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NOMADIC DIALOGUES

UCA Conference: Imaging at the Intersections of Arts, Science and Culture

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Our brief presentation illustrates three examples of research and practice that involve journeying, non-hierarchical collaboration, and ‘Nomadic Dialogues’ as dynamic elements.

SLIDE 1 Reading Landscape – Aims and Website

Reading Landscape comprises colleagues, mostly from the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art. Established in 2014, we currently have 22 research-practitioners within the group, including our colleague, Gina Wall. Our research themes reflect members’ practice, and we’ve worked nationally on research projects and academic collaborations in remote locations in Scotland. Details of these projects are on our website.

SLIDE 2 Practicing Landscape peripatetic seminar

The group has consciously used fieldwork as a method to research and learn through shared experience. For example, in this week-long peripatetic seminar, different members of Reading Landscape led discussions, that reflected their own research interests, with experts in locations where they’re actively engaged in research; journeying over 300 miles from Glasgow to Orkney in the process.

SLIDE 3 Creative Centre for Fluid Territories – Research Questions and Website

Certain members of Reading Landscape are also engaged in international networks, such as the Creative Centre for Fluid Territories. CCFT is an interdisciplinary network which examines questions of place identity, particularly border territories and contested landscapes. In the case of this image, in a village in Cyprus that, prior to the mid-1960s, was intercommunal; where Cypriot Greeks and Turks – Orthodox Christians and Muslims – had lived harmoniously together.

SLIDE 4 A series of Nomadic Dialogues Cyprus and Norway

CCFT also uses a peripatetic model: moving between Scotland, England, Norway and Cyprus. We have no fixed centre, but meet in chosen locations to undertake practice-led projects and what we call ‘Nomadic Dialogues’, involving artists, invited specialists from the Arts & Humanities, as well as students: people who bring both specialist and, importantly, local knowledge to the conversations. We learn from them, and the artworks provide the conduit through which we can be in dialogue. Our Nomadic Dialogues are, therefore, both a method and an outcome that generate a “rhizomatic interconnected plane of *being*”. [UCA Nomadic Image – Conference outline.]

SLIDE 5 ‘Urban Glendi’, Buffer Fringe 2019 as an example of one Nomadic Dialogue (where we have used letters)

One of our collaborative contributions to CCFT’s Nomadic Dialogues has been an ongoing series of ‘*Coffee Letters*’ – 50 to date. These letters are written from locations in Europe, Scandanavia, and the Mediterranean, and reflect upon experiences since the Millennium.

They are written from an anonymous ‘I’ to an unnamed ‘you’; a strategy that draws the viewer or reader into a world where distinctions between *I* and *you* – or *self* and *other* – become interchangeable. In this slide, the letters were shown as part of Cyprus Buffer Fringe, in 2019, inside the UN de-militarized Buffer Zone and at the Home4Cooperation, an NGO focused on fostering intercommunal dialogue between the North and South of the island. CCFT’s temporary occupation of ‘no-man’s-land’ brought audiences from both sides of the border together and the *Coffee Letters* formed a locus for conversations between strangers.

SLIDE 6 Yedelir Turbesi and other example letters

All of the events described in the letters are actual experiences witnessed on the dates given, and subsequently reflected upon. The texts are deliberately written to evoke a personal and sensory experience of place and encounter, in order to awaken the visual imagination of the reader or listener.

Like an image, the letters capture moments where understanding or insight can only be glimpsed. [Barthes and Bonnefoy]

They are *fragments* that speak about humanity and geo-political complexity. What is written becomes an event [Lyotard] repeated each time it is read ...

South Nicosia, 12th July 2006

I've arrived at the hotel and have just settled in. The flight went smoothly and I passed the time reading various newspapers, but they didn't make for easy reading. The world is full of tales of displacement. Even when I arrived tonight I encountered another. *En route* from Larnaca Airport the taxi driver talked, in broken English, of his family's lands in the North – near Famagusta – from which he was excluded and is now estranged. His anger at a thirty-year long loss was tangible: his memories became a minefield of pain and frustration. Where his grasp of English failed him, he resorted to Greek and his narrative, driven by its own momentum, drifted out of the range of my understanding. At those moments and as the land slipped by, lost in the darkness, I listened in silence and found myself thinking of your encounter with an elderly woman in Kyrenia who told you her story – in a mix of English and her mother tongue – of an EOKA-B raid on her village: of the capture of the Cypriot-Turkish men and boys and of their disappearance in the night. Along with the other women, she later fled north, no longer at ease in what had once been their homes. Both she and the taxi driver had each left places resonant with a deep sense of belonging, and journeyed with only a few possessions; never really to come to rest. The places, their homes, the things left behind were ghosts that still haunted their memories. Now, in turn, they haunt our understanding of such places too.

Yediler Turbesi, Lefkoça, North Cyprus,
31st March 2018

A very old woman brought the keys for me, walking from her house with the aid of a walking frame, her feet shuffling and scuffing over the ground. Her progress down the sloping street was painfully slow, and many minutes passed before she reached the tomb's green door, during which time I regretted having taken her from her rest. Seven tombs, each containing the remains of a martyr who had died during the siege and capture of the City by the Ottoman army some four hundred years ago, were each shrouded under a beautiful, well kept, green and gilt silk cloth. Their purity seemed so at odds with the sad dereliction of the locality, within the 'so-called' Dead Zone and up against the no-mans-land of the Buffer Zone. A mother of three boys had accompanied me into the tomb and she showed her children how to offer prayers and ask for blessings: her hand touching each headstone with a casual gentleness as she made her recitations. She then asked me to photograph her kids, despite knowing that they would only ever see the image on the back of my camera. I was reminded of that time many years ago now when you and I walked in an equally dilapidated area, just a few streets away in what had been the Armenian district of the Old City, and were accosted by a group of children who, after a few words of English were exchanged, gestured for their picture to be taken, and then ran away giggling shyly. I helped the old woman replace the gauze and wood screen over the doorway and lock up, and watched her slowly retreat to her home.

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