, New Labour emphasis on policies of 'social inclusion' has been translated in the art world under the banner of 'cultural diversity'. Arts Council funding, the lifeblood of many, if not most artists in the UK, has prioritised those who can identify themselves in a way that diverges from what has been considered the dominant, hegemonic majority: white, heterosexual British. Identifying specific ethnicities, especially if they fall within Arts Council definitions of 'black and Asian',<sup>7</sup> have received particularly favourable responses in the way of institutional support and grants. An undeniably admirable effort to afford public visibility to hitherto under-represented groups of individuals, this policy has also had the result of forcing artists into ever-multiplying pigeonholes where they are identified as much by

their so-called ethnicity as by their art. This process has also met the Government remit of 'social inclusion' through the apparent identification of 'new audiences' that are its consequence: if the artist or artists come from a particular minority sub-group, so too, it is assumed might her, his or their viewing audiences. The widening and expansion of audiences who now visit art exhibitions has been seen as something to encourage by means of funding incentives: small surprise then that many artists and curators alike have sought to promote themselves on the bandwagon of this 'cultural diversity' ticket by identifying their differences both from the host culture and from other equally fragmenting groups. (Others, however, have actively refused to have anything to do with a policy seen as smacking of ghettoisation.) So while artists want to be known as artists pure and simple, in practice their experiences often mirror that of the distinguished Sudanese artist Mohamed Omer Bushara. Bushara sought safety with his family in the UK in 1999 and, over time, has found his work shown in exhibitions of 'Black art', 'African art', 'Arab art', 'Middle Eastern art' and 'asylum art'.<sup>8</sup>

These policies have been interesting to observers of British visual culture but they are also interesting from a broader perspective of British social history. A model of society that prioritises cultural diversity emphasises the differences between the different groups that are identified as forming its constituent parts, reifying thereby the boundaries that supposedly separate them. This model (successor to the parallel, but now outdated model of multiculturalism) has grown from the identity politics of the 1980s, described by cultural theorist Ien Ang as an era when "who you are" – in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or race – became an increasingly prominent pretext and motive for political association and cultural self-assertion.<sup>9</sup> However, observers from diverse disciplines, including Ang, quickly pointed to the absurdity of the belief that it might be possible to define with any certainty where particular peoples begin and end. The philosopher Wolfgang Iser, in his plea for 'transculturality' as a way of conceiving contemporary cultures, for example, refers to 'the insinuation of cultural homogeneity which spread through the nineteenth century and which today still bewitches many among us'.<sup>10</sup> Sociologist and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek argues that respecting the Other's specificity, whether under the guise of multiculturalism or cultural diversity, is the very form of asserting one's own superiority. In such an unequal power relationship, it is only those in the privileged universal 'centre' who are able to appreciate, depreciate (and tolerate or not tolerate) other more particular cultures. This attitude, he asserts, becomes a disavowed, self-referential form of racism.<sup>11</sup> Ien Ang argues forcefully that drawing lines around people is 'a form of discursive reductionism'.<sup>12</sup>

British artist/curator Judith Stewart refers to the climate of cultural diversity in the arts as encouraging a new colonialism that has 'sallied forth unchecked, bring[ing] home new Others with their new Differences'.<sup>13</sup> London-based artist and writer Rasheed Araeen, who came to Britain from Pakistan in 1964, has written eloquently and prolifically on the effect of imposing the descriptor of cultural diversity on foreign-born artists in the UK. This means, he maintains, that they are obliged to 'always carry their ID cards and reflect their cultural identity and origins' in their work.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the criteria used to judge their work become different from that used to judge the work of artists in the mainstream, from which they are automatically excluded. Encouraged by the dominant institutions to believe they can only work within their own cultural tradition, these artists are placed within a colonial discourse that, he argues, presumes them not to possess an autonomous status outside the constraints of their cultural origins. As such, they are 'precluded from the history of modernism [and] denied agency but marketed in a safe and palatable manner that references their authentic cultural roots'.<sup>15</sup> No wonder that Ien Ang concludes that 'while the rhetoric of identity politics generally emphasizes the liberating force of embracing a collective identity, especially if that identity was previously repressed or oppressed, that very identity is also the name of a potential prison-house'.<sup>16</sup>

However, there have been some interesting recent changes afoot as far as 'British art' is concerned. A mosaic-like vision of culturally diverse (but still, or rather by definition, minority) artists has been giving way to something more exciting: an expanded and more generous view of Britishness. In major exhibitions of 'British art' such as the Hayward Gallery Touring Exhibition, *British Art Show 6* of 2005 to 2006, for example, as well as the *Tate Triennial: New British Art* show of 2006, British art is now seen as something created by artists currently living and practising in Britain, irrespective of where they were born, of how long they have been in the UK, of how they arrived or of their so-called 'ethnicity'. Immigrant identities, whether recent or several generations ago,<sup>17</sup> are starting to be swept aside, in institutional terms, with the adoption of the more general term 'British' to describe them. Meanwhile of course, at a certain level, artists' own senses of their 'roots' and who they are – their personal and cultural attributes as well as their sense of their collective history – may well remain unchanged, however they may be institutionally defined. The life stories, experiences, narratives, dreams, aspirations and nightmares that they bring to their work make up what and who they are, just as they do for the rest of us. As a result, their work may well have unfamiliar references and even seem 'exotic' to British-born audiences.

How do viewers then reconcile these unfamiliar attributes, attributes that are often very 'foreign' to their eyes and sensibilities, with the label 'British' that is now attached to them? If this is 'British art', then Britishness must surely be changing.

My study takes this issue as its central theme. Taking the opportunity presented by new definitions of 'British art', my focus is on the cultural transfer that contemporary and recent refugees are making to Britain through their art and the way that this art is coming to be positioned by curators for viewers – not as 'foreign' or as 'exotic', but as 'British'. Given that the art-going public is no longer the rarefied elite that it once was, I would like to suggest that this is not an insignificant step of interest only to a handful of connoisseurs: visitors to the Tate Galleries, to take a prime example, number in their millions.<sup>18</sup> Curatorial decisions at major exhibitions are influential decisions and the choice of what is and is not going to be put on show may have repercussions beyond 'mere' considerations of artistic merit. Exhibitions of 'British art' are revealing as much for what they show about what is deemed to be British as for what they show is deemed to be art.

### The 'Irreducible Singularity'<sup>19</sup> of Breda Beban's *Walk of the Three Chairs*, 2003

Taking an example might help to articulate these ideas visually. Let us consider Breda Beban's *Walk of the Three Chairs*, shown at *British Art Show 6* (see Figure 1). Beban is an artist of national and international stature, now based in Britain. She was born in Novi Sad in the former Yugoslavia in 1952 and fled 'her imploding homeland' in 1991,<sup>20</sup> travelling through Italy to seek eventual refuge in the UK. A large body of her work catalogues her experiences of exile since that time. She trained as an artist in Zagreb, completing her undergraduate and postgraduate studies there, followed by a further period of study in Berlin. She exhibits primarily in the UK (including at the Tate) but she has also shown work in, amongst other places, Venice, at major galleries in Germany and in the USA, as well as in the new countries formed from the splintering of the country of her birth. She continues to return to her former homeland for material and inspiration for her work.<sup>21</sup>

In *Walk of the Three Chairs*, Beban floats down a wide river in a barge accompanied by a gypsy folk band. At a certain point, one of the members of the band starts to sing to her and tentatively at first, she joins in. Gradually she gains confidence and they sing together. While she is doing so, she walks along three chairs, manoeuvred for her by members of the band.





**Figure 1** Breda Beban, *Walk of the Three Chairs* (stills), 2003.



There is clearly a cultural specificity – an opacity even for the British-born and English-speaking viewer – to the content of this piece. The words of the music are inaccessible, the music is compelling but unfamiliar and the meaning of the ritual of walking along the chairs is a mystery. Beban's outstretched hands as she walks along the chairs suggest a Balkan dance – but then again she might just be keeping her balance. The scenery is not recognisably British though it seems to be 'European'. You have to read the accompanying notes to learn that the river is the Danube and that the words of the song are 'who doesn't know how to suffer doesn't know how to love' as well as that the elegant yet mysterious act of walking along three chairs is a re-enactment of a celebratory ritual her grandfather used to do when winning at cards. 'History and personal experience, loss and memory' are all brought together by Beban, as the curators of *British Art Show 6* observe, describing her work in the exhibition catalogue.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly Beban has indeed brought her personal memories as well as her language and elements of the broader culture of her birthplace together in this piece. But then what else would she bring? The British-born viewer may be able to draw a sense of both melancholy and what Beban herself has elsewhere called a particularly Balkan 'complex kind of joy' from *Walk of the Three Chairs*.<sup>23</sup> But joyful or sad, nonetheless much remains culturally unfathomable in the work, despite its quasi-narrative format set against real time and a real landscape. Does this cultural unfathomability detract from viewers' assessments of the quality of the work, as 'art'? On the contrary, I would argue. One of the characteristics of the avant-garde is its often unfathomable nature. In the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'the avant-garde [has] prepared us for watching and valuing what we don't know how to react to', inviting, as it does, audiences 'to confront the incomprehensible' as an integral part of the 'authentic [viewing] experience'.<sup>24</sup> The cultural opacity that is the subject of my discussion now offers an additional opportunity for this 'authentic experience' to occur.

As far as exhibiting work such as Beban's *Walk of the Three Chairs* as 'British art' is concerned, the implication is that the personal and cultural elements that she draws upon – the memories, histories, attachments, even the landscape – become part now of an expansive sense of Britishness. These elements sit alongside the equally variegated personal and collective elements of all other artists – native or migrant – currently practising in this country. But does this mean that they are assimilated or subsumed within a broader, stronger and pre-existing culture? If the potentially divisive and ghettoising mosaic-type model of 'cultural diversity' is rejected for the emphasis it lays on the differences between different cultural groups, is assimilation the only other possibility? The Martinique

philosopher and writer Edouard Glissant suggests otherwise and provides an interesting alternative with reference to the Caribbean that may be helpful in this instance. Glissant proposes the metaphor of a woven fabric as a device for conceptualising a place in which multiple cultures are not assimilated into some greater whole but rather co-exist.<sup>25</sup>

Glissant argues that the ‘opacity’ and ‘irreducible singularity’ of cultural difference are qualities to be accepted, not struggled with. Understanding, knowing what things ‘mean’, classifying, judging, labelling – for Glissant these are all part of a very Western mindset. This mindset privileges transparency as part of a post-Enlightenment project that ultimately seeks to reduce and to control whatever comes within its gaze or reach. It is an attitude that says, ‘I have to understand you in order to accept you’. He argues eloquently that on the contrary, opacity – accepting the difference, the ‘irreducible singularity’ of the Other – offers the key and the solution to thinking about this Other in non-reductive, non-judgemental and non-hierarchical ways. Glissant describes the weaving together of the different layers of opaque human experience and representation as creating a fabric. The strands of the fabric converge and co-exist. He suggests that it is on the texture of the fabric, rather than the nature of its components, that we should focus. Fabrics are created by the interrelationship of their different strands as and where they meet: taken metaphorically, a cultural fabric reflects the ‘poetics of relation’, to adopt his own phrase (and the title of one of his books). In her analysis of Edouard Glissant’s work, Isabel Hoving refers to ‘his very seductive imagination of the cross-cultural world as a rhizomatic network of relations, in which every relation is fluid, open, temporarily shaped by its relations to others, always in the process of transformation’. For Glissant, she observes, ‘every geographical place is a site where other places meet’.<sup>26</sup> Beban’s ultimately mysterious, yet visually and audibly compelling *Walk of the Three Chairs*, shown in the UK in an exhibition of ‘British art’ demonstrates to the viewer how place-Britain is somewhere that is similarly shot through with other places, with other histories and with other imaginations.<sup>27</sup>

### **The ‘Migratory Aesthetics’<sup>28</sup> of Margareta Kern**

Showing the work of foreign-born artists under a loose aegis of ‘British art’ suggests a spatial simultaneity that is at least partially shared (albeit unequally in terms of their power relations) by refugees and their ‘hosts’, between migrants and natives, non-Europeans and Europeans, as well as by increasing numbers of often stigmatised Europeans from former communist countries. For reasons about which I can only speculate (high

levels of secondary education?; large numbers arriving in the UK during early adulthood when war broke out in 1990?; lack of fluency in a new language encouraging them to claim an available tertiary education in a primarily visual field?), there appears to be a particularly large number of talented and accomplished young artists now living and practising in the UK who came, like Beban, from the former Yugoslavia.<sup>29</sup> Prominent amongst these is Margareta Kern, who fled to the UK from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 when she was 17. In many ways, Kern epitomises a spirit of exuberant migrancy, to use another somewhat contested term. Kern sought asylum in the UK, was granted leave to remain and obtained British citizenship in 2002. She has actively explored her displacement and new political and social status in this country in a number of her works. In 2003, she set up a loose collective of professional artists, all of whom had arrived as refugees in the UK, called 'Leave to Remain'. This was a brave and polemical project at a time when 'asylum-seeker' had become literally a term of abuse in the school playground and when the popular press was leading a series of moral panics about the country being swamped and flooded by waves of so-called 'illegal immigrants'.<sup>30</sup> Curating a successful exhibition of the same name that toured several London venues in 2003–04, Kern declared that her aim was 'to show the work of artists who were willing to knowingly frame their work within the bracket of "refugee art" precisely in order to raise. . . questions and to challenge that frame'.<sup>31</sup> Today there is barely a trace of accent marking her speech and signalling her 'difference' from someone born in the city. An enthusiastic Londoner, she is aware that the timing of her departure from Bajna Luka was traumatic but that it was also a 'coming of age' moment when she was ready and excited to be leaving home.<sup>32</sup>

*Standard Class Opinions* (2003) was Kern's own piece shown in the *Leave to Remain* exhibition (Figure 2). This is an installation of portrait snapshots taken on random train journeys around England of fellow passengers who were then invited to offer a 'one-line' opinion on what they felt about the presence of asylum-seekers in the UK (Figures 3 and 4). As it transpired, I fell into the role of being Kern's assistant for this piece, as the initial idea came to her when we were on the train together travelling from Bristol to London and I accompanied her on the other train journeys that were necessary to obtain the raw material (photographs and quotes) she used in the piece. Together, we interviewed nearly a hundred people on trains travelling across England and it was certainly salutary to witness the transformation of familiar crowded train compartments into a multiplicity of individual, incommensurate experiences. The diversity of views in any one carriage was startling.

That aside, it was also fascinating to observe the cheerful goodwill of our fellow travellers, even when sharing with us their most xenophobic



**Figure 2** Margareta Kern, *Standard Class Opinions*, 2003, as shown at *Para Sites* exhibition, Bridport, 2004. Photograph: author.

attitudes. Kern introduced herself as an artist, inviting people to take part in this particular upcoming project and those who agreed to participate were both generous in sharing their views and happy to help her with her work. There appeared to be little recognition of the fact that they might put forward views that could offend us and certainly it did not seem to occur to anyone that either of us might be, or once have been, an asylum-seeker ourselves. While, as Liisa Malkki observes, the prevalence of particular types of media images about refugees and asylum-seekers means that most people have a strong idea of what they think a 'refugee' and 'asylum-seeker' looks like, clearly neither Kern nor I fitted into the stereotype of either.<sup>33</sup> Neither did we fit into the category of the 'stranger', one that is predicated on a common sense notion of not belonging, as we also must have seemed as much at home on the train as any of our fellow-passengers.<sup>34</sup> Since everyone we spoke to seemed to think we were one of 'them', an extraordinarily wide range of views were offered to us, ranging from the wildly xenophobic to more measured and compassionate comments.

In the final piece itself, viewers are invited to match the quotations, printed on card and presented in a box nearby, to the person whose face they felt best matched the opinion, and to affix it, using velcro strips attached to the wall and the back of the quotations, beneath the picture. Unsurprisingly

(though perhaps counter-intuitively), appearances alone offer no indication as far as individuals' views on asylum-seekers are concerned.

A Londoner she may be now, but since 2005 Kern, like Beban, has been revisiting the country of her birth and drawing material for her practice from her experiences in a geographical, cultural and family environment that is both so familiar to her and yet uncannily changed from when she left. As Stuart Hall warns, leaving home is always perilous because 'migration is a one-way trip. There is no "home" to go back to'.<sup>35</sup> *Clothes for Death* (2007) is a recent project that has developed from these visits (Figures 5 and 6). This has been shown at the Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts gallery, Bath and has toured, together with another recent work (*Graduation Dresses* (2005), where she documents graduating high school pupils wearing the ballgowns they had commissioned her mother, a seamstress, to make for them) with the Margaret Harvey gallery. Starting in the home gallery in



**Figure 3** Margareta Kern. Images from *Standard Class Opinions*. Montage courtesy of the artist.

- Unless you're affected, you can't have an opinion and it doesn't affect me.
- I feel sorry for them really. They're just trying to get a decent life.
- What shall I say? The man who is an asylum seeker, you know, nobody leaves his land unless he has a problem
- We don't have strong views about anything. Good luck with your work
- We take too many compared to other countries. We're too nice. They're the ones that cause the problems. They take people's jobs
- Since their inception, immigration laws have had a racist bias. I think we have a responsibility to find out the facts before we make an opinion
- I think there's too many and England should stop letting them in. They should stay in their own countries even if they have got problems and sort it out with their leaders. They come over here and take all the jobs from the British people and abuse their generosity
- I think they should seek asylum in the first country they arrive in. We are a soft touch. We ought to emulate the French and look after ourselves first.
- I think there is a lot of unfair press about asylum seekers. I don't have a problem at all. We're so lucky, so fortunate, so privileged.
- I'm against economic migrants because if I arrived in their country what would they give me?
- Someone's got to work in McDonald's
- They shouldn't be here. There's too many of them
- I have varying views. If someone is in a vulnerable situation, then the rest of the world has a duty to help. But I have also had two mobile phones and a bag stolen by young Romanian children in London
- I am asylum seeker. We live not too bad. I and my wife have a flat. We get £60 a week. We have free studies. We have free doctor

**Figure 4** Margareta Kern, sample quotes from *Standard Class Opinions* (not necessarily matching images in previous figure).



St Albans, the show travelled to different venues throughout the UK, as well as in Croatia, during 2008–09. Both works, like Beban's, have a cultural specificity, but nonetheless Kern is described by her curators as a 'UK artist' with her work exhibited unproblematically now as 'British art'.<sup>36</sup>

In *Clothes for Death* she turns her attention to a Balkan tradition that is still prevalent amongst older women whereby they choose and set aside the clothes they wish to be buried in. Kern set out to explore this tradition, meeting with individuals who agreed to show her the clothes they had chosen in their homes. *Clothes for Death* documents these women, their homes and their clothes.

*Clothes for Death* is self-evidently a culturally specific piece of work. It documents a custom based in the Balkans that is, to my knowledge, absent in the UK – at least in any ritualised sense. Furthermore, the intimacy of the photographs, taken in the living rooms and bedrooms of these elderly women, implies a relationship and level of trust with the photographer/-artist that would have been hard to achieve if she were a foreigner and unfamiliar with either the language or the subtleties and sensitivities of local social mores. Conversely, I find myself wondering whether she would have been able to distance herself as a (dis)passionate observer if she had never left and if this custom (and the one she documents in *Graduation Dresses*) was not in some way strange to her. While the cultural specificity of these works imbues them with a resultant opacity for British-born viewers, they are, at the time of writing, being exhibited as 'British art'.



Figure 5 Margareta Kern, *Clothes for Death*, Liza (Donja Vrba, Croatia), 2006.





**Figure 6** Margareta Kern, *Clothes for Death*, Mara (Orubica, Croatia), 2007.

produced in Britain by a ‘UK artist’. Inevitably, this fact turns the focus away from any gap that might exist between Kern’s experiences and the viewers, encouraging instead reflection on a mutually shared and expansive sense of Britishness. In Glissant’s terminology, Kern’s personal family history as well as the collective history and cultural patterns of a broader community from her birthplace in the former Yugoslavia enter the fabric of place-Britain as part of the weave, providing it with another layer and thickening it in the process.

### **Geographers on Place**

Unsurprisingly, it is geographers who have tussled most with the thorny question of the nature of place. What is it that makes one place distinctive and different from another? How does one put one’s finger on these distinctions? What cultural qualities lie at their root and how stable or fluid are they? Geographers just a short generation ago were arguing that places have intrinsic meanings, *essences* even, that have made them what they are.<sup>37</sup> These essences were seen to be inextricably (and circularly) interlinked with human consciousness: it is the self-conscious awareness of what makes a particular place special by its occupants that transforms a location into a place. Human experience, identity, and the notion of

authentic existences have been all tethered to the idea of place; by extension you could even say that to be human is to be 'in place' and to be in place is to be 'at home'. As geographer Tim Cresswell observes, 'the concept of place is central to our understanding of how people turn nature into culture by making it their home'.<sup>38</sup>

Current geographical theory has moved (to adopt a metaphor of mobility) to adopt a more open-ended approach to place. Places are no longer understood as fixed entities located at different spots on the earth's surface, waiting to be 'discovered' by the traveller, be he or she tourist, refugee, immigrant or visitor, and remaining unchanged by his or her arrival, presence, or indeed departure. On the contrary, place is seen more interactively. Far from being the unchanging scene to which newcomers, as though on stage, append their props, their props – be they their material belongings or their experiences, dreams and aspirations – in a sense take place: they occur as events that reproduce place and produce it differently.<sup>39</sup>

These considerations are crucial to the premise underlying the current volume, namely that culture can be 'transferred' from one place to another through the act of human migration (although in a world of virtual reality and instant global intercommunication, obviously not exclusively through this route). This essay, which takes the examples from contemporary visual arts in Britain to suggest ways that this transfer quite literally 'takes place', relies heavily on current theoretical understandings of place. What other intellectual tools do we have to hand to conceptualise the changes that must inevitably be occurring when cultural elements from one place become introduced to, and interwoven or intertwined, as Glissant would have it, with another?

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau draws attention to the microprocesses at work in the everyday negotiation of place, signalling their potential as opportunities for resistance. For de Certeau, place provides certain structures within which practice has almost limitless possibilities. Just as speech acts are able to create new meaning within the disciplinary confines of language, so the way that space is used in everyday practice makes new meanings within the disciplinary confines of place. Places may be pre-structured in ways reflecting the unequal power relations of their occupants, but everyday practices offer the capacity for resistance: the structures themselves do not ultimately determine how people live their lives within them. Buildings or streets may remain physically little changed over generations, but that does not mean that these different generations use them in the same ways. Skateboarders, for example, may subvert the uses intended for car parks or open city spaces; particular immigrant groups may move in and out of specific areas. Places

are a ground for agency, says de Certeau; they are not operational without the practice within them. Place, in other words, as Cresswell observes, 'is made and remade on a daily basis'. Cresswell continues:

[Place] is constituted through reiterative social practice. Place provides a template for practice – an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialised ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways. Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a-priori label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice.<sup>40</sup>

Other commentators have encouraged an open, even extroverted view of place. The feminist geographer Doreen Massey also thinks about place in terms of process. It is a site of multiple identities and histories and gains its unique specificity through the particular interactions, she asserts, that occur within it.<sup>41</sup> Multi-disciplinary writer Arturo Escobar has presciently argued that 'places gather things, thoughts and memories in particular configurations'.<sup>42</sup> This is a far cry from seeing place as a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic: place in this sense becomes an event.<sup>43</sup> Assembled things, thoughts and memories do not fill an existing place, but enact and re-enact place. When migrants arrive on the scene, they do not merely append their props to a place that otherwise remains the same. On the contrary, their things, thoughts and memories, one might say, take place: place itself is reproduced and recreated in the process.

Places, in other words, are not fixed and finished products on the earth's surface waiting for travellers to find them. While places self-evidently do not move in themselves, they are created by and through the multiple acts of movement of their occupants. So while place itself is a sedentary word, it has no meaning without reference to terms of mobility such as the visitor, the migrant, the immigrant, the nomad, tourist, international business person, refugee and asylum-seeker. This paradoxical idea is central to the present study: place-Britain is never established, never 'finished'. It is practised and lived through the lives of its occupants: made and remade on a daily basis, as Cresswell observes. It is, in the words of geographer Doreen Massey, 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far'<sup>44</sup> and the stories of refugees are an integral part of the mix.

### Gonkar Gyatso and Renegotiating Identity

Artists' stories will always have a particular visibility given that the *raison d'être* of every artist is to communicate with an audience. Artists from refugee populations who have come to the UK over the last 30 years or so (and who I

am therefore considering rather loosely to be ‘contemporary’) are, of course, by no means restricted to individuals from the Balkan peninsula. I would imagine that there are artists amongst every national group present in the UK, including those who received their professional training in the countries of their birth, those who have studied art in British institutions and those who have combined first degrees in the former with higher degrees in the latter. Amongst this last group is Gonkar Gyatso, a Tibetan-born and now British artist living in London. Born in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1962, Gyatso studied Chinese brush painting for four years, from 1980 to 1984, in Beijing, followed by two years studying art at Lhasa University. He was a pioneer member of the Tibetan avant-garde, forming a group called the Sweet Tea House which used the idea of the land as a way of re-engaging with Tibetan identity and to create a specifically Tibetan contemporary art culture. In 1992 conditions in his home country forced him to move to Dharamasala, India, where the main Tibetan exiled community is today.<sup>45</sup> In 1997 he was awarded a scholarship to study as a guest student at Central St Martin’s College of Art and Design and he completed an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea School of Art and Design in 2000. The different training he has received under very different cultural and ideological conditions is reflected in his work.

Take *Trinity* (2004) for instance, a piece that brings together the techniques he learnt in Beijing with an approach characterised by its conceptual nature (Figures 7 and 8). The three figures in *Trinity* are composed of three different calligraphic scripts: English on the left, Tibetan for the central figure and Chinese on the right. The English words are taken from tabloid newspaper accounts about asylum-seekers, the Tibetan text is taken from a Buddhist prayer manuscript and the Chinese characters are words from Volume 2 of Mao’s selected works.<sup>46</sup> Visually difficult to distinguish, it comes as little surprise to discover that Gyatso has linked the language of his family and the people of his birthplace with the gentlest, and hence most sympathetic, text. The overall effect looks (to this Western eye at least) quietly contemplative (and the work’s title obviously draws on the spiritual doctrine of the Christian church) but the three fused identities and the harshness of the written words in two of the three languages suggest, in so far as *Trinity* may be a self-portrait, a less than tranquil observation by the artist of his situation.<sup>47</sup>

Gyatso has also worked with textiles since coming to the UK, referring to this particular body of his work as a reflection of his life in exile.<sup>48</sup> He uses shiny Tibetan brocades, as well as materials (and shirts) found in London charity shops to explore further his hybrid identity. His reconstructed shirts (Figure 9) suggest the presence of the ‘stuffed shirts’ running the far reaches of Empire, with the collar fabrics hinting that while the uniformity





Figure 7 Gonkar Gyatso, *Trinity*, 2004, pen and ink on paper, 39 × 28 cm.  
Photograph: author.

of the male bureaucrat may be similar throughout the lands the Crown controls, the individual men themselves may well be recruited (and indoctrinated) locally. At the same time, their uncanniness is unnerving; shirts with three collars hinting at tri-cephalic mutations and bizarre corporeal, rather than spiritual trinities.

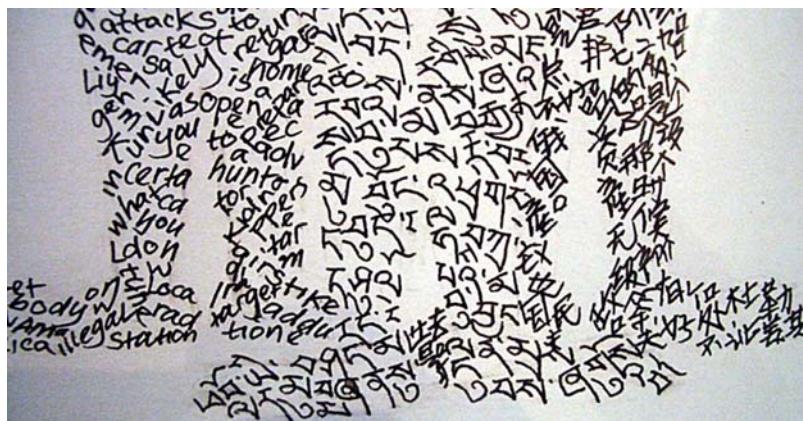


Figure 8 Gonkar Gyatso, detail from *Trinity*, 2004. Photograph: author.



Figure 9 Gonkar Gyatso, *Untitled*, 2002, cotton, silk, 80 × 60 × 30 cm. Photograph: *Sanctuary* exhibition catalogue, courtesy of the artist and Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums).

Gyatso further explored his sense of belonging and not belonging when he was appointed artist in residence at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, from November 2003 to January 2004. The British flag is a – perhaps *the* – potent symbol of nation and empire,<sup>49</sup> and Gyatso joined the ranks of critical observers who have investigated its signifying powers with his giant Union flag, made of shiny Tibetan brocades, suspended in the ceiling space of the museum hall. The edges of his flag were attached to a number of the cases of objects in the museum space below, linking the emblem of empire symbolically with the objects on display. But there was something just a little bit ‘wrong’ with the flag. The colours and shapes were all in the right place but there was something about the vibrancy and shine of the materials, plus the extra white circles in the areas of red and blue, that demanded the viewer look again. The flag was simultaneously reassuringly familiar and unsettlingly Other, reflecting perhaps the sense of never quite belonging that Gyatso professes he continues to feel.

He has also explored this ambivalence in *Soft Touch* (2003; Figure 10). This cushion with its ‘Union Jack’ emblem on the upper surface, reveals scores of dressmakers’ pins piercing its surface when subject to closer scrutiny. The commonplace notion that the UK is a ‘soft touch’ when it comes to allowing entry to asylum-seekers looking for a supposedly easy life is satirised by Gyatso and the piece has proved extremely popular with curators and viewers. Originally created for Kern’s *Leave to Remain*



Figure 10 Gonkar Gyatso, *Soft Touch*, 2003. Photograph: Adam Nieman.



exhibition in 2003, it is now on long-term display at the Museum of Immigration and Diversity in London.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

One of the effects of viewing work by artists such as Beban, Kern and Gyatso as 'British art' (and I would like to stress that I have chosen these artists only as exemplars) is that the process destabilises fixed notions of place and of identity (both personal and national). Welsch's call for the necessity of thinking of cultures 'beyond the contraposition of ownness and foreignness'<sup>51</sup> is met and the simultaneous coexistence of all who share place-Britain at any one time is brought to the fore. It is through bringing to prominence this sense of varied coexistence, that notions of 'Britishness' become broadened and expanded and that, on a micro level seen through the eyes of individual viewers, it is possible to conceptualise one of the ways that cultures may become transferred. The fact that the artists in question come from refugee populations lessens the gap between the viewer and the particular cultural attributes they make visible as well as, when they choose to focus on this in their work, the experience of being a refugee. If 'British artists' are refugees, the British-born viewer might find herself or himself thinking, might this then be not so much a particular fate that happens to 'others' but one that could befall any one of us?

How is it that this gap between artist and viewer is narrowed in this instance? It is not that, as members of the art-going public, we suddenly absorb elements from these artists' cultures into our own myriad cultures but more that we are encouraged to heighten our awareness of the closeness and coexistence of experiences, perspectives, visions and viewpoints different to, yet existing alongside our own. The process of reflection that results is not always an easy one and we may find ourselves pushed beyond the comfort zone of our taken-for-granted beliefs about who we are and indeed about who it is that makes up this 'we'. Thinking in terms of the strands that make up Glissant's cultural fabric not only foregrounds ideas of mutual coexistence but pushes into reticence old ideas based on such binaries as belonging and not belonging, native and stranger, guests and hosts, locals and foreigners, as well as citizens and refugees.

The reception of artists' work by the viewing public is always going to be affected by the way that curators 'frame' their work and the coherence they thereby give to this work in a broader cultural context. Exhibitions of 'British art' where the artists are those living and working in the UK, irrespective of country of origin or birth, draw attention to the transcultural nature of place: to place as layered and 'thickened' by and

through the lives of those who occupy it. It takes attention away from discussion about whether staying put or being mobile is good or bad. As Cresswell observes, 'place, home and roots are profoundly moral concepts in the humanist lexicon' of geographers of the past (the 'sedentarists', as he calls them) while mobility, hybridity, fluidity, flow and routes are seen as positive attributes by the more recent proponents of a more contemporary 'nomadic metaphysics'.<sup>52</sup> Seeing place as transcultural – visualising it once more in terms of Glissant's interwoven cultural fabric, with its multiple and varied strands making up the final weave – mitigates against attempting to work out who is at the centre and who is at the margins, who dominates at the expense of whom, who is privileged and who disempowered. As distinct individual strands of a resulting weave, all contribute differently yet equally to the final – yet continually evolving – fabric. Different patches of the fabric will be created as strands interweave differently with other strands, coexisting and interacting together and variously at the same time.

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, as far as the visual arts are concerned at least, interesting changes in curatorial policy have allowed a shift to occur in the way that the viewing public in the UK look at the work of artists from refugee populations. This piece has offered a case-study approach in which this shift has been examined for the way it opens up possibilities for cultural transfer to occur from artist/refugee to viewer/member of the public. It has provided the opportunity to examine – and to speculate upon – the processes of this transfer while they are happening, as it were. Recent exhibitions of 'British art' encourage viewers to rethink and re-negotiate their understanding not only of the art in question but also of place-Britain as somewhere that is demonstrably shot through with multiple places, multiple histories, multiple imaginations and multiple cultures. It has been my proposition that by allowing viewers to think again about notions of Britishness, artists from refugee populations are, in this way, unwittingly also effecting the transfer of elements of the cultures from which they have come into the culture in which they are now living their lives.

## Notes

- [1] Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees describes a refugee as one who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'. See, for example: Tuitt, *False Images*; and Mason's very helpful *Guide to International Refugee Law Resources on the Web*.

- [2] Röhl, 'Fleeing Violence and Poverty', 3.
- [3] Mecham, 'At the Margins'.
- [4] All figures in these last three sentences are from Schuster, 'The Origins of Fortress Europe'. See also Schuster, 'Common Sense or Racism?'; and Bloch and Schuster, 'At the extremes of exclusion'. Moorhead, *Human Cargo*, gives a UK estimate of £835 million for 'handling asylum seekers in the UK' although she is not entirely clear what this 'handling' entails.
- [5] See Marfleet, *Refugees in a Global Era*, 266.
- [6] Unaccredited but quoted in Röhl, 'Fleeing Violence and Poverty', 2.
- [7] The Arts Council *decibel* programme that ran from May 2003 until March 2004 stated that 'the term "culturally diverse" means ethnic diversity resulting from post-war immigration, with an increased focus on artists from African Asian and Caribbean backgrounds in England. Asia refers to the continent from Turkey to Japan'. See First *decibel* newsletter, 2003 (month not given).
- [8] Bushara was one of three artists whose work was shown at the *Asylum Years* exhibition, Oxford Brookes University, 3 December 2003–24 January 2004.
- [9] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 10.
- [10] Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, 141.
- [11] Žižek, 'Multiculturalism', 44.
- [12] Ang, 'Representing Social Life'. See also Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*, 8.
- [13] Stewart, 'Thinking is my Fighting', 13.
- [14] Araeen, 'The Art of Benevolent Racism', 57. See also Araeen, 'A New Beginning'.
- [15] Araeen, 'The Art of Benevolent Racism', 57.
- [16] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 11.
- [17] Arts Council policies that promoted 'visual artists from African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds' such as the *decibel* initiative of 2003 to 2004 raised immediate issues regarding what the term 'background' means. Do you qualify if you are an immigrant yourself, or if you are the child or grandchild of immigrants? Or great-grandchild? How far back can you go?
- [18] 7,709,000 visitors went to the Tate Galleries between April 2006 and March 2007, for example. Figures from the Tate website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/tatereport/2007/audience/attendancefigures.htm> (May 2008).
- [19] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
- [20] Darke, 'After Effect', 37.
- [21] During 2002–2003 she curated the exhibition *Imaginary Balkans*, shown at the Site Gallery Sheffield and the Cornerhouse, Manchester. Her work *The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha* (2006) was shown at the Lightbox, Tate Britain, 2 February–30 March 2008.
- [22] Farquharson and Schlieker, 'Breda Beban'.
- [23] '...the kind of joy informed by sadness, a complex kind of joy'. See Beban, *Imaginary Balkans*, 24.
- [24] Kirshenblatt-Gimlett, *Destination Culture*, 203. See her chapter 'Confusing Pleasures', 203–48, for a fascinating discussion and case study on the viewing of culturally unfamiliar stage work at the 1990 Los Angeles Festival of the Arts.
- [25] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
- [26] Hoving, 'Remaining Where You Are', 126.
- [27] For further discussion of Hoving's analysis of Glissant and of the politics of place, see Aydemir and Rotas, 'Introduction'.

- [28] The term ‘migratory aesthetics’ was coined by Mieke Bal and refers to the aesthetic dimension of the social experience of migration. See Durrant and Lord, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics*.
- [29] See, for example, the work of Dzenana Hodzic, Pajdic Predrad, Dijana Rakovic, Sinisa Savic, Lena Simic and Suzana Tamamovic.
- [30] For an interesting examination using discourse analysis of the language used in the media to describe refugees and asylum seekers, see Baker and McEnery, ‘A Corpus-Based Approach to Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers’. In particular they draw attention to the use of words with water associations. The use of such language facilitates the process by which refugees become dehumanised. By likening them to natural and elemental disasters, the appropriate response becomes overwhelmingly one of resistance, management and control.
- [31] Exhibition pamphlet, *Leave to Remain*, June 16–22, 2003, <http://www.leavetoremain.org>.
- [32] Two anecdotes, the first relating to her perhaps naive (and undoubtedly ironic) excitement when she left home. Firstly, while she was still at school, her class was reading Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and when the civil war forced her school to close, she remembers her first feeling being one of the relief she felt that she was not going to have to work through that enormous book. The second demonstrates both her ‘invisibility’ as an immigrant (still less as a former asylum-seeker) and native prejudice against immigrants to the UK from what she refers to as ‘my neck of the woods’. Her handbag was stolen from a coffee shop in Putney, London. When she reported the incident at the local police station, the officer in charge confided in her that the likely culprits were ‘incomers from eastern Europe’ who were apparently ‘flooding’ what, by inference, was a crime-free utopia prior to their arrival (personal communication, March 2005).
- [33] Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 8–12. See also Buchanan, Grillo, and Threadgold, ‘What’s the Story?’
- [34] See Georg Simmel’s classic 1908 text ‘The Stranger’ in ‘The Sociology of Space’ (see Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture* for a recent translation); and Goffman’s *Stigma* (originally published in 1963). See also Ahmed’s wonderful *Strange Encounters*; Sibley’s *Geographies of Exclusion*; and also Bauman’s ‘The Making and Unmaking of Strangers’ and *Community*.
- [35] Hall, ‘Minimal Selves’, 44.
- [36] See Holden Gallery website for their ‘Make it a Better Place’ exhibition, 12–17 April 2007, <http://www.holdengallery.mmu.ac.uk/makeitabetterplace.php> (accessed August 11, 2011).
- [37] See Cresswell: ‘Theorising Place’, 12–15; and Cresswell, *Place*, 23.
- [38] Cresswell, ‘Theorising Place’, 13.
- [39] Aydemir and Rotas, ‘Introduction’, 17. See also Tim Cresswell’s excellent *On The Move*.
- [40] Cresswell, ‘Theorising Place’, 25.
- [41] Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’.
- [42] Quoted in Cresswell, ‘Theorising Place’, 25.
- [43] *Ibid.*
- [44] Massey, *For Space*, 12.

- [45] 'Preview' on Gyatso', *Oxford Today, The University Magazine*, 15, no. 3, regarding residency at the Pitt Rivers Museum, unspecified page and author (clipping provided by artist).
- [46] Personal communication, September 21, 2005.
- [47] *Trinity* also brings to mind the intertwined figures of Antonio Canova's neoclassical sculpture *The Three Graces* as well as *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (1792), engraved by William Blake, in John Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam 1772–1777*.
- [48] *Leave to Remain* exhibition pamphlet; and also McGlashan and Pacitti, *Sanctuary*, 38.
- [49] For example, see Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*.
- [50] Correct at the time of writing (October 2008). 'It came as a temporary exhibit', I was told by the Museum's spokesperson, 'but has ended on more or less permanent display – resonant with the stories of many of the people who come here. It is a very powerful piece'. Personal communication, October 2, 2008.
- [51] Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, 139.
- [52] Cresswell: 'Theorising Place', 12–26; and *On the Move*, chapters 1 and 2.

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