

St Hugh's Foundation for the Arts
2017 Award Grantee - Rich Wiles
Final Project Report

Project Name - Ongoing Journeys

Project Dates - 3 September 2017 - 31 March 2018

Introduction

My major ongoing project 'Ongoing Journeys' took place with the support of the St Hugh's Foundation from September 2017 through to March 2018 as planned. The project has grown significantly during this period and interest is growing in the work nationally. Several unplanned developments have taken shape and there are various exciting new developments also in the pipelines.

The following document is the main narrative report, but within this final project documentation I have also included various supporting documents for clarity, these include:

- 1 - 'Timesheet' - A breakdown of weekly work implemented throughout the project.
- 2 - Financial Report - A breakdown of how St Hugh's Foundation financial support was spent.
- 3 - Images - Some photographic images from work produced.

Narrative Report

The project began and received support from the St Hugh's Foundation based on the aims and ideas of the original proposal submitted. These original aims are listed below along with the progress made within this project towards their achievement and any relevant issues that affected or related to them.

1 - Concept:

I will develop a long-term documentary photography project exploring the challenges faced by refugees rebuilding their lives in the UK. This will be used to create a multi-media tool to be used cross-syllabus in local Secondary schools to help students develop deeper understanding of the global refugee crisis and the challenges of relocation and resettlement. There will also be an accompanying photographic portrait exhibition which will be launched at Hull International Photography Festival in 2018 before being taken further afield.

The multi-media tool will be a 'non-linear web documentary' (NLWD). A 'NLWD' utilises new technologies to produce an interactive digital documentary (built primarily with still photographs) which, rather than having a beginning, middle and end is built around a 'map' in a 'non-linear' form allowing the viewer to direct the documentary themselves as they watch it - choosing which sections they watch in which order. Although these new technologies are not widely being used in education yet, I believe that the interactive nature of the tool offers greater educational potential than traditional formats as it allows students to 'learn themselves' rather than 'be taught'. The interactive experience therefore has parallels to computer gaming and social media which taps in to current interests of students and moves away from traditional teaching styles.

1b - Progress within the Project

Since September I have been working full time on this project. As with any long term project there have been some changes that have played out yet the fundamental structure of the project has been retained.

I have been working very intensively with one family of refugees who arrived in the UK from Syria in 2017. The results of the very intimate project will, I believe, become my most successful documentary project to date. Having the opportunity to fully dedicate myself to my creative practice without financial restraints and with full creative control has allowed a major development of my thought processes and practice. As originally intended, the main work within the scope of this period of the project was practical photographic (with supporting multi-media) work. The development of the multi-media tool is something that is now taking up more time after the completion of the St Hugh's project support.

The original intention to show the work at the 2018 HIP Festival has been among changes within the project for different reasons. Initially there were some doubts as to whether the 2018 HIP Fest would take place or not due to administrative issues within the festival. These have now thankfully been rectified, although due to this, and the fact that I now believe it better to wait until early 2019 to do the main launch as the project has expanded, I began to look for alternatives.

I met with David Sinclair the Director of Humber Street Gallery who, after seeing the strength of work in progress, offered me a major show over the 3 floors of the gallery. David then helped me to develop my Arts Council bid for the next stage of the project that would follow the St Hugh's support. After developing the project with me, and my Arts Council bid being successful, unbeknown to me David was not retained at HSG and a new curator took over along with new aims

for HSG centred around working with international artists. This caused a major problem for me - I had not been informed of these changes, and even when I spoke to David after he had been released he still didn't tell me himself and even told me that the show was still going ahead as planned. I later found out that he had acted outside of his remit, and had done similarly with other artists - he is no longer connected to the gallery and the new curator is now unable to include my project within the gallery due to restraints of the Arts Council funding they have themselves been given.

Due to these issues which presented a major challenge I was forced to look elsewhere. Discussions are now ongoing with other potential spaces in the city and the exhibition will be held within one of them around my new planned schedule which aims for the local launch of the exhibition in the new year.

The development of the multi-media tool is ongoing and I have schools onboard locally. AS the project has now grow significantly, I have now restructured original pans here also. Instead of launching the tool is different schools in September I will now run a pilot scheme in 2 or 3 schools in September allowing the schools to offer feedback for development. I believe this will create the potential to make the tool as useful to schools collectively as possible based on their needs and practices.

2 - Project Aims

The projects aims are rooted in the belief in socially-engaged art. The fundamental aim of the project is to help students in local area secondary schools develop a deeper understanding of issues of displacement and the lives and challenges of people who have been displaced. Specifically, this will focus on the challenges of relocation and resettlement in the local area. This focus is centred on the belief that developing deeper levels of understanding and greater clarity can play an important societal role in developing greater tolerance, understanding and even support for people facing these significant challenges. With the accompanying production and showing of the photography exhibition, these same fundamental aims will be spread further, reaching out to the wider public away from educational institutes.

2b - Progress within the Project

The project aims remain constant as the fundamental aims that inform my practice. The potential achievements within this area have only grown with the project as I have now developed an official project partnership with Platforma/Counter Point Arts. Platforma/Counterpoint Arts are the Arts Council's NPO specialising in arts related to refugees, asylum seekers and migration. They became partners with me after they were recommended to me by AC staff at a meeting, and I then showed work to them following which they asked to become official project partners for the AC bid. Counterpoint Arts are the founders of Refugee Week nationally, and have an active network of schools across the country who have signed up to work on their projects. This offers me an immediate potential route into schools across the country which is a fantastic development and achievement that will take shape next year as the educational project is launched.

As described above the exhibition will be shown in Hull area in the new year now, but excitingly I am already making developments through meetings/portfolio reviews about other potential spaces for national shows. I cannot release details yet, but these are planned to include inclusion in a new exhibition at a London museum, gallery shows in other UK cities, possible inclusion in UK photography festivals, and very excitingly I am also in discussion with a significant international photography curator who is building an international touring group show with selected artists who focus of issues of refugees and displacement.

3 - Planned Project Outputs/Outcomes:

The physical outcomes (or outputs) of the project include the production of the multi-media tool for use in local area Secondary Schools and the accompanying photographic exhibition that will initially be publicly launched in Hull.

Conceptual outcomes include raising the levels of debate around these important issues within local area secondary schools and within the wider public arena, and the consequent progression into developing greater levels of understanding both inside and outside of educational settings.

In terms of personal outcomes relating to my own artistic development (which are outlined in more detail below), this project will help me to relocate my own practice and develop a platform for my work in this country following my own relocation from Palestine to Hull. So it will act as a 'kickstart' for my practice and provide a professional platform from which my career can progress successfully, helping me to pass through the current transitional period that I am passing through professionally and personally.

3b - Progress within the Project

As already described above, the physical outputs of the project are taking shape and receiving a lot of interest both nationally and internationally. In order to further these developments I have been attending 'Portfolio Reviews' including Derby's FORMAT Festival recently (and soon London's Photomeet, and Arles Photo Festival in France), as well as utilising my contacts and researching potential partners. This is already leading to major developments as outlined previously.

The conceptual outputs also remain constant as originally outlined in the proposal.

On a personal level, this project represents a major development of my practice which I believe will provide the hoped for 'kickstart' to my career. After many years of attempting to juggle my personal practice with work that paid (media work, NGO work etc) I have finally with the support of the Foundation been able to focus my practice solely on long-term documentary work. In all honesty, this has been the single biggest personal success for me within this project. The development of my work is significant and this has arisen due to lots of hard work but more significant from having the time and a clear head space in which to work. The importance of this cannot be underestimated and the response I have had to my new work now that I have begun to show it to people is on a totally different level to where it has been previously. People are excited about what I am doing and the intimacy and strength of the work. I fully believe that my hopes to build a real platform for my practice are already being realised due to the feedback that I have had already and the offers for collaborations within and around this project on a national and international level. Without the support of the STH none of this would have been possible.

4 - Project Ambitions:

My life and work has been in a complicated transitional period over the last 2 years within the relocation process, at the heart of which is my wife's ongoing UK immigration case and its legal complexities which have restrained my creative practice. This project provides the opportunity to concentrate on restructuring my socially-engaged practice here and developing it in a local context while continuing to work around the fundamental themes of my practice which are just as relevant in the UK as elsewhere. My current Arts Council R+D grant has allowed me some time to reconnect with my practice here, but its limited resources have not allowed me to restart my career, rather they have provided useful time to network, edit existing work, and develop potential working

contacts. I desperately need to develop creatively again and this project will provide that opportunity, producing an essential educational tool but also establishing a UK platform for my practice.

I also believe that although this project will be launched locally (Hull, East Riding and Lincolnshire) it is also needed nationally and will garner interest in other regions following its launch. This creates the potential to develop the project over coming years nationally to reach students across the country.

This project will create a 'model', using the non-linear web-documentary format, which I can also develop in other contexts. I am convinced that the model itself, when shown to other potential partners for future work, will excite people and lead to further developmental opportunities.

4b - Progress within the Project

I have already described many of the practical and professional achievements that have been addressed, but among the most important developments within this project have actually been deeply personal. Interestingly I have come to realise that my current project with the Syria family is in fact a deeply personal work through which I am attempting to address many of my own personal questions relating to my own life, family and past. As I am looking to them exploring issues of 'home', 'belonging' and 'identity' I have actually been addressing these issues within the context of my own life and family. As the Syrian family are 'integrating' and questioning their own issues, so it has helped me to do the same.

In terms of my creative practice, this has allowed me to develop work that is more personal than anything I have produced previously. At last I have found the space and time to look deeply within myself and produce work that explores not only issues that are important to me, but more significantly my own relationship to these issues. This level of intimacy has been a revelation for me and I believe it has taken my practice to a new level. With previous projects I have, maybe, shown some of my work too soon due to overexcitement to get work out. With this project I have kept it under wraps for a long time due to the knowledge that for once I had time on my side as was not working to immediate deadlines as I have been forced to in the past. It is only within the last couple of months that I have begun to contact people and show work and although time itself will tell what develops from this, the response to date has been very positive and many exciting collaborations seem to lay ahead.

5 - Audience

The primary audience are secondary school students across Hull, East Riding, North and South Lincolnshire. The multi-media tool will be introduced to students via their own teachers following my work with staff, following the below model:

Collective Workshops:

I will run one collective workshop in each region to which teachers from all secondary schools will be invited. These workshops will introduce the tool and its uses and will be implemented prior to 2018-19 school year.

Individual School Follow-up:

Schools will be offered the opportunity to invite me to work with their staff on a more intensive level. The structure would be agreed individually with each school.

Introduction to the syllabus:

Staff will then introduce the tool into their own syllabuses to take it directly to the students. I will be available to continue support as requested.

**As this distribution model is not reliant on my working directly with students it allows implementation in many different schools concurrently - reaching a wider audience. It also creates space for different schools to 'think outside the box' depending on their own academic and social contexts.*

The secondary audience will be visitors to the photographic exhibition at HIPFest 2018. HIPFest will manage all publicity and advertising which will be supported by my own publicity work through media and digital channels. In 2016, HIPFest drew audiences of approximately 40,000 people to the festival. Schools will also be invited to bring students to the exhibition and support their educational work.

5b - Progress within the Project

The project structure has now changed slightly in this regard. Educationally, I am now planning to run a pilot scheme in 2 schools from September this year through towards Christmas. This will allow me to make changes if/as necessary and ensure that the project can be as useful to schools as possible. The Collaborative School Workshops will then be implemented in the New Year rather than in September as originally planned.

For the exhibition as I described the show will no longer launch with HIPFest but will instead launch at another venue in the city in the New Year before being taken on a tour that is already being developed through discussions with potential national and international partners. I am also in discussions with major book publishers regarding a potential 2019 photographic book release.

6 - Discussions with Audiences

Ongoing personal discussions with students and staff at Hull area secondary schools are helping me learn more about work being done currently around these issues and how it is being contextualised. This process will be developed once funding is secured by establishing an official staff-level 'advisory working group' (cross-syllabus - 5 teachers from different schools) for regular developmental feedback meetings during the project production. This process will help me shape work for specific syllabus and social needs and contexts, and share ownership with schools prior to project completion - creating an early excitement and awareness and a direct route into the institutes.

Collectively, I have been looking for 'umbrella' type bodies who are working directly within education. Hull City Council Education Department directed me to Hull City of Culture's 'No Limits' Team who are working in Hull and East Riding secondary schools producing teaching resources. 'No Limits' has described to me the lack of practicing visual artists working with local institutes and the negative effect this has on local education. Secondly, they have pointed out that this project does not overlap with anything similar happening locally but it addresses a very real need to creatively broaden discussion around the fundamental issues, and, they believe, would be a huge asset in that regard.

6b - Progress within the Project

Regular meetings with schools staff have continued throughout the project, these are still ongoing and will remain so. Rather than establishing and continuing to work with the staff level advisory

group I felt that this became a little redundant as I am now running the pilot scheme. So I am conducting meetings with the schools involved in that scheme and then will use the scheme to address later developmental issues.

I have continued to look for umbrella-type organisations and Platforma/Counterpoint Arts have been a huge development in this regard. Their role has already been outlined above and they will be significant in the educational side of things and possibly also for supporting the photographic tour at a later stage.

7 - Original Project Partnerships

Various bodies/individuals are offering project support:

1 - Hull International Photography Festival (HIPFest) has offered confirmed exhibition at their Sep/Oct 2018 festival to potentially include the multi-media aspect. HIPFest will fund all printing, mounting/framing, opening night launch and publicity, gallery space and staff to manage the space.

2 - Hull 2017 'No Limits' Learning and Education Team Director Ian Read, has offered:

a) To help setup the school collaborative workshops through their programme and promotion within their Learning Resources Programme - a direct route into schools.

b) To help me look for later project phase funding, and office working space.

c) To help establish staff 'advisory working group' during the project, ensuring specific needs are met.

3 - The Refugee Council (Hull) has agreed to help introduce the project to potential participants (refugees/asylum seekers), as well as introductions to different local bodies to widen collaborations.

4 - Hull City Council Refugee and Asylum Team Director Debbie Hammond has been supportive of this project since I first began to develop it around a year ago - offering support in an advisory capacity to help draw up Safeguarding and Protection guidelines.

5 - Kathleen Guthrie, an independent consultant for 'Global Learning' is also supporting in an advisory role based on her vast experience working with teachers developing effective learning around key developmental and global issues.

7b - Progress within the Project

From the original intended project actors some have been helpful while other new ones have also developed. As explained I continue to be close to HIPFest and their team although I am not planning to launch the show at this year's festival. I did think that Humber Street Gallery would take on that mantle after their offer of full project support and an agreed partnership although due to their change of lead curator that has not materialised as explained. New gallery spaces are instead stepping in now.

Hull2017 offered some support early on by way of arranging meetings with different people. I have not developed my relationship with Hull2017 significantly now due to their changes of staffing but am still utilising contacts built through them. It was also them that set up my Arts Council meeting and they did help me in that regard.

The Refugee Council introduced me to families as planned and were very helpful in that way. I have also throughout this project been visiting Hull's Open Doors project, often weekly. Through

Open Doors I have met dozens of refugees and asylum seekers and that has been very important in developing the contemporary portrait side of the project. I began to shoot portraits of asylum seekers I met at Open Doors but found that a large percentage were scared to be photographed due to myriad reasons - fear of racism, fear of legal issues, fear of negative effects on family members in their home countries etc. 'Access' to asylum seekers itself was not a challenge in itself, I have met and continue to meet many through Open Doors, the challenge was finding a way to visualise the stories they were telling me. It took me several months to find a clear way to visually articulate this, but eventually I realised that a series of 'Portraits without people' was the direction to go in. In this series, I am photographing places that individual asylum seekers told me were important to them for different reasons but the people themselves are not photographed in the spaces. By leaving them out I am symbolising their fear of being photographed. Photography can sometimes represent a power imbalance and I felt this was one such issue. If, as a ('privileged) 'local' photographer not facing legal/social fears I photographed only the small percentage of people who were not in fear of being photographed, I was actually missing the point. The point is that many are living with these fears, so it is that 'fear' that I need to communicate so by photographing the empty spaces and recording supporting yet anonymous audio through which the asylum seekers describe why this place is important - I can morally and visually represent this issue. I have been working on this series for a while and the schools are particularly interested in these short audio-visual tools which will become a significant feature of the multi-media tool. Schools have expressed an interest in these being 'taking points' to structure lessons or tutorials around as they include pieces on issues such as destitution, racism, home, identity, fear as well as integration, education, hope and others.

Other major partners that have developed include the partnership I have formed with Platforma/Counterpoint Arts and subsequently Refugee Week as described previously, and also the many collaborations that are being developed in terms of gallery spaces nationally and internationally.

Arts Council England accepted my application for project support by offering funding through until the end of 2018. Other funders who also agreed to contribute financially to the project include:

Hull City Council Arts Unit
East Riding Council Arts Unit
War on Want

Significantly in terms of project development, I am also now working with Laura Noble, a renowned curator and Director of London's LA Noble photography gallery. Laura is helping me in a mentorship role through regular meetings in London and this developmental support is hugely beneficial to my practice. This would not have come about with the support of the STF although it has come via the work I have developed with the STF rather than with the foundation's financial support.

8 - Original thoughts on Legacy

Experience has taught me that practicality and realism are essential and pretensions of high-browed naivety are redundant in socially-engaged practice. This project alone will not end stereotyping and discrimination or build an entirely tolerant and welcoming society, but it will play a significant role as a cog-in-the-wheel of positive change.

As a result of this project there will be a powerful educational tool (and model) raising understanding about the challenges faced by displaced people attempting to resettle locally, being actively used within institutions and that can be developed, extended or re-imagined by the students, staff or myself. This will be a solid foundation which will deepen the debate, and in some ways the 'end' of this project (the initial year's work) will be the starting point for progression - this

fluidity is fundamental. This tool will challenge misconceptions and stereotypes, develop greater understanding and hopefully even practical support.

There will also be a concrete example of the model in practice and its educational value, offering a rethinking of the socio-educational role artists can play and a model which can be developed in different social contexts to address varying needs.

Finally, I also believe that this project, once funding is secured, will be the project from which my practice is successfully relaunched in the UK following my current challenging transitions. This is the planting of a seed that, if well watered, will flourish and branch in many different directions.

8b - Progress within the Project

My ideas around the potential legacy of this project remain constant, time will tell how these finally play out. The multi-media tool will be used as planned and the exhibition tour (and potential book) will represent major achievement professionally/artistically but also personally. Much time is still needed but through the Arts Council grant that I have successfully secured off the back of the St Hugh's Foundation support I have funding through until the end of the year. I believe that the SHF showed in me is now being replicated by others. Further discussions are ongoing with other interested parties and I believe the project will continue to develop in this manner.

Conclusion

Work on this project has allowed me to refocus and restructure my practice significantly. I believe it has been a very significant stepping stone that I will be able to look back on over future years as the much needed bridge through which my practice and life was able to move from my time in Palestine to my time back in the UK.

My work with the Syrian family is a joy. Early on in the work I came to see that the family found in me a 'bridge' between their former lives and their new lives. This was through my own background and experiences and my language skills (Arabic). As they were new in the country I have been able to assist them in various challenges and thus support the development of their new lives. Yet significantly, over time, I have come to realise that this relationship is double edged. As I provided a bridge for them, so they also are providing a bridge for me - a link to my time in Palestine, to our shared experiences (often quite dark), and to my ongoing journey with my family as we attempt to navigate their challenges and complexities both legal and social/cultural of passing through the immigration system and relocating to the UK once more.

My relationship with the family is no longer merely creative or professional. As an artist I have never worked in the detached manner of Martin Parr or others, my work is socially-engaged on every level and I am deeply committed to that and also proud of it. Somehow, somewhere down the line, I have become part of their story, and so has my family. I have shared so much with this family - being at the hospital for the birth of their new baby, translating for them, spending time at the children's schools, helping them at medical emergencies, watching football together - and now, with the birth of my new baby and the developing friendship between my wife and children and the family, they have also become part of our lives collectively.

As I touched on earlier, maybe through this project I am in fact metaphorically photographing my own life, and trying to make sense of it. The level of intimacy that comes out through my photographs of the family is something that all the people who have reviewed the work in progress recently (including staff at Magnum, Dubai's East Wing Gallery, The Guardian photo editors, Laura

Noble of London's LA Noble Gallery and others) are all excited by. This work is not the, sadly, sometimes 'Orientalist' approach to refugees that has been seen widely around the world over recent years - this project is a story of family and relationships, and, simply, people who want a chance to live.

I have spent many years working as a socially engaged artist exploring the role that art can play in 'change'. This can work on many levels. Through the experiences with the Syrian family, that continue to develop with time, my belief in such work has only strengthened, but work aside, my realisation that my work and my life and ideas are in fact intensely related concepts that need not be kept apart is fundamental here. I have no desire to be a 'detached' photographer, or an impartial 'reporter' of events. I *need* to 'live' my work and to let it evolve from deep inside my emotions and ideas. The support that the foundation has given me through this project has allowed these ideas to flourish, and my practice to develop through these concepts, and for that I am deeply indebted.