

## Is 'Refugee Art' Possible?

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1. 'Leave to Remain', press release, May 2003.
2. Home Office figures for 2002 are 85,865 in total applications and 110,700 including dependents. The figure for the first quarter of 2003 is 16,000 applications (which is 3520 fewer than for the first quarter of 2002). Asylum statistics can be found on the Home Office website: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html>.
3. See, for example, Ceri Mollard, *Asylum: The Truth Behind the Headlines*, Oxfam Poverty Programme report, February 2001 (available online: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/policy/papers/asylumscot01/asylum.htm>); the Press Wise Trust, Ram Project publications (<http://www.ramproject.org.uk>, <http://www.presswise.org.uk>), eg *Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media Forum: Brochure*, February 2001 (available from [ram@presswise.org.uk](mailto:ram@presswise.org.uk)); Andrew Clarke, *Acceptable Racism: UK Press Coverage of the Yarl's Wood Fire* (unpublished, obtainable from [andrew.clarke@unl.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.clarke@unl.ac.uk)); *Press Myths*, Refugee Council, December 2002 (available online at:

*You know, if one person, just one person does it they may think he's really sick and they won't take him. And if two people, two people do it, in harmony, they may think they're both faggots and they won't take either of them. And three people do it, three, can you imagine, three people walking in singin a bar of Alice's Restaurant and walking out. They may think it's an organization. And can you, can you imagine fifty people a day, I said fifty people a day walking in singin a bar of Alice's Restaurant and walking out. And friends they may think it's a movement.*

Arlo Guthrie, *Alice's Restaurant*, 1966

I was asked recently to sit on the panel of 'Leave to Remain', an exhibition of visual art by 'artists who are refugees, asylum-seekers, or who have experienced a similar situation'.<sup>1</sup> The reason I was asked was because I had started researching the work of visual artists who are also refugees or asylum-seekers. I have been pondering on the possibility that a category, a community, a genre, even, of *refugee art* might exist; is there such a thing? Could I say that I am researching *refugee artists*? This paper presents my initial reflections.

A somewhat large number of refugees are reaching UK shores and claiming asylum,<sup>2</sup> of whom it is not unreasonable to expect a certain proportion, and hence a significant number, to be artists. This would surely be something to celebrate. But refugees have been so vilified in the popular press that we may wonder whether this marginalisation of individuals who have already endured not inconsiderable trauma might lead to a sense of solidarity-in-adversity amongst them, with the emergence of a sense of a separate community.<sup>3</sup> Will artists overlook or overcome their diverse national backgrounds and link themselves together, united by the pain of their displacement and the hostility of their reception in their new host culture? Or will the adjective 'refugee' function in some way as the adjective 'black' once functioned when it was a term bestowed by the dominant culture on those who were perceived as threatening? By designating these individuals with the

<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths/myth001.htm>); Stephen Morris, 'Press Whips up Asylum Hysteria', *Guardian*, 24 January 2003, (available online: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk\\_news/story/0,3604,881213,00html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,881213,00html)); Tammy Speers, *Welcome or Over Reaction: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Welsh Media*, Wales Media Forum, 2001.

4. For a full discussion of arts initiatives in London, see London Arts' thorough report: Yvonne Field and Marietta Harrow, *Routes Across Diversity: Developing the Arts of London's Refugee Communities*, London Arts, 2001 (available online at: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/downloads/information/routesacrossdiversitysummary.pdf>).
5. According to the UN, international law defines a 'refugee' as a person who has fled from and/or cannot return to his/her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, including war or civil conflict. A refugee is a person 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 *Article 1, The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. An asylum seeker is a person who has left his/her country of origin, has applied for recognition as a refugee in another country, and is awaiting a decision on his/her application (see: [http://www.unhcr.org.uk/info/briefings/basic\\_facts/definitions.html](http://www.unhcr.org.uk/info/briefings/basic_facts/definitions.html)).
6. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p 13.

monolithic term 'black', they were contained, differentiated, and controlled until the people themselves took hold of the term and made it 'Black', a site of resistance and a source of pride. Will it raise similar issues when linked to the word 'artist' that 'black' has raised, and indeed continues to raise?

In this article I am directing my attention to refugees and asylum seekers who are 'professional' artists for whom I am making the assumption that 'visibility' is a key, if not unproblematic, issue. I am not, for example, discussing individuals whose artistic interests or talents may draw them to projects targeting the refugee community but which may have specific outcomes in mind that take them beyond the art-world frame. These outcomes may include, for example, widening access to arts activities, challenging public stereotypes about refugees, providing opportunities for learning, self-expression as a way of dealing with trauma, skills acquisition, and mentoring.<sup>4</sup>

Like 'black', the term 'refugee' smoothes over difference within the group it designates at the same time as reifying the boundary that defines its otherness and the notions that constitute that boundary. Unlike 'black', 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are terms denoting internationally recognised political status, nor are you born a refugee or born an asylum seeker.<sup>5</sup> Nation-state bureaucracy defines both the political refugee and the asylum seeker and the terms are not interchangeable. But the social construct of the terms is predictably more fluid, less fixed. So a 'refugee artist' or an 'asylum seeker artist' becomes someone not defined simply by their political displacement or their ownership of a 'wrong' passport (or indeed of none at all); they are socially and culturally defined by *notions* of displacement and by other, changing signifiers of the words 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker'. These words work as signifiers in many ways. 'We' (the hosts) may presume, if we are predisposed to thinking empathetically, that the refugee feels a sense of alienation, lack of agency, loss and loneliness and that these emotional factors are key to his or her identity; we might expect a refugee to talk about homesickness, yearnings and displacement. There is a distance between us, at home here, and them, the out-of-place arrivals. The asylum seeker, on the other hand, narrows that distance by asking something of us, he or she asserts a connection between us, wants to take something from us: to be a 'seeker' is to be an active agent, at least linguistically. Both change our own identity by their very presence; they are strangers that we have to deal with, living in a liminal zone amongst – and yet not-quite-amongst – us. It is proximity that reifies the stranger as Ahmed has demonstrated in her discussion of stranger fetishism, and the refugee exists, by definition, within the community to which he or she does not properly belong, creating new structures of power relationships.<sup>6</sup> The notion of strangers in our midst suggests being infiltrated and penetrated, and the popular press has the power to inject further potency into both terms, by linking them with words such as 'swamped' and 'overwhelmed', for example, so that what they signify slips and slides on an increasingly negative trajectory. This is an important subject to which I shall return later.

The refugee artist or the asylum seeker artist, as someone creatively endowed with the ability to express and represent human experience, now has the awesome responsibility of representing the displacement of

7. Live performance, Manchester, x.trax showcase, 3 May 2003.
8. Eddie Chambers, 'True Colours', in Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, eds, *Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, Annotations 5, inIVA, London, 1999, p 39.
9. Lubaina Himid, 'Mapping: A Decade of Black Women Artists 1980–1990', in *Passion*, ed Maud Silver, Urban Fox, 1990, p 68.
10. Kobena Mercer, 'Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness', *Third Text*, no 49, Winter 1999–2000.
11. Frederic Jameson, 'Marxism and Postmodernism', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*, Verso, London, New York, 1998, p 35; Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, New Left Books, London, 1975, quoted in Jameson p 35.
12. Eddie Chambers, 'Mainstream Capers: Black Artists, White Institutions' in *Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings by Eddie Chambers*, eds Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, Annotations 5, inIVA, London, 1999, p 20.
13. Quoted in Mercer, op cit, p 58.
14. 'decibel is supported in several ways. Arts Council England's commitment to cultural diversity as a key priority for the organisation means that there is a prioritisation for diversity across all funding streams including Grants for the Arts. In addition to this, treasury funds of around £5 million have been allocated directly to decibel. These are strategically managed flexible funds comprising a £1 million Development Fund, and a £500,000

someone in a community to which he/she does not belong. But this responsibility is equally the limited responsibility of representing that displacement *and nothing else*. For if she or he does represent anything else, say, for example, flowers (unless they are graveyard flowers, or exotic flowers, or 'my lost little sister's favourite flowers'), she/he becomes simply 'an artist', and that designate is reserved for practitioners from the dominant host culture alone.

The performance poet Lemn Sissay (who is black) describes talking to a bewildered white audience about mother–son relationships, a topic that interests and concerns him (and which he has also written about movingly). 'Black people have family relationships too, black men go through that stuff with their mothers', he felt compelled to explain, adding, 'I stopped talking about race to my public and I lost work for that'.<sup>7</sup> Black artists have, in other words, faced a string of problems connected with the blackness that describes, defines, and confines them and for the dominant culture their blackness has become *what they are*, their unique selling point, their *only* selling point.

Nonetheless, times have moved on even if the underlying power structures remain, rock-like, embedded, and unchanged. Black visual artists were considered substandard, alien, and invisible in the 1980s, when they were at worst denied gallery space altogether and at best piled together in 'decidedly dodgy "survey" shows'<sup>8</sup> characterised by Zanzibar-born artist Lubaina Himid as 'mega-shows with more than fifty artists . . . [so that] who can remember the names let alone the work?'.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, this invisibility gave way to an excess visibility, according to Kobena Mercer, or a 'hypervisibility'<sup>10</sup> where blackness became cool and commodified as part of a corporate internationalism. In this mindset, characterised by Jameson (after Mandel) as that of 'late capitalism', difference, diversity, and multiculturalism all become decorative, commercial, and stripped of any potency as sites of resistance.<sup>11</sup> They do not challenge the dominant mainstream since they are defined around and with reference to this dominant mainstream, which they reinforce and enhance. Black artists, if they represent or make reference to their blackness, now play into the hands of the establishment, for whom diversity is a key platform in colourful, cool, and, above all, marketable, multicultural Britain. They are, indeed, part of the brand *Britain*. And in brand *Britain*, the mainstream allows only two possible readings of their work. They are either 'ethnic' or they are invisible. As 'ethnic' they may achieve commercial success as they decorate and embroider the dominant culture's right-on view of itself as having (and tolerating!) a rich multicultural heritage. As invisible, the dominant culture simply . . . dominates. As a result, they may either address their own audience (a Black one)<sup>12</sup> or struggle to find different ways out of the ideological trap. As Steve McQueen observed, 'just like everyone else I want people to think beyond race, nationality and all that kind of crap. This debate is tired, ugly and beat up . . . it is boring.'<sup>13</sup>

In 2003, diversity has become a key constituent of national policy and no more so than in the art world. Arts Council England has announced its 'significant investment in culturally diverse arts' with literally millions of pounds<sup>14</sup> being assigned to culturally diverse projects and a new arm to its structure, *decibel* (replete with logo, officers, newsletters, and website, <http://www.decibel-db.org>, all in place), constituted specifically

Profile fund which will specifically be used to invest in Black and Asian artists, arts administrators and arts companies. The production of the performing arts showcase event, visual arts events, networks, debates, research, profiling and decibel staffing costs make up the balance of this amount.' *decibel* website, <http://www.decibel-db.org/about/faqs.asp#1>, May 2003. The funds are also discussed in a *decibel* newsletter 'decibel – questions and answers', October 2002.

to spearhead its mission.<sup>15</sup> The question of what you have to be in order to qualify as 'culturally diverse' is clearly key, though still something of a conundrum, to this writer at least.

Arts Council England, not unexpectedly, 'takes the broadest possible interpretation' of cultural diversity according to its website, 'but with a particular focus on race and ethnic background. *decibel* has increased that focus to look specifically at African, Asian (from Turkey in the West to Japan in the East) and Caribbean arts practice in this country'. So far, so opaque. This is a time when theorists are deconstructing notions of race and ethnicity and highlighting the absurd notion that we might be able to say with any certainty where different peoples begin and end. Furthermore, as Ien Ang observes, 'drawing lines' around people equals 'a form of discursive reductionism'.<sup>16</sup> Arts Council England, however, is *increasing its focus* on specific groups, as defined by notions of race and ethnic origin, both of which are no more natural entities than the carefully and deliberately invented nation states of Benedict Anderson's famous 'Imagined Communities'.<sup>17</sup> Both racial and ethnic 'belonging' is limited and exclusionary – you need to demonstrate your Chinese, or African, or Jewish roots to claim membership of the Chinese or African or Jewish diasporas, for example. Looking backwards to one's roots implies a hardening of boundaries with past origins overriding present geographical location. But cross-fertilisations, transformations, and new beginnings are occurring in the here-and-now, and the resulting emergent voices are too discordant, too cacophonous, too unpredictable to be reduced to monolithic ethnicities. An ethnic group, or a diaspora, to highlight another term with widespread currency, may be, as Ien Ang observes, de-territorialised but it is symbolically bounded nonetheless and carries with it notions of ethnic sameness: it is ideologically monolithic.<sup>18</sup> She gives the example of the so-called 'Chinese community' of Sydney, people to some degree 'Chinese' but with very diverse interests and coming from very diverse backgrounds. The Chinese in Sydney interact, she says, not as an 'imagined community' but in a singular geographical space; how meaningful is it, she asks, to describe the East Timor Chinese in Sydney in the category 'Chinese'? Having lived under the Portuguese in East Timor, they follow the Christian rather than the Chinese calendar and were totally nonplussed when a well-intentioned initiative in the city 'allowed' them to celebrate the Year of the Dragon. For Ang, in a real world with porous boundaries, the encounters *between* peoples are as constitutive of identity as the encounters within.

Lucy Lippard refers, when writing about art, to 'the fertile liminal ground' between the familiar and the unfamiliar – that area characterised neither by difference nor by neutrality – as being a place 'where new meanings germinate and where common experiences in different contexts can provoke new bonds'.<sup>19</sup> New meanings and transformations are also encouraged in the place that allows different experiences in similar contexts to happen, although sometimes it is hard to tell which way round it is. Two recent train journeys gave me opportunity and cause to reflect on the shift that occurs when the familiar is temporarily subverted into something strange.

The first time was on a crowded train journey from Birmingham to my home in Bristol. I learnt that my fellow-passenger and companion on the seat next to mine, a young man from Somalia, was an asylum-seeker

15. Arts Council England *decibel* newsletter, May 2003.

16. Ien Ang, public lecture, Bristol University, Department of Sociology, 14 May 2003; see also Stephen Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals: the Implications of Diversity*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, p 8.

17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, revised edition 1991.

18. Ang, *op cit*.

19. Lucy R Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, New Press, New York, 1990, p 9.

with sixty-four pence in his pocket, the prospect of a walk across Bristol to the area where the Somali community lived, and the hope of hospitality, if he was lucky, when he arrived. We shared the journey, the carriage, the same scenery, and some conversation but our sense of relative safety or apprehension as we approached Bristol could hardly have been more different.

On the second occasion, I was assisting a young Bosnian artist, Maragreta Kern, herself a former refugee, with a current project.<sup>20</sup> She was taking photos with a digital camera of individual passengers on



Margareta Kern, *Standard Class*, 2003, quotes and digital photos mounted on card attached to the wall by velcro, 225 × 187 cm, *Leave to Remain* exhibition, London, June 2003, photograph Adam Nieman. Viewers were invited to 'match' quotes to faces and then check their accuracy, or not

20. Founder of the exhibition 'Leave to Remain'.

trains and at the same time asking them their views on asylum-seekers coming to the UK. I was the note-taker and Kern was going to assemble the results in an installation, *Standard Class*, for a coming exhibition in London. That day, we interviewed and photographed a hundred people on trains travelling across England. Again I was struck by the transformation of the familiar into a multiplicity of individual, incommensurate experiences. The diversity of views in any one carriage was startling; the same journey became transformed into multiple differences in the individual responses to one single question.

This transformation of something neither neutral nor exotic into a contested site of new meanings is reflected in Edita Marelic's *Frightened Stations Gathered Together for Mutual Support* (2003).<sup>21</sup> This work subverts the notion of train stations as a self-confident symbol of modernity into sites of alienation, fear, and loneliness. By displacing and focusing on the stations (rather than the routes they serve) Marelic reminds us how they increasingly contain individuals whose lives are characterised by displacement and dispossession rather than by the optimism and vigour of their nineteenth-century designers. Nonetheless, there is something playful about the piece which reminds me of the comment made by Breda Beban, artist and curator from former Yugoslavia, about the 'Imaginary Balkans' exhibition (which she curated). 'Most of the work in the exhibition is about tracking down a sense of joy', she reflected, 'but this is the kind of joy informed by sadness, a complex kind of joy'.<sup>22</sup>



21. Lippard, op cit, p 9.

22. Breda Beban (in conversation with Chris Darke), 'A Complex Kind of Joy', in *Imaginary Balkans* (exhibition catalogue), Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2002, p 24.

Edita Marelic, *Frightened Stations Gathered Together for Mutual Support*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 50 × 40 cm, 'Leave to Remain', exhibition, London, June 2003, photograph Adam Nieman

And where do ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ artists come in all of this? Is their ‘difference’ predicated on pathos; their authenticity based on trauma, sadness, displacement and loss, any joy they express at best being viewed in the knowledge that it is ‘complex’? Should they choose to draw on the British landscape for their subject matter, for example, shall we, the audience, reject the work – and artist – on the grounds of authenticity? Is there a ‘pathetic imaginative space’ waiting for the refugee/asylum-seeker artist to fill such as the space, James Clifford has argued, Native Americans have ‘long filled’ in the dominant culture of North America?<sup>23</sup> Native Americans, he observes, were ‘always survivors, noble and wretched’; they were ‘proud, beautiful and “vanishing”’; in any other guise their authenticity ‘as Indians’ was brought into question. Issues of authenticity are hardly new, but they are nonetheless potent for their familiarity. Once a category is created, whether it be ‘Indian’ or ‘African’ or ‘refugee’, and this category is bolted on to the broader category ‘art’, certain questions are immediately raised. Sidney Kasfir, in his paper *African Art and Authenticity*, asked ‘who creates meaning for African art? And who or what determines its cultural authenticity?’<sup>24</sup> We may now also reflect on who creates, or will create, meaning for refugee art and who or what determines *its* cultural authenticity?

‘Refugee/asylum seeker’ artists certainly need to demonstrate some sort of ‘difference’ to be considered culturally diverse enough to meet the requirements of Arts Council England’s new *decibel* initiative. But since, as *decibel*’s website proclaims, ‘the term “culturally diverse” means ethnic diversity resulting from post-war immigration with an increased focus on British artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent’,<sup>25</sup> it is hardly surprising that this ‘difference’ does not automatically fulfil the ‘culturally diverse’ criteria. A refugee is not automatically foregrounding his or her ethnicity and may not come from the ‘right’ place anyhow (there was a strong Balkan presence in the ‘Leave to Remain’ exhibition, for example, with four of the eleven artists coming from Bosnia and one from Romania). In the case of ‘Leave to Remain’, an application to Arts Council England for modest funding support was rejected.

Clearly, *decibel* has slippery criteria to meet. ‘Cultural’ and ‘ethnic’ are, as we have seen, now interchangeable terms. With its ‘particular focus on race and ethnicity’ it has, for example, instigated a project to compile a database of arts organisations throughout the country ‘with an interest in cultural diversity’. Since inclusion and equal opportunity are requirements of any and every organisation, any and every arts organisation is indeed, quite properly, submitting its proposal to be on the list. If, for example, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra is as much part of a map of culturally diverse arts organisations across the country as BRIT (the Black Regional Initiative Theatre based at the KUUMBA institute in St Paul’s, Bristol), we might question whether *decibel* is involved in a well-meaning circular exercise of chasing its own right-on tail.

If cultural diversity is the same as ethnic diversity and both are a euphemism for non-white, then the group ‘refugees’, whose difference is not predicated on their non-whiteness, may understandably fail to qualify for funding from the *decibel* kitty. And if their difference is, furthermore, not predicated on ethnicity at all, but on factors such as suffering caused by displacement, then it is hardly surprising that they

23. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, p 284. Clifford describes how the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council in 1976 sued in federal court for 16,000 acres of land constituting three-quarters of Mashpee but how they had difficulty persuading the court of their ‘Indian-ness’ without costumes or props, looking as they did ‘like what they are: ordinary pillars of the community’, p 285. The issue of whether the Mashpee were a tribe or not was decided by ‘a white majority’ (they were not) even though the Mashpee members ‘knew’ they were, p 344.

24. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, ‘African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow’, *African Arts*, 25:2, 1992, p 41.

25. *What definition of cultural diversity is decibel using?* <http://www.decibel-db.org/about/faqs.asp#9>, May 2003.

may fall through the funding-net parameters Arts Council England has now set itself. If Arts Council England, through *decibel*, has thrown in its lot with the notion of ethnic roots being the source of difference, then roots will be what gives an individual, or a group, or an organisation, culturally diverse value. Roots are then reified and become pure, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett points out: 'presumably they are purest at their putative source'.<sup>26</sup> *decibel* is, however, also quick to support a watered-down version and celebrate examples of hybridity and fusion although both of these are, nonetheless, predicated on biological models of the initially 'pure' components of the subsequent mix.<sup>27</sup> But these originally pure components of yesterday are what have to be demonstrated, it would seem, in order to qualify as culturally diverse today. Perhaps, I find myself speculating, if 'Leave to Remain' had highlighted the ethnic roots of the contributing artists, rather than the emotive experience of displacement, it might have found more boxes being ticked in its funding application and the criteria more readily fulfilled.

Do visual artists whose political status is that of 'refugee' actually want to come together in the first place? What is clear is that, like all artists, they want and will struggle for visibility and that at times they will make *compromises* in order to achieve this visibility. And like 'black' and 'women' artists before them, many will wish to make a name for themselves as 'artists' without any adjective qualifying the term. As *decibel* itself somewhat ambiguously observes, 'should artists show their work in group shows around race? Well the answer to that question is clearly coming back to us as an emphatic no!'<sup>28</sup> In their comprehensive discussion and evaluation of London Arts initiatives aimed at developing the arts across London's refugee communities, Yvonne Field and Marietta Harrow revealed that many artists 'were reluctant to work within arts projects where being a refugee or asylum-seeker was the key criterion for involvement'.<sup>29</sup> What is less clear is why. Does the description 'refugee' and 'asylum-seeker' limit and contain what the artist can and cannot represent, involving some sort of emotional essentialism, just as 'black' and 'women' may denote notions of biological essentialism? Has the term 'refugee' become so pejorative and negative in the public mind that an artist who is also a refugee might not wish to draw attention to it? Is the political status of the term so separate from an artist's sense of professional status that he or she sees no reason to combine the two? Is the experience of being a refugee so traumatic that the individual feels there is no earthly reason to celebrate it? Blacks and women have become sources of pride; can one ever be proud to be a refugee?

Of the eleven artists in the 'Leave to Remain' show, not all jumped at the opportunity to present their work under the refugee bracket. It is probably fair to say that it was the attitude of the show's founder, Margareta Kern, that persuaded them that this was a label they could actively adopt – inject, that is, with a sense of their own agency – for the purposes of a show that she asserted from the onset would deliberately 'challenge the parameters of refugee art'.<sup>30</sup> The fact that Kern herself is a former asylum-seeker and that the term was owned and self-imposed, for the duration of the exhibition, by the artists, rather than being one designated to them by the dominant (and hostile) culture is what affords it its power as a site of resistance.

26. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1998, p 243.

27. See, for example, a request for 'Applications for the Alfred Fagon Awards are invited for the best new play (which need not have been produced) for theatre in English by writers *from the Caribbean or with Caribbean antecedents*' (emphasis added), <http://www.decibel-db.org/news/latest.asp>.

28. May issue of the *decibel* newsletter, p 3.

29. *Ibid*, p 48.

30. 'Leave to Remain' press release, May 2003.

It certainly calls a halt at least, when ‘owned’ in this way, to the inexorable slippage whereby the words ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum-seeker’ are increasingly becoming a term of abuse. That language is an unstable and finely tuned barometer of social change has been demonstrated by Vološinov, for whom it is always both social and ideological simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> Vološinov shows how language is essentially *dialogic*, since the meaning of any word is entirely determined by the context in which it is used. As a result, we may use the same word differently depending on the particular audience we have in mind. Thus we may always be said to be in conversation, even though sometimes we may not literally be speaking, just as I am writing this with an idea of the kind of reader ‘you’ may be. The words ‘refugee’, and still more, ‘asylum-seeker’, have been increasingly used by members of the dominant (and host) culture to objectify individuals seen as unwelcome and threatening strangers in their midst. They have been tied together with other words like ‘swamped’, ‘illegal’, ‘economic migrants’ (itself a term that is gathering new potency as a carrier of negativity and abuse), ‘bogus’, ‘fiddle’, ‘false’, ‘overrun’, and even ‘vermin’. As such, they are words loaded with negativity that is both empowering for their usual speakers (increasingly entrenched as *not*-refugees, *not*-asylum-seekers) and disempowering for those they purport to describe (dehumanised and objectified *as* refugees and asylum-seekers). They are words that increasingly distance those who are ‘not’ from those who ‘are’ and entrench the boundary between them. The refugee, who, as we have seen, is less demanding and threatening than the asylum-seeker (who actively *seeks*) is nonetheless essentialised as a very *foreign* individual against whom we must clearly be on our guard and, indeed, the word has increasing xenophobic connotations.

As such, the word ‘refugee’ is also branching away from, and developing a different meaning from, its apparent synonyms ‘émigré’ and ‘exile’. The latter have not been used at all to describe the present wave of displaced individuals in Europe or the UK and interestingly they both retain a historical tone, signifying a certain romanticism, dignity, and even respect for those so designated. The terms humanise rather than dehumanise, suggest elements of nostalgia, pathos, and suffering; they even signify a particular kind of suffering, a suffering that is particularly *European*. Emigrés and exiles may have been forced to leave their countries (but these countries have been ones that largely share a common European culture) and they may have lived amongst us (and the ‘we’ here includes notions of we-the-Europeans) but their strangeness is not so strange, and their infiltration of the host country is therefore more welcome (certainly in retrospect) not least because ‘they’ bring with them a legitimate European intellectualism that can enrich – and demonstrably has enriched (but not disrupted with *really* foreign elements) – our lives. So many clauses, so many caveats in order to achieve a half-grudging, half-admiring acceptance. The categories ‘exile’ and ‘émigré’ still denote difference and notions of being-out-of-place, but the boundary with the host culture is more permeable, less guarded, and less dangerous, than between the ‘refugee’ and his or her host. Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Milan Kundera, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Vladimir Nabokov: these are all émigrés or exiles rather than refugees.

31. Martin Barker, ‘A Dialogical Approach to Ideology’, in *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1989, p 264.

So what happens when today's refugees take hold of the term and use it to describe themselves, as the visual artists showing their work in the 'Leave to Remain' exhibition have chosen to do? When re-appropriated by the individuals it purports to describe, the word's objectifying and destabilising momentum is subverted and called to a temporary halt; we find ourselves forced to reassess it afresh in this new context. The very act of agency strips the word of its objectifying power and demands a repositioning of the listener and a radical reappraisal of its meaning. Whether the removal of some of its vilifying and emotional layering simply serves to remind us of the official bureaucratic meaning of the word, or whether we respond more sympathetically to the speaker rather than the spoken-about, the point is, for Vološinov, that the context has changed; we have entered a new dialogic relationship and in so doing a shift has been effected in the meaning of the word. It now becomes a site of resistance offering an opportunity for transformation to both speaker and respondent.

In this speculative paper, I have tried to highlight the lexical minefield that the criteria of so-called 'cultural diversity' force us to enter and in which a new set of marginalised individuals – artists who are refugees; refugees who are artists – struggle for visibility and recognition. However, I suggest that the term 'refugee' has connotations of non-European-ness, implying that individuals so described by a xenophobic host culture are somehow 'not-white-enough' to be in the same bracket as the more favourably viewed émigrés and exiles. On the other hand, they are 'not-black-enough' to be seen as coherently distinct and hence fundable and marketable in brand *Britain*, where diversity is hip so long as it is predicated on notions of ethnicity. At this point, a familiar rock and hard-place loom on the horizon. An exhibition of 'Tibetan refugee artists' or 'Kurdish refugee artists', rather than 'refugee artists', may well lift the lid to the funding pot at least. On the other hand, this route objectifies, contains, and limits the individual's freedom of expression even more and potentially further removes him or her from being able to function simply as 'artist', with all the lack of constraint that this term conveys. 'Refugee artists' could be a new movement but I am struck with a sense of *déjà vu*: these are old arguments, familiar issues. 'Women artists', 'black artists', they have been there before. 'Diversity' and 'diaspora' are cooler now than ever, and key terms in the discourse of *decibel*, Arts Council England's new and powerful initiative. Indeed, we may speculate as to whether diversity is the new ethnicity, and diaspora the new race. This lexical minefield is the new, real-time frame for any emerging group to negotiate, and it is a little bit tricky out there. Asylum seekers and refugees who are artists/artists who are asylum seekers or refugees are a new cultural phenomenon entering and negotiating the contemporary arena. It will be as interesting to see whether they choose to identify themselves together as a group that challenges this frame as it will to see just how and if the art world engages with them. These are new literal and figurative border crossings that are structuring new power relationships on the UK cultural map, and they deserve to be charted.