

Index Arts (Writers and Scholars Educational Trust)

Albanian artist Denis Hyka had not been back to Albania since he left in 1997. Film maker Violana Murataj, who is 12 years his junior, had grown up in the very violence which Denku had left as a young man. Though 1,000 miles apart, they collaborated on an art project which explored emotions and memory and the social and psychological impact of migration. The resulting work – incorporating Hyka’s drawings and Murataj’s film and photographs – documented Murataj’s emotive search to find Hyka’s grandmother’s garden, and was exhibited at Tate Britain.

Such is the way that Index Arts is giving voice to the experience of exile and migration in Britain. Index Arts was set up in 2005 as the specialist arts arm of the celebrated UK freedom of speech NGO, Index on Censorship, with the mandate to promote and support freedom of artistic and cultural expression for disempowered, under- and mis-represented or silenced communities and individuals in the UK and around the world. The **imagine art after** exhibition, hosted by Tate Britain (*October 2007-January 2008*), was the first major output.

It evolved from a series of dialogues between exiled artists living in Britain and counterparts in their countries of origin, drawn from the list of countries whose people make the most applications for asylum in the UK. Such pairings comprised 14 artists based in London and Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Iraq and Serbia, who exchanged via an internet-based dialogue on the Guardian Unlimited website about life, art and their experience of London and their country of origin.

Six artists among the group - among them Murataj and Hyka, as well as Muyiwa Osifuye (Nigeria), Addisem Bizuwork (Ethiopia), and two other London artists Eritrean Senayt Samuel and Iraqi Estabrak - were subsequently commissioned by Index Arts to extend their collaboration to produce works for the **imagine art after** exhibition.

Julia Farrington, Index Arts’ Director, talks of the importance of the project in giving voice to the experience of people and cultures from the fringes of society in Britain, and also the change in perspective that arises from enabling artists to speak about the subject of migration, which is usually the domain only of politicians and journalists.

“One of the ideas was to bring voices from the margins into the mainstream and to look at cultures which are under-represented in Britain, and address that issue of under-representation, by making sure that major art institutions like the Tate are able to represent and respect the broader make up of the community,” says Farrington.

“I think what it does is contextualise the whole issue of migration and the impact it has on the UK by relating back to the countries of origin. It does provoke a very interesting discussion and exchange.

“For artists, it touches a deep chord of their own experience and has genuinely influenced their work. We have had feedback which has shown that it inspired new ideas and triggered new approaches. And it also creates an important profile for artists, both here and abroad, who would not normally get the chance to exhibit.”

imagine art after is now moving into a second edition with a new programme of dialogues between 10-14 pairs of artists from 35 countries happening in 2009, with a further, larger exhibition due to take place in 2012.

Exciting plans are also in hand to extend the scope of the project to include educational work with schools and youth groups, Diaspora groups and host communities, enabling the artists to become more of a catalyst for the discussion of migration and cultural diversity in community settings.

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