

# THE CREATIVE MARGINS OF GLASGOW: PROCESS-BASED ART, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND HOUSING ESTATES

>> ISEULT TIMMERMANS INTERVIEWED BY KIRSTEN MCALLISTER

STREET LEVEL PHOTOWORKS, GLASGOW, OCTOBER 08 2009

## Street Level Photoworks

*Street Level was founded in 1989. From its inception it has provided artists and the public with the opportunity to produce and participate in photography and lens-based media. It aims to make artistic production accessible, both physically and intellectually, to a wide audience. Recognised for its integrated practice, the organisation promotes the work of artists through exhibitions, commissions, residencies, and publications; an education programme; community collaborations; open access facilities and training courses for the public.... the education programme involves a range of collaborations in the community, with schools and with agencies working across areas of inclusion, social justice, and equalities. It aims to enable the creativity of non-artists, increase involvement by under-represented groups, and assist the artistic programme by engaging participants.*<sup>1</sup>

### multi-story

*multi-story is a collaborative arts programme based in the Red Road flats, North Glasgow, Scotland. Established in 2004 by Street Level Photoworks, multi-story collaborators include artists, local residents and community organisations.*

*multi-story offers opportunities for people to take part in creative activity alongside artists and aims to support dialogues across communities. Using traditional and contemporary art multi-story explores current issues of regeneration and aims to celebrate different cultural traditions and explore the dynamics of Glasgow's changing communities.*<sup>2</sup>

**Kirsten:** You've been doing community-based art in Glasgow for over a decade. The art projects you've done with asylum seekers are on the multi-story website. How did you produce this work?

**Iseult:** We ran weekly skills based workshops for asylum seekers resident with the YMCA at the Red Road flats. I describe the project as collaborative arts practice. We don't prescribe or impose ideas on participants, although we do offer ideas. I work collaboratively, so the process is very fluid, sessions aren't rigidly scripted whilst there is an over arching structure in place. This allows the space for the creative direction to be developed at a pace and level that my collaborators are comfortable with and capable of. This approach allows the chance for create possibilities that I could not have devised on my own. In practical terms, the workshops we offered were across a range of different media from traditional film based photography, including large format (5x4) Polaroid portrait workshops through to digital photography, Photoshop, web design and digital imaging. We had three classes a week running from the community resource space at the YMCA.

**K:** Can you tell me more about the YMCA and Red Road flats?

**I:** The YMCA was 1 of 3 main agencies contracted to house asylum seekers in Glasgow. The YMCA (now Y People) already leased a 30-story tower block, one of the 8 Red Road flats in North Glasgow. The Red Road flats are significant in Glasgow as they were the showcases of social housing in the early 70's and were the highest tower blocks in Europe at the time they were built. They are all now scheduled for demolition, although at the time we started multi-story this had not yet been announced. By 2004 the residents of the Y's block were almost exclusively asylum seekers. The 28<sup>th</sup> floor housed a dedicated space for use as a community facility. There was a little café, a crèche, (daycare), a games room and computer

1 [http://www.streelevelphotoworks.org/street level/about/about.html](http://www.streelevelphotoworks.org/street%20level/about/about.html)

2 <http://www.multi-story.org/home.php>



From the series *Messages Home*, 2005.

Photo by Iseult Timmermans.



*Documentation from the Girl's Photography Group*,

2008. Photo by Iseult Timmermans.



suite. That's where multi-story began.

The back-story, is quite long. Street Level has a history of education outreach work and a good relationship with Glasgow's Culture and Leisure Services (now Glasgow Life). I started working with Street Level soon after I first graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 1995. I delivered a number of creative photography projects that were commissioned by GCC (Glasgow City Council). In 1999 I was working on a project called "I Belong To Glasgow". It was being delivered

across 3 schools and part of a larger inclusion strategy addressing cultural diversity in Glasgow. One of the schools was Woodside Secondary and I was working with a group of Scottish Asian girls, introducing photography and also doing some portrait work that explored the use of objects as symbols for personal identity. At the time this project was coming to an end Glasgow accepted a contract to house Kosovan refugees. They weren't seeking asylum, they were declared refugees in their country of origin. A lot of the atrocities of

the war were being reported in the media here - Sarajevo was fresh in people's minds - so there was broad public support and a lot of good will in Glasgow toward them (that is not to say there weren't issues and prejudice in the areas they were housed). Woodside Secondary had a bilingual education support unit and so was the school where the Kosovan young people were going to attend. The head of the Art Department at the time, who was a wonderful teacher, said to me "What a shame we're just finishing your project here because it would be great to do something with these newly arrived refugees, especially as they have little English. A visual art project would really be perfect." And I said "You're absolutely right." It coincided with a project Street Level were developing called 'Artworks With Young People', that involved 23 schools across the city—so we included Woodside Secondary and the refugee teenagers.

**K:** What type of funding was it?

**I:** It was Children and Young People's Lottery Fund through the Scottish Arts Council. It took over nine months to develop the project, so by the time I started working with the Kosovo refugees, they had been in Glasgow for almost a year. All of them had top grades in every subject that they studied and spoke confident English. I was working a lot at that time in areas of social exclusion with teenagers with challenging behaviour, so these young people were a real delight for me to work with. They were polite, attentive and grateful. It was a very positive experience for me as a practitioner. I introduced them to B&W photography, running the sessions at Street Level as an after school activity. I didn't introduce anything referencing their past or the war. I wanted this to be an opportunity for them to have a creative experience without imposing a theme relating to them being refugees. I gave them disposable cameras to document their home

life and they printed b&w post cards that we were intending to send to their relatives back home. It was scheduled to be a twelve-week project but unfortunately, in week six, five of the six returned to Kosovo because they were here with just one years leave to remain. Kosovo was declared no longer a war zone; therefore many who'd been given refugee status in Glasgow had to start the preparations to return. So the project finished with one young person, Alexis<sup>1</sup>, whose family secured an extension on their leave to remain due to extenuating circumstances. Our final session was kind of eerie because it was just me and Alexis in the darkroom printing photographs and she started telling me about some of her experiences in the war and described a bomb going off and seeing her neighbours' head rolling across the pavement in front of her. Hearing these accounts in the red light of the darkroom with the sound of running water in the background was a powerful moment. I reflected on it afterwards and thought there's something about the process - a safe space that you can create with people, if they want to share or if they have things they need to unlock, it can support that. This approach is different from targeting a project directly to document people's stories, it is different from the reportage that most people associate with photography and refugees. The work is not about extracting stories but it does unearth some powerful stories in the process. It's more about establishing a project that makes a safe creative space and a context where quite naturally, accounts start to come out if people have suppressed trauma or something they want to express.

Something else I discovered working with the Kosovan students was that they'd been living in Glasgow for nearly a year and they knew nothing of the city or the surrounding area. They knew the housing scheme where they lived and

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<sup>1</sup> names have been changed in this interview

the school and practically nothing outside of that. A bus was sent to pick them up and would drop them home at the end of the day. At weekends they stayed on their scheme. There was quite a lot of fear. They lived in pretty rough areas that I found intimidating as somebody who can quite discreetly walk down the street and not stand out too much. For refugees who clearly looked out of place - and it'd be clear they were new because at the time there was little cultural diversity in these areas - it was a difficult time. In the last session I asked Alexis: "If you could do this again, or more of this what would you like to do?"

"I'd like to see more of the countryside." she replied.

So the next project was shaped from that experience. It introduced asylum seekers to photography with trips to various Scottish landmarks. This project was called "New Horizons" which we developed with the Scottish Refugee Council. They recruited participants and it was run from Street Level. We went to Glasgow Green<sup>2</sup> with cameras made from old coffee tins and took film cameras to Loch Lomond (a popular national park) among other places. The participants were living in different areas across the city, so we also went to where everybody lived, and took photographs in their areas as well.

**K:** Was it through this project that you developed a relation with the Red Road flats?

**I:** Yes, one of the participants was housed in the YMCA accommodation at the Red Road. He was a very articulate guy with strong views. He was a nurse from Ethiopia and among other things, was distressed about not being able to work here. He had issues with the rules at the YMCA. He wanted to do a video interview with the Volunteer Manager, Shirley Gillan, which she agreed to. So we filmed an interview with her, during which

she mentioned she was about to open a new community resource in the building, on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor. It hadn't opened up yet and she was looking for agencies to deliver activities for residents. So it was through that interview that the seed of what was to become multi-story was planted.

**K:** Why did he want to interview the volunteer coordinator for the Y? That was the building where he's staying, right?

**I:** His main issue was he couldn't have overnight visitors. He wanted his friends to be able to visit him (a girlfriend I suspected). He knew other asylum seekers who were housed in some of the other local tower blocks and there was no monitoring, they were given the keys to a flat and that was it. However, the YMCA building has a secure reception area and residents and visitors have to sign in and out, and everyone gets buzzed in and out of the building. This has to do with their health and safety regulations and the rule about no overnight visitors is practical and relates to their contractual obligations. There were solid reasons for the restrictions, within them it offers a safe and supportive environment to residents, and these benefits were appreciated by many of the families with young children staying there. The surrounding blocks had mixed tenancies, some flats housed asylum seekers on temporary contracts and some GHA tenants, mainly Scottish people. I was told about conflicts and bad incidents in the lifts. These issues did not affect residents at the YMCA but Mustapha was independent and didn't feel the need for the protection that came with the restrictions.

**K:** So he interviewed the volunteer coordinator to confront her about the restrictions.

**I:** He wanted an explanation for the restrictions they imposed on asylum seekers because he saw it as barely better than being in prison. Shirley was fantastic in her replies, you could tell from the start that she had genuine respect for Mustapha

<sup>2</sup> Glasgow Green is the city's largest and oldest common land, over which, historically, the public had certain rights.

and the dialogue was very friendly. I want to emphasize that he didn't have high-octane angst toward her – his manner was more a cheeky tone. He had a point he wanted to make with this interview. He was granted refugee status about a year later and got a job with the NHS (National Health Services). He called into the gallery one day and had some interesting things to say about disease in Scotland and the state of the NHS. He said he'd worked in many hospitals in the third world and the Victoria Infirmary was worse than any hospital he'd seen in the third world. He also said we didn't have disease in the west as he knew it, what we had was self-inflicted problems due to lifestyle. The diseases here were alcohol related, diet related and related to a lack of exercise. It required a very different kind of nursing and medical support than he'd been used to and he was horrified. I've heard quite a few refugees talk of how the idea they had of the UK was very different from the reality they discovered.

**K:** ... inside the empire, someone once described it to me as being in the belly of the beast, though he was referring to the United States.

**I:** You're not in danger here (compared to Iraq or Somalia) but we do have poverty and social exclusion, especially in the areas of Glasgow that asylum seekers were dispersed to and I think this was a shock for many people.

**K:** Going back to the interview with Shirley Gillan, you said this is when she told you that she just managed to secure funding to open a community resource room in the Y's building?

**I:** Yes. I instantly responded and we began a dialogue that led to the start of multi-story. The first 2 years were funded by The Scottish Refugee Integration Fund—SRIF. Glasgow City Council negotiated its first contract with UKBA (UK Boarder Agency) to house asylum seekers in 2000 and a second in 2006. At the time we received funding, between 2004—6, I believe about 80% of the asylum

claims were getting positive decisions.

**K:** Was processing quite fast then?

**I:** No, it wasn't fast at all. There were lots of problems getting the cogs going in the system but there was a high rate of positive decisions. There is some relevant background to understand the potential benefits to Scotland in all this - actually Glasgow, since Glasgow was the only city that accepted asylum seekers. I remember political debates at this time about the declining population in Scotland and linked declining economy. There was an acknowledgement that Scotland needed initiatives to boost the population.

**K:** This is the context for Glasgow's decision to sign the contract with UKBA?

**I:** Of course there is no direct link, I mention it to set a bit of the broader context regarding the population in Scotland. Glasgow had significant empty housing stock that it couldn't rent and each asylum seeker comes with a funding package. I'm not saying this in any cynical way but it's an important fact that a lot of people, particularly people living in the areas of dispersal, weren't aware that incoming asylum seekers weren't taking flats that other people wanted and they were not living off taxpayers' money. They were bringing income into areas in decline. There has been a lot of regeneration across Glasgow in social housing, including in the areas where asylum seekers have been housed. I don't know the figures but I'd guess that the income from housing asylum seekers has made a positive contribution to the regeneration in these areas.

**K:** When you say regeneration you mean refurbishing?

**I:** Some refurbishing and some complete demolition and rebuilding—as with the Red Road flats.

**K:** I went to see a refugee event at the Sitehill scheme. I had the address but when I got there the building was being knocked down. I went up to one of the construction guys and said,

“I’m looking for this address.” He replied, “I don’t know, as you can see the building is being knocked down.” I eventually found the event in a building around the corner. All the surrounding buildings were being demolished. So that is part of the planning that has been brought in?

**I:** Yes.

**K:** I want to ask about New Horizons, the project you did with the Scottish Refugee Council.

**I:** The project was based on the format of an orientation guide. As a group we went to key landmarks in the city and participants took photographs and then, as I mentioned, we went outside the city also. We also documented where people lived. We invited people to talk about their experiences of arriving and what they had experienced before fleeing their former homelands, but it was a very open offer. All of them wanted to talk about these things.

**K:** Can you talk more about the format?

**I:** The work was produced as a CD-ROM. The structure was based on a guide to Glasgow, when you open the CD, it is a map of the city with a variety of landmarks. It combined things like, “here’s Primark, a really great place to buy cheap clothes,” and “here’s the centre of town.” “Here’s Glasgow Green, it’s a public facility. There’s the People’s Palace with the Winter Garden, a beautiful place to go, always warm, open to all and free.” So it was about both land-marking key facilities and also wove the personal narratives that drew their experiences into the cityscape of Glasgow. They all talked to different extents about the complete disorientation they experienced when they arrived. One woman didn’t even know what country she was in. She thought she was coming to the UK but after the first day, came to the conclusion that she wasn’t in the UK at all, because she spoke English and no one in this country was speaking English, because she couldn’t understand the Scottish accent.

And no one could understand her. I think it was a really successful piece. It is based on the very simple premise of taking people on a journey, it’s literally a physical orientation of where they are, where facilities are and what support systems are in place for asylum seekers. The dialogue shares the participants emotional response to being in a new place and some of the trauma of their past. It was a both a useful resource for new asylum seekers and equally for Scottish people to gain an insight of what life is like for asylum seekers here. So it was also used as an educational tool and distributed to schools during Refugee Week to highlight issues around asylum seeking from an individual’s perspective and to help tackle prejudice.

**K:** From what I have seen on the multi-story website, the spatial dimension is a key component of all the work in multi-story. Re-mapping Glasgow. It isn’t mapping that involves surveying and surveillance. You introduce another type of mapping, another use of technology—it is about how to be in a place.

**I:** Since photography was invented, it was used for evidencing, in portraits for example, of explorers standing on the mountain: “This is me here”. It’s the document that says, “I made it”. I think we all do that in a less conscious way. For asylum seekers, who don’t yet have the right to be anywhere, it isn’t quite the same. Obviously, a lot of people didn’t arrive in Glasgow with cameras and back in 2004 mobile phones were not as common as they are now and a camera phone was quite rare. When I was offering the portrait workshops at the YMCA, they were very popular, especially with women and their children. They couldn’t get enough photographs of themselves. I had intended the portrait workshop as a warm up, introductory session—and ran it for 2 years! Many didn’t really want to learn about how to download and print them (although I also had



these skills sessions running). Most wanted to be able to email photographs to people. I remember one experience of delivering a portrait workshop vividly. I have a 5x4 camera that I love to use with Polaroid film for this workshop, as it makes taking a photograph a participatory event. The glass plate on the back reflects everything upside down and back to front and you need to use a dark cloth to view it. So it's a very different experience for people and viewing the sitter is quite magical. You instantly get a 5x4 beautiful, quality colour photograph that you can hand over to someone on the spot. This was one of my favourite workshops to deliver and was very popular. I was asked to deliver it as part of International Women's Day, 2005 I think, at an event held at a community hall. There was a full days programme based on empowerment for refugee and asylum seeking women. People shared their experiences in the morning, for instance many weren't familiar with the money here and some shops were short changing them. Even when they knew they weren't being given correct change, they were too nervous to say anything. So this was a day for empowering women and introducing skills to support them.

**K:** Was the event at Red Road?

**I:** No, it was in a different part of the city. It brought refugee women from different areas together. So I set up my camera, I had a little office screen that I threw my black cloth over and made an instant studio; I also had a couple of basic lights—Red Heads. My assistant for the afternoon was a YMCA volunteer, a lovely Scottish woman in her sixties—Cathy. She was not in the best of health and had a walking stick because of arthritis but was a very lively woman. I had two boxes of film, twenty in a pack, so forty sheets total. The session was 2 hours and it's quite a slow process so I felt amply stocked. But I can tell you - I have never taken so many 5x4 photographs

so quickly before, it was like a factory as soon as I got started. Since the photos take only two minutes or ninety seconds to develop, there is a very short time between each person's portrait. A buzz started up and I looked over my shoulder to see a long line of women almost immediately. I asked Cathy to check how many women there were and counted my film stock. "Cathy, you're going to have to put an end to the queue." I said. But the queue was getting bigger by the second. As Cathy tried to put an end point to the queue a few women started to dispute who got there first. These were the women who weren't empowered enough to say, "I don't think you've given me enough change," - ready to defend their place in this queue and did not intend to leave without a photograph. I did run out of film in the end, so to settle the dispute I took digital photographs of the women that stood their ground at the end of the queue and posted their photos the next week. I'll never forget the sense that gripped that session at the point when it was clear the film was going to run out; the queue started crowding in on me and the lights were really hot—they aren't called Red Heads for no reason. An enduring image for me is when I turned to Cathy in a slight panic and said "They are starting to knock the lights, you have to hold them back." I turned around again and she was standing with her walking stick held straight out in front of her, holding the jostling queue of women back. When I came away from that day I thought to myself "What was that about?". Perhaps it's because it's the evidence, the evidence of having arrived. It's a document that proves they're here. And though I don't like to say it myself, they were quite beautiful photographs as well.

**K:** There's something about having a photograph, an image of yourself.

**I:** We don't see ourselves most of the time. I don't see myself sitting here in this room. You see me

but I don't see me. And I think there is something particularly compelling about seeing yourself in a new place, especially if it's been a long or difficult journey getting there.

**K:** Something affirmative. Something powerful. The relationship between you as a photographer and the sitters, as they compose themselves and present themselves for the photograph, followed by you taking this image, literally capturing it on film.

**I:** It was certainly something they wanted.

**K:** It's significant that they could articulate what they wanted, whereas it was difficult, as you said, for them to confront the shopkeeper and say, "You haven't given me the proper change."

**I:** There must be a link to the right to be somewhere. I began to think about this in more detail when you emailed me earlier and asked what I wanted to accomplish through multi-story. I started trying to articulate some of the things I thought we had accomplished or offered, which is actually very mixed. Some people engage at quite a superficial level and others delve deeper. Yet there's something about being respected and being validated, being personally empowered in a powerless situation that is central to the work. Asylum Seekers are very powerless, they are waiting for someone else to decide their future and they are completely out of place in the areas where they are housed. That relationship to their right to be there is very insecure - so any kind of process that supports a right to be, in whatever form - that fundamental right that is alive within you rather than external rights in the world - is essential to the human spirit. This is an area where the arts can make a positive contribution.

**K:** With respect to the photographic process and in particular your description of setting up the camera, and the actual ritual of taking the photograph, there's Jo Spence's work<sup>3</sup> about

the very act of taking the photograph, the ritual of taking an image, so it's not just about the photograph itself but rather it's about the process. Even when you talked about the moment with the Kosovan student in the darkroom, that's part of the process. As a medium, then, it's important to consider all the dimensions of how it works in relationship to memory and place and identity.

**K:** I want to ask more about multi-story. Once you were set up in the YMCA building, did other organizations start approaching you to do other events?

**I:** Yes we got involved in various kinds of events and extended partnerships in the area: The Red Road Women's Centre, Tron St. Mary's Church and Alive and Kicking. The church is very active in providing drop in services for asylum seekers. Alive and Kicking doesn't work with asylum seekers but is a really fantastic project for elderly people. They provide services for older Scottish people, some of whom were the original residents in Red Road flats back in the early 1970's. We interviewed some people for a newsletter, sharing their memories of the early days in the flats.

**K:** How did the structure of multi-story contribute to this mapping element of the work?

**I:** We launched a website for multi-story to showcase the work because it seemed an accessible platform and gave the results an International reach. We had a commitment to local events and exhibitions but we launched the website with an exhibition at Street Level in March 2005. We aimed to make strong links to the work in the community and the gallery, to establish new pathways for people to access cultural facilities and also to celebrate and present the work created on the project to a different audience. The first workshops to be delivered within multi-story were with an artists collective from Manchester

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3 Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds) (1991) *Family Snaps: the*

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*Meanings of Domestic Photography of Domestic Photography.*  
London: Virago.

called Virtual Migrants. They had an exhibition at Street Level and we invited them to run some participatory workshops. An artist called Kooj Chuhan delivered a series of video-making workshops with a group of young people at the community resource at the YMCA. It was fantastic. He made three films with three different groups in a week. It happened to coincide with the launch of a new International Human Rights Film Festival called Document. The co-ordinator, Paula Larkin, invited Kooj to screen the film. So literally the film was made and screened within a week. The film was called 'Surviving in Shawbridge'<sup>4</sup> about four young asylum seekers from Russia, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Zimbabwe. It told the story of how they had met in Glasgow and formed a band, also of an incident when one of them was stabbed in the head. Their lyrics were about their experiences of being asylum seekers and young people trying to make sense of the world. They had never shared any of their songs with anybody before this film was made and by the end of the week they were watching a documentary about themselves, made with and by them at the UGC. (strange co-incidence it was the tallest cinema in Europe at the time and the workshops at the Red Road where the film was made, were also the tallest in Europe at the time they were built!). It was a really great start for multi-story. The band were called 4D (4 dimensions) and played their first live gig at the multi-story opening night at Street Level, 6 months after their film was made. They were seen by an events promoter and went on to perform lots of gigs at community events across the city that year.

**K:** Going back to the multi-story website, when I first came across it in 2007, I was fascinated. I loved it. When you enter the site, there's music that takes you into another space, a musical-aural

space, and then the buildings start popping up, "whoop, whoop." It was really magical. When you click on the windows of the buildings it's like one of those advent Christmas calendars where each day has a window, and when you open the window, there's a little image inside, sometimes a chocolate. The mystery resonated with me. But in the buildings on the multi-story website, in each of the windows, there were stories of asylum seekers told through photos, songs, and writing. When was this work made?

**I:** It was made between 2004—2006. I liked that format because you could offer people a window to fill as they wished. The narratives and images are not always from the same people. We've put some people's narratives with other people's images, it was flexible how the windows—the rooms—if you like were occupied.

**K:** When you brought together different people's work in a window, whether it was interviews or text or images, how involved were people?

**I:** To be honest it was varied. Some people were actively involved and some people had left Scotland by the time we began designing the site. So, not everybody sat down in a big room and had a debate about it. Some people didn't mind how their dialogue was used, their engagement had been in the workshop and they were busy doing other things and didn't want more engagement other than to sign the consent form. Other people were really involved and particular about how their work was presented because some people might have only been involved in one workshop session while others had been involved for up to twelve months. There was no standard engagement.

**K:** So that put you in the position of facilitating, or bringing all the work into dialogue. There were six months followed by another eighteen months of generating material. There must of have been masses of material. There's different media

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4 Produced as part of Exhale publication. [www.virtualmigrants.com/index.htm](http://www.virtualmigrants.com/index.htm)

involved: some windows have little film clips. Some people sing songs; and there are collage pieces; there's one that plays on that famous Scottish painting, "The Skating Minister" by Sir Henry Raeburn from the 1790s. Thus to be able to bring all that material, all the individual stories along with a socially sensitive understanding of everyone's circumstances and so on into dialogue in each little window space using the technical interface of the website is quite phenomenal.

I want to now ask about the issue of access. It's possible to view the windows as spaces of exhibition that anyone can access. As a medium, photographs are images that can move across different spaces, temporally and also geographically and now virtually, across formats, which makes them quite powerful in many ways. This intrigued me when you talked about the camera obscura project where, on the one hand, the project took place on site (at Red Road) then you created posters from the images. In this second form or iteration, in a physical material form, you could then distribute the images to different sites throughout the geography of the estate or even more widely throughout Glasgow.

**I:** Some images from that project were included in an exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in 2010. The images take on a completely different meaning in the context of the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow. Red Road is an iconic housing scheme. It was the showcase of social housing in Glasgow, all about the possibilities of social planning and architecture that shaped the postwar redevelopment of cities across the UK, Europe and internationally in the 1950s and 1960s. It is now in the process of being demolished. The images of Red Road, just before the first blocks come down, are now historical documents. In the gallery context, they operate totally differently from exhibiting them where they were made – and of course, they are seen by very different

people. We also produced a calendar using these images that was distributed across the flats and to ex-residents housed in the new builds locally. That was funded by the Red Road Project—a new initiative established by Glasgow Housing Association and Glasgow Life to commemorate and mark the demolition of the Red Road Flats and the end of an era.

**K:** Before I ask more about Red Road, I want to ask more about multi-story. It is now archived on Street Level's website and there's a new website for multi-story, which has a different aesthetic, which seems more static.

**I:** Both sites were created by the artist Lindsay Perth. The original website was designed in a dialogue with the creative team. In 2004 Lindsay was involved in six weeks of workshops, then she moved to Canada and continued as the web-designer for 2 years. When Lindsay returned to Glasgow she began a 3-year Artist Residency on the project. Lindsay wanted to create a new site for the new phase of activity and one of the ambitions was to make it much more dynamic. You feel it is more static but the aim was actually the opposite. For me a significant difference in the 2 versions of the site is that the first one offered navigation in 6 different languages and that made a big difference to the overall feel of it.

**K:** Was there less activity on the new site?

**I:** In terms of viewers, no. We have good hit stats.

**K:** multi-story shows that art projects don't necessarily have to result in categorization for asylum seekers, but given the stigma around being an asylum seeker in the UK and Europe, I can see why participants can be cautious. Categorization is something the government does. It is a key component in the operation of controlling members of a population. It is something that is "done to you." It happens when you first arrive somewhere new and you don't have the ability to define yourself on your own terms. I was at

a workshop this fall in Glasgow where a man, maybe in his sixties who works with youth, gave a presentation. A woman approached him and said, “You know, it’s so interesting to hear about your background. I love hearing about that. I know kids can feel offended when they’re asked where they’re from, even if they’ve grown up here, but I love hearing about their backgrounds.” He kept on saying: “No. These are kids who’ve been here for three generations right.” And she couldn’t hear him. I could see his frustration. Why is “exotic cultural difference,” code for “racial origin,” the first thing she has to know about him? It’s the reproduction of a system of labeling and categorizing that has colonial roots, deep cultural roots in the idea of the museum and collecting specimens.

**I:** We have always tried to approach and present the work within multi-story as collaborations with people. We took the word “asylum seekers” out of everything, and took it off the website but the fact is, the people we engage with are seeking asylum and much of their current experience is shaped by that, so at the same time we don’t avoid the issues that arise through the work either. It’s a balance that has to tilt and shift with everyone we work with because some people do have things they want to express that directly addresses issues relating to seeking asylum and some really don’t. multi-story has evolved and spread out of the YMCA and engaged with the broader Red Road community, not just asylum seekers in the last year. multi-story always aimed to establish new dialogues between people who were living at the Red Road Flats. The reality of what life is like for asylum seekers is unimaginable for most people and there are a lot of misconceptions and resentments based on lack of and false information amongst the broader population. To what extent are their (asylum seekers) realities connected to or understood by other people

in Glasgow? Or even, to what extent is their presence viewed as part of Glasgow?

**K:** An important component of multi-story then, as it has evolved over time, is questioning the segmentation and isolation of unwanted elements in the city’s (and country’s) population. Your projects start from the ground up in contrast to the modern designs of the original tower blocks with their grand utopian visions. So going back to the question of engagement, is it a question of finding the right format for each group of participants according to their situations and conditions of living?

**I:** Absolutely. The flats were designed to sway, someone told me by 3 feet but I’m not sure it’s as much as that. They have to sway because of the wind here, otherwise the structure could never withstand the environmental conditions. I think that’s a good analogy for multi-story as an arts project—it has had to have its own sway built in, otherwise it could never have lasted and been of interest to people for so long. Everyone’s interests and needs are different, that includes cultural background, level’s of English, ages—layer upon layer of differences. I have learned a lot over the duration of the project, both in relation to the collaborative process of making art with people and the presentation of outputs (artwork). I don’t believe there has to be a choice between process and product, both enrich the other. However, there can be a tension between different priorities for what the results of the work is – depending on who has funded the activity and who is working on it.

**K:** Did the terms of funding define or limit the scope of the project?

**I:** No, it has always related to what we wanted to achieve with the project.

**K:** Can you elaborate?

**I:** The first phase of the work was funded by the Scottish Executive and The Home Office, to assist

in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, and that was very much the focus of the work at the start. Then we received funding from Paul Hamlyn and Baring Foundations, charities that valued the role the arts can have in assisting social integration, so the remit remained in essence the same but there was better understanding from our funders about the art aspect and that supported a more creative approach to be explored in how we structured the delivery. I haven't had time to evaluate all of what has happened over the last couple of years but ultimately for me the core of the work is about much more than "art". It is art—but not as you know it. Sometimes what comes out of the project intersects with the art world, but creating work for public display has never been the only drive of the project. The connection with people, the collaborative sharing of creative techniques and ideas and extending inclusion in the arts has always been a central motivating force. Although those 2 aspects of the project are solidly embedded in the process, are part of the fabric of the project, they don't exist as static components, they shift and change. multi-story has always had several objectives and a lot of the work created can be personal for the participants and not for public display. While there is an extensive amount of material that multi-story shares with the wider public, there is a lot more material that will always remain unseen outside the immediate family and friends of the participants. We have to be careful with exhibitions and public events, especially in relation to some of the portraits of the women I discussed earlier. In some circumstances it's not appropriate to display work outside the environment it was made in and I don't ask participants directly if I can include their portraits in a city centre exhibition because there is a danger that if I ask, they will agree because they don't want to appear ungrateful. I don't want to propose something I know they are

not prepared for – or interested in. So, on some occasions I'll mention an exhibition is planned but leave it to them to come forward if they want to be included. Some do and some don't, which is absolutely fine with me. Sometimes, the experience we had making the portraits was the art.

**K:** It sounds like exhibiting the portraits would change the process and turn them into something else. Does this relate to your process-based model of art practice?

**I:** Sometimes. There is not one answer relating to the work within multi-story because different groups and strands of activity are different. The work I was talking about, that I didn't include in the GoMA exhibition, an example comes to mind of images made with a group that I ran in a church. The Reverend was a wonderful woman, she ran weekly drop in sessions for asylum seeking women, most of whom were Muslim. She welcomed everyone, regardless of religion because she was offering support to any woman who needed it, for me (who has never followed any religion) it demonstrated good Christian principles. She even let me set up my equipment at the altar, as it had the best natural light. It was a small group and several of the women wouldn't be seen in public without their headscarves and came from places where the threatened punishment for wearing lipstick was to have your lips cut off. The lasting image in my mind of that session is of women giggling like naughty children as they brushed their hair and put on makeup, bathed in a soft shaft of light on the altar of the church. That is where the art rests, timeless in the memory of those involved and perhaps alive on a mantle piece somewhere or in a new lipstick someone was empowered to own. I am very happy to let the art rest there, on that occasion.

**K:** You're talking about one's presentation of self, a process that is captured in the act of taking

photographs. Photography makes it possible for people to define their presentation of self, whether through how they pose, what they wear and include in the photograph. But that's only if they have input. Taking someone's photo can also function coercively, for instance when a photo is used as a device to identify the subject in the photo and the restrictions on her or his rights. On the discretion of an immigration officer or a health care worker, she or he might be denied the right to move across borders or access to emergency care. Many of us in countries like Canada and Scotland don't understand this coercive power. In contrast, your portrait workshops had an element of experimentation where the women were playing with their presentation of self: they defined how they portrayed themselves, whether privately, just for themselves or in other cases, for family or friends living somewhere else. It involved trust. They had to be confident that you understood their sense of play. They had to be confident that you "saw" them on their terms since as the photographer you were responsible for capturing the right image on film. Photography has an end product – the photograph – that can be taken out of context and used in a variety of ways depending on how and where it is distributed and exhibited—how it moves. It can "do things" that were never intended, whether liberating or damaging.

**I:** Absolutely. So there is a big responsibility as the image maker in this context to be clear about why you are there. Especially when there are language and cultural differences. Many of the people that I work with have no reference points for the debates that I and other artists have around socially engaged practice. Mostly, participants in the project only relate to what we're doing on the basis of what happens in the room together, it isn't contextualized as part of a larger meditation on art practice and social inclusion. Starting from

the act of bringing different people together in the same room, one has to be careful about what you put forward as shared reference points. Some arts projects that happen in communities are about using the people or place as material for an artwork that exists in the art world and have nothing much to do with the community. Sometimes that is a good experience for people, although certainly not the way multi-story has operated.

**K:** In your own practice, do you start with a sense of what you hope will happen?

**I:** This was one of the questions you emailed me before the interview. In response I wrote, "I always wanted great things to happen on different levels. I was primarily stimulated by people, their stories, their amazing capacity for survival, resourcefulness and they sparked in me the inspiration to make art -which was really about having a dialogue and translating their experiences into a creative format that shifted the terms of their conditions into another register, celebrating survival and exploring all of this as the subject matter of art." It was about supporting people living on the margins of society and giving them a chance to breathe some fresh air. My motivation was to stimulate dialogues and keep the resulting connections and exchanges going. Five years ago I had ideas about what this meant and how to make it happen, what it would look like - an exhibition, a film, a website - if it was going to be successful or meaningful. I've now learnt that what's meaningful can equally be private moments just as much as the big public celebrations. My motivation has always been to the simple magic of creative connections with people.

**K:** I want to return to Red Road and ask about the practical elements as well as the questions about your creativity as an artist. How would you define your role?

**I:** For the last 10 years, my job was mostly at Street Level as the Project Co-ordinator. My role has been to facilitate new connections to and from the gallery, to try and break down some of the social barriers that exist for many people that prevent them accessing and participating in the arts. Within that role I both co-ordinated projects and delivered creative workshops. The combination of these two facets in my work became what I relate to as my collaborative arts practice. My work has been to support a broad range of people to access the arts and their own creativity, alongside creating work collaboratively that merges their experiences with my creative expression. Many artists are working within this area and find different levels of engagement. Some artists get quite angry or upset in debates about social engagement, they make a clear distinction that they are not social workers. And while I totally agree, it's a big conversation about lines of responsibility and what it is we are actually doing with people, but I personally have felt validated with my arts practice being aware of it's intersection with social work. For example, I was involved in a three-year project with Leaving Care Services for young people in foster care and care leavers. The dialogues I had with the social workers were as productive and helpful to me as were the discussions with other artists. I understand artists that protest if they are not supported properly when working with difficult groups and the creative input becomes secondary to what they are expected to deliver but that's to do with project structure not an intrinsic principle about what the artistic role is—or can be. And sometimes, it can be a very hard and long process to create a space with people where art can happen.

**K:** The other extreme would be projects that strictly adhere to the terms of community integration funds where your work is expected to be very

instrumental with defined outputs. In this situation, where's the space for the type of work that you're doing, the creative work. Is there a tradition for this type of creative work in Scotland or more widely in the UK?

**I:** There is a strong history of community arts in the UK and Scotland particularly. David Harding is a significant figure here in Scotland, he wrote a wonderful article for the minigraph that accompanied the launch of multi-story, it can be found on the home page of the original multi-story web-site. He has compiled an on-line Public Art Index: an annotated bibliography of 131 magazine articles, published between 1969 and 1994, on Public Art and related themes. There is a lot of very relevant material here relating to art and social context: [www.davidharding.net](http://www.davidharding.net)

There's been a push for new types of artistic practice to be recognized and appreciated within the mainstream contemporary art world. "Community arts" from the perspective of galleries and artists can be a derogatory term because there's an assumption that it lacks quality and integrity. It's not "art" its "community art." Other than from a patronizing point of view, there would be no space for this work in a gallery. But there are artists who are challenging these assumptions and making powerful work. Tim Rollins is an American artist that established a project in the mid-eighties with 'at risk' teenagers in the South Bronx, New York. The group called themselves K.O.S (Kids Of Survival), have exhibited extensively and have work in prestigious private and public collections worldwide. He managed to fund the project by selling the work made with young people. An interesting project in Scotland is Deveron Arts, based in Huntly a 4000 people strong market town in the north east of Scotland. For Deveron Arts<sup>5</sup> the town is the venue: studio, gallery, and stage<sup>5</sup> for a wide

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5 [www.deveron-arts.com](http://www.deveron-arts.com)



range of visual and performing arts. They invite artists from all over the world to live and work in the town to meet with local people and exchange ideas on issues of both local and global concern. They use found spaces all over the town and its surrounding area, I particularly like their use of The Empty Shop. As artists develop the practice, the language has to adapt and new definitions sought to describe the work—community arts workers, community based artist, socially engaged artist, collaborative practice.... I feel a strong affinity toward the history of community arts and I'm cautious of being too involved in the debate for new definitions, it can unintentionally, further discredit an invalidated history rather than develop and evolve it. I have heard artists state indignantly "I'm not a community artist, I'm a socially engaged artist." So then we have these crazy frictions where what should be a proud history becomes something artists are trying to dissociate themselves from because it doesn't have enough value in the art world—which was what the whole debate was trying to address in the first place. I get uncomfortable when I feel dialogues entering that kind of territory.

**K:** There is something about the ethical commitment and suspicion of status and power, especially as the newest, slickest aesthetics feed into commodity culture. But going back to what you just said, so in attempts to validate their work with various communities, some artists have ended up dissociating themselves from the foundations of their practice. And they end up trying to validate themselves in terms defined by museums in the art world, by funders and through theoretical language.

**I:** What then is their connection with the community? And what does "community" describe today and where are communities in modern cities? That's something at the heart of multi-story: the erosion of community and if there is a possibility for new

communities or at least a sense of community to be facilitated through the arts in the context of de-communitised areas. There is no possibility for a new, stable community at the Red Road flats. The residents we engage with are fluid, individuals passing through an area that's being demolished. New communities may arise in the surrounding area but multi-story works in the waiting room that people are passing through, spending different amounts of time before they get on with their journey. That's an interesting space for an artist to work in but it limits what can be achieved.

**K:** It seems to me that it is precisely the exploration of what's possible in these transitory unstable conditions and spaces that makes the work creative. As you've said, you can't impose templates on the situation – what is possible must be generated with the people transiting through the margins of the city, through places like Red Road flats. What ever is generated comes from the conditions of existence, interfaced through different art practices and media. These people have very little control over their lives—where they are temporarily assigned to live, for instance. They aren't members of a homogenous community who share values, beliefs that simply need to be articulated. What seems magical is the moments where something happens—when something shifts, for instance with the portrait session when women experienced a sense of their right to be—at first, their right to be in the queue, a queue that leads somewhere, instead of being at the back of a queue and ending up with nothing. It was a photo, an image of themselves they sought—so esoteric in some ways but an image is all about being "present" of having a presence in your own right. The possibility of having an image of themselves ignited a sense of having, as you said, the right to be counted, to count, that makes a statement, that as you said, pronounces, "I am here".

POSTSCRIPT: FEBRUARY 2011, ISEULT TIMMERMANS.

### **THE END OF THE RED ROAD.**

In June 2010 Street Level received funding from GHA to establish a Community Studio on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor at 10 Red Road Court in partnership with The Red Road Project. The studio comprises of: a camera obscura room overlooking the Campsie Fells; a darkroom; workshop space; office and exhibition corridor. Street Level's programme has involved young people from the flats in weekly photography and animation workshops and women in creative photography. A series of trips and events, locally and city centre based continued to be delivered alongside this. This activity operates within the broader Red Road Flats Project and works alongside other artists and activities within the Community Studio. While Street Level's work retains the core principles and delivery methods of multi-story there is a new dimension to the work that is directed at the history of the Red Road, through the development of a Portrait Archive. This aims to create a collection of photographic portraits made with people that have lived in the Red Road flats across the duration of their history, tracing and connecting ex-residents. The process continues to be at the heart of the work, with portraits being made in sessions that involve a recorded discussion of the participants experience of the flats and photographs made in a variety of formats over several sittings, with the 5x4 camera bringing a performance aspect to the sessions that I still find magical. Whilst nearly all GHA tenants have now been re-housed the flats still accommodate over 500 temporary lets to over 1,000 people seeking asylum. When the first blocks were opened in the late 60's/ early seventies there was still building work going on with the remaining blocks, so the first residents lived on a building site. Today that history is being repeated in reverse, with people living on a demolition site. The issues of disorientation and insecurity are as acute as ever for these people and hence what Street Level offers is

as poignant as it was 6 years ago. The first two slab blocks are still in the process of being de-clad before the blow down of the steel framework next year. 10 Red Road Court will be next to be handed over to the demolition company, current predictions are that this will be mid-2012. It's hard to predict at what point Street Level's work in the Red Road will end and what shape it will take when we, like many of the residents, have to leave this base we have established. Not knowing how long we have left makes planning difficult and the need for the project sway to be as flexible as ever. The hard realities of life in The Red Road cannot be ignored and last year these found acute expression in the highly publicized suicide of 3 Russian asylum seekers—a mother, father and son jumped to their deaths from their balcony when their claim for asylum was refused. In interviews with ex-residents the issue of suicides from the flats nearly always comes up, it is a dark aspect of the history that goes right back to the start. Street Level will keep going for now and believe it's significant work, not an artistic whim, to keep the project work of multi-story going to the end of The Red Road.

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