



IETM REPORT

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# FORTRESS EUROPE

Report from the IETM Amsterdam Plenary Meeting, 14 - 17 April 2016

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# Fortress Europe

Followed by its previous two working sessions in IETM Bergamo and IETM Budapest, the discussion about 'Fortress Europe' on the last day of IETM Amsterdam was more urgent than ever. The purpose of the session was to pool together the reflections, experiences, recommendations and actions of the participants, working in the field of culture and the arts, thus trying to find some temporary working solutions to the urgent issue of refuge and migration.

## Moderator:

Shanaz Gulzar - Independent, UK



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## Participation in every aspect: Cases from the UK

In the UK, attention to the refugee issue has been given at different levels, by festivals, organisations, companies and individual artists. The discussion provided a glimpse of practices, ideas and outcomes.

Organisations in the UK and across the world are working with refugees, not just as sources of inspiration through their stories and experiences, but also as artists, collaborators and audience. An interesting example is the [Platforma Festival](#), a biennial festival across the UK creating art work with refugees. In 2015 the festival was held in Leicester and for each iteration it is held in a different city echoing the transitory nature of the refugees and attempting to reach as many communities as possible.

Their approach is not to 'work with the refugees', but to **build up a two-way conversation**, to actually work together and create a richer experience for participant and audience.

Another example given was the International UNHCR, the UN branch working

with refugees. Artists and arts organisations work with refugees in camps, but also in Afghanistan, in Syria, in the Middle East and in Western Europe, to find a transnational solution and approach to working with refugees.

A young company based in North England, [Target Theatre Company](#), is developing a performance entitled '[Swarm](#)', which will tour in the autumn of 2016. The play is based on work with two communities in the Middle East and in the UK and presents the migration and refugee crisis from the eyes of the people coming to Europe in search for help. It is meant as a 'holistic' piece of work with refugees showing different perspectives on the issue. Another exciting example is '[Good Chance](#)', founded by two British playwrights in Calais (France), which creates a theatrical space in which people come voluntarily and share their stories, performance, circus, clown theatre, etc.

Shanaz Gulzar is a UK-based artist and second-generation British Asian. She is developing a project, '**POV**' (point of view)

working with VR technology, computer generated landscapes and impressions responding to interviews with refugees and host communities exploring how each perceives the other. The interviews are not about where the refugees have come from or their journey but how the host communities appear to them as welcoming, hostile, fearful, suspicious, warm... communities who fear to be invaded and have their landscape changed forever. Her work takes the form of a conversation with 6 of her neighbours, refugee and host.

Using the VR headsets, the viewers are able to see from another perspective, the central idea – allowed by technology – is to be literally 'in somebody else's shoes' and see how the receiving communities perceive immigrants and refugees, their story and their tragedies, as 'others.', and the reactions of the host community to the migration and refugee issues ranging from positive proactive to ambivalent and negative.

# Operational strategies for the migration and refugee issues

The overarching theme of the session was to encourage the art sector to discuss and reflect on what art can do concerning the migration and refugee issue, and how to work in partnership with other agencies and organisations that support refugees to create a more cohesive response. How can art and art organisations who have worked with refugees create a more cohesive response to the crisis? How can we work with grass-roots, non-artistic organisations to create more inclusive holistic strategies for employment, work, housing, etc.? Can arts provide a conduit between other agencies, not as a tool for healing social ills?

The migration and refugee issues are **massive and complex**. The question of how to create a **single coherent approach is in itself problematic**: different needs require different approaches. We should take into consideration the specificity of the contexts we are working in, and the diversity of the people involved. Refugees need to be engaged at all levels of society.

## Building holistic collaborative communities

To build up a collaborative community, we should first build up trust between the hosting community and the refugees encouraging conversation and contact, whilst minimising fear. Trust-building and barrier-removing are long-term, slow and hard processes and art can play a vital role in achieving this.

Building holistic collaborative communities takes the form of not only organising national, international or transnational art work with refugees from different countries working with cultural organisations and agencies, but also cross-sector collaborations with different institutions and organisations such as the UN, grass-root NGOs, non-artistic organisations, etc.

Engagement with the refugee community can range from working with them as

co-creators and collaborators, exploring and sharing their stories and engaging them as participants and audience, etc.

In building a holistic collaborative community, the practical value of art has to be affirmed. Art is an incredibly powerful vehicle to create cohesion and conversation whilst challenging beliefs and stereotypes.

At the same time refugees should also have access to support to transfer their existing skillset to the host community and or to training and learning a new profession. This could support the building of cohesive communities with a particular attention to social integration through transferrable skills.

*Language plays an important role in building up collaborative communities by getting over the barriers of fear. A constructive refugee narrative is helpful to raise the awareness of the hosting society. Encouraging people to question refugee camps as a practice of people enclosure, attracting media attention to it, and advocating for a public debate on refugee phobia are very precise steps to construct an adequate social discourse about refugees. Besides, a historical perspective on the immigration and displacement (i.e. the development of the refugee issue since the World War II) has to be provided, so as to heighten societies historical knowledge. On the other hand, refugees' own storytelling prowess has proven an effective theatrical strategy in getting their own experience heard and understood, as well as in engaging audience's sensitivity. For example L'Age de la Tortue in France is preparing a publication project named 'Encyclopedia of Immigrants', collecting 400 live stories (including children's stories) from different countries, with the aim to prepare an impressive encyclopaedia of migrant and refugee narratives.*

## Refugees' Rights

Art work on the refugees theme should try not to reinforce the labelling of refugees and the simple exploration/exploitation of their misfortunes in the name of art, which in a certain way reinforces and perpetuates the binary logic of refugee vs host, intruder vs local.

The artists should try hard to **reach the far and isolated refugee communities**, children and women for example, instead of working only with the more accessible and visible ones, as the former are the people in the greatest need of attention and help.

At the same time, artists also have to address the ethical problem: what will the refugees involved in the art work get in return? What will be their benefit and outcome from the experience? There is also the risk that the art sector could be seen as capitalizing on suffering and appropriation of the stories removing ownership and agency.



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## The artist's responsibility

'If I am not an art worker but a florist and I go to help the refugees during my spare time, how is my engagement different from the activist artists or from other common people?' A Dutch participant directly questioned the possibly privileged status of activist artists. Do art and artists really want to do something or to choose a political side? The discussion is about artists' responsibility to provoke change in front of the refugee crisis: artists can take that responsibility, and that would help in the long term.

Art and Artists can also work to bring about a political shift. According to one participant from the UK, this country has only accepted a very small number of refugees, around 20,000 over 5 years. What needs to be changed is the political situation. Artists have the responsibility to take their part in fostering the change. Apart from creating art with refugees, it is important that artists work with other cultural and political agencies to achieve a real political impact to shift the current culture of fear and suspicion.

# Principles

The participants suggest IETM invite artists from migrant and refugee networks to IETM meetings and network.

To provide bursaries for the artists working with migrants and refugees to host them at IETM to share their experience directly as opposed to through a third party.

To develop the Fortress Europe session to become a more proactive session actively sharing best practice beyond its current experience.

A set of principles/manifesto, core values to use as an integrity bench-mark for working with vulnerable, refugee migrant communities:

## **Know why you're doing it and have autonomy to achieve it**

- Not every project can do everything, be clear about the aims from the beginning and ensure clarity of aims.

## **We must be autonomous, not manipulated by funding applications.**

- Allow the arts to respond to need and rethink how we're making the core work not doing the it as a project-funded add on.

## **Refugees should have the opportunity to do things actively and get paid for it.**

- This is fundamental to not appropriating stories and experiences for our own gains

## **Listen better.**

- Don't be arrogant that we are best-placed to assist; acknowledge our self-interest.

## **Engage the communities first then design together to address needs.**

- Address both communities host and refugee.
- Talk to other arts organisations, collaborate and combine forces rather than 100 individual programmes, which dilutes impact.