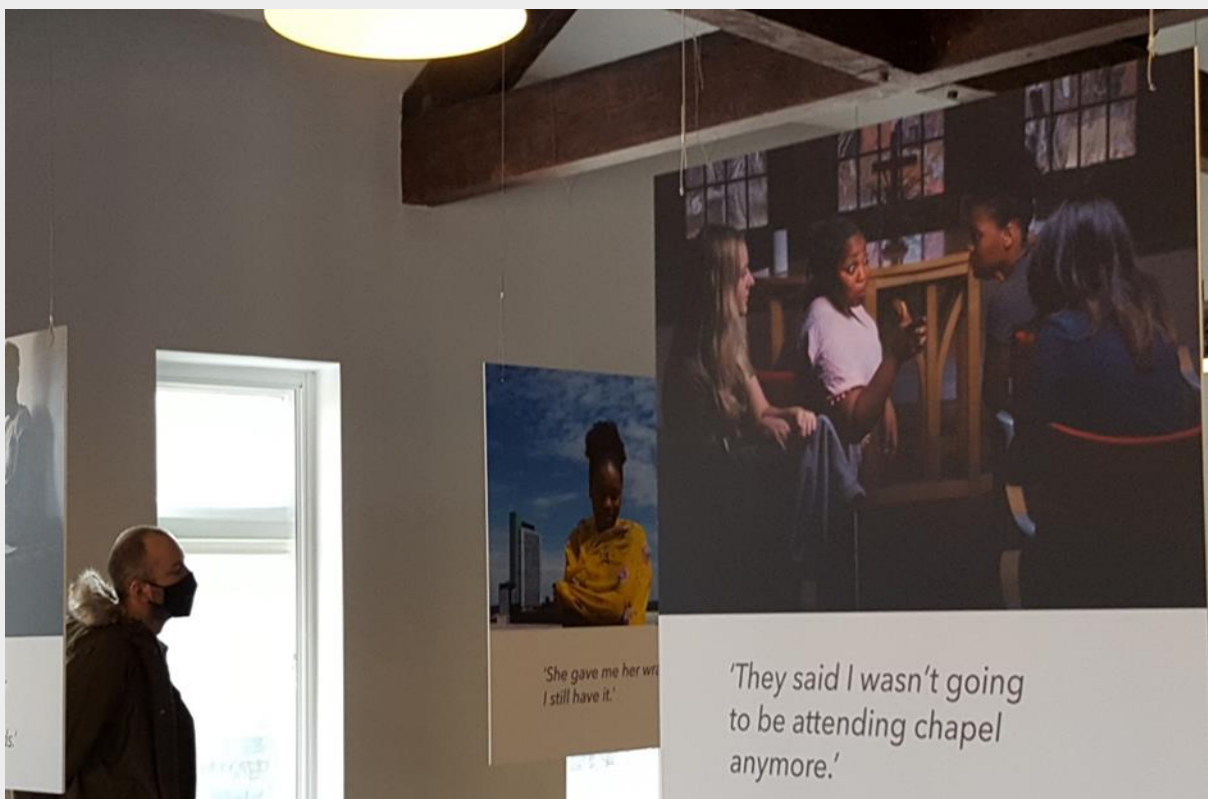




ASYLUM IN ART: A PHOTO-NARRATIVE EXHIBITION



INTRODUCTION:

'Asylum in Art' is a photo-narrative exhibition taking the audience on an experiential tour of lived reality.

What is the exhibition about?

Asylum in Art shines a lens on what life is like inside a British Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) and beyond release into a community in Leeds, West Yorkshire.

What form does the exhibition take?

The exhibition is a photo-narrative of 11 photographs visualising the primary narrative research of Maria De Angelis in photographs by Jeremy Abrahams. At its heart, photo-narrative captures the tension between the institutional IRC (tasked with detaining and deporting those without papers) and the gendered, cultural, human face of detainees hidden away inside it. Using a photo-narrative method, the exhibition reflects key narratives across detention experience: Amongst them - a lack of institutional legitimacy; its modern slavery typology; its carceral practices, its netting of poor people of colour; counter-conduct and belonging both within and beyond IRC walls. Due to women's ongoing asylum claims, women did not want to feature in their own photographs. Therefore, to protect participants, all the actors are students or colleagues from Leeds Beckett University.

Who else is involved in the project?

Asylum in Art is a collaborative project with Critical Friends from City of Sanctuary, Refugee Education Training Advice Service (RETAS); Toast-Love-Coffee café; Asmarina Voices; Hinsley Hall; and Universities Chaplaincy in Leeds. And is based on the collective experience of 15 former detainees - truly remarkable women whose generous sharing of stories has made the exhibition possible. Given that women cannot take photos inside these Centres, photographs are artistic representations of key lived moments, as narrated by women, and negotiated between women, critical friends, researcher, and photographer in the attempt to show the experience the women wished to tell. As it takes the audience on an experiential tour into the lived reality of detainees, it becomes an interactive process. Art as witness to trauma and resistance encourages all of us to think through oppressive dynamics imposed on people by the State and its institutions so we are better equipped to understand *our* place in asylum practices and *our* capacity for social change.



*'You are not allowed to
keep your phone if it
has a camera.'*

Photo No 1: Phones

What does the image tell us? Although the UK's immigration detention estate is one of the largest in Western Europe (Silverman, Griffiths, & Walsh, 2020), what it is like to be inside an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), or how they operate, is a mystery to most. Designed for immigration checks (an administrative as opposed to a criminal process), IRC's are located far from urban areas and operate as closed institutions, allowing family visits (to those who can afford the travel) and entry to few but a select handful of charities, community groups, and pre-approved researchers. The removal of phones compounds the isolation and secrecy of these low-visibility spaces since any IRC replacement lacks both personal and legal contacts as well as picture galleries. In the photo, mobile cameras are defiantly fixed on a UK Border Agency site, as women provide this exhibition's micro-lens on life inside the IRC.



'If you are inside for some time, you get to work.'

Photo No 2: Coins

What does the image tell us? This photo-narrative concerns the amorality characterizing asylum administration. In deciding who to detain and deport, the IRC reflects societal values towards gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status, colonial and post-colonial movement (Bosworth et al, 2018). Whilst in the prison context, there is frequent over-representation of society's poor, within immigration detention those confined are any and potentially *all* racialised migrant bodies, as illustrated by the Windrush generation (see National Audit Office, 2018). Trinity (52) from Nigeria had this to say: 'They treat you as in times of slavery. They transport you, they control you, they take your freedom and your labour'. Asylum seekers who work illegally are detained for deportation but allowed to work whilst inside the IRC. Work is menial – serving food, washing dishes, sweeping floors - paid well-below minimum wage and women's skills set. BAME (Black & Asian minority ethnic) women describe such practices as the typology of 'modern slavery'.



*'In my mind I was
always in the dark.'*

Photo No 3: The bed

What does the image tell us? The practice of night-time removal is experienced as psychological violence. As Kia (41) from Uganda explains 'the guards come at night and a big scream would wake you up. It's like she's not from my country, or in my family, but every time people go missing you think is this human being safe? And you get upset, then scared'. According to the charity Detention Action (2014), the IRC not only exacerbates existing mental disorders but actively causes disintegration of mental health by detaining people without criminal charge, for indeterminate periods (there is no upper statutory time-limit to how long someone can be detained), and night-time deportation. According to the charity, the IRC is a harmful and harming institution. Irrespective of whether the person had a mental illness before entry, suddenly being locked up, cut off from friends, family and a whole life, can have unpredictable and serious mental health effects on anyone.



'They said I wasn't going to be attending chapel anymore.'

Photo No 4: Chapel

What does the image tell us? A significant strength of photo-narrative is that it situates detainees as primary experts in the detention regime. This brings into focus the reality that IRCs are more than just human warehouses and their inhabitants possess autonomy and agency. As this photo-narrative shows, in the struggle for survival, women's ingenuity and creativity interrupts (albeit temporarily) the smooth workings of State power and control over people without rights of citizenship or belonging. When it comes to challenging institutional restrictions on women's free association: 'they [the guards] said I wasn't going to be attending chapel anymore because in chapel we had ladies from other wings and when we had made friends - that's where we planned the hunger strike' (Benyu (35) from Zimbabwe - 31 days on hunger strike. The hunger strike not only disrupts the smooth running of the IRC but actively lowers its performance rating viz-a-viz contractual delivery of care.



'This way we could cook our own food, eat it when we wanted, together with friends.'

Photo No 5: Radiator Food

What does the image tell us? When lives are ruled by external immigration forces, some choices over what to eat, when to eat it, and who with, afford women a rare moment of autonomy and asylum agency. In the photograph, women's dismantling of supplied food (saved from the canteen and bought from the IRC shop) and their rebuilding of ingredients inside an empty plastic pot and cooked on the radiator, restores purpose and meaning to an otherwise bare life. Women typically describe making food for one another following an official interview or bad news from home. Beyond this, Wema's attempt at recreating a homely dish nourishes her gendered and cultural identity as a migrant homemaker (Mankekar, 2005), as distinct to her administrative embodiment as a deportable body. Wema (32) from Malawi.



*'I went on hunger strike
for 33 days.'*

Photo No 6: Hunger Strike

What does the image tell us? Look carefully at the photograph to spot the two empty chairs and untouched plates of food in the centre of the table. The duty of care imposed by the Detention Services Order (Home Office, 03/2017), makes food refusal inside the IRC a political (as opposed to a private) matter. Once the refugee sector, the media, and politicians take up a hunger story, political invisibility and institutional secrecy are temporarily lifted. Therefore, the hunger strike is women's most powerful form of protest for change. In the photograph, women also display division and apprehension reflecting its costly challenge to their own physical health and mental well-being (Shaw, 2016).



*'She gave me her wrap.
I still have it.'*

Photo No 7: Wrap

What does the image tell us? Looking at Centre routines and practices under the micro-lens of lived experience raises the fragility of State exclusion, even when imposed on a heterogeneous collection of non-citizens with diverse ethnic and religious identities. Joli (31) – a Christian from Namibia – recalls languishing in her room until a Kenyan detainee and professed Muslim showed her where to eat and how to use the computer room. Kia (41) – an Anglican from Uganda – describes arriving with nothing but the clothes she is arrested in, to be given a wrap by a Russian Orthodox Christian. The wrap meant so much to Kia, that she could not bring herself to throw it in the Centre detention cupboard (where many women discard items redolent of their captivity). Inside the walls of the IRC and across such a diverse social group, such small kindness magnifies an administrative indifference for women's ethical care and social belonging.



'They had no reason to keep me.'

Photo No 8: Empty Bed

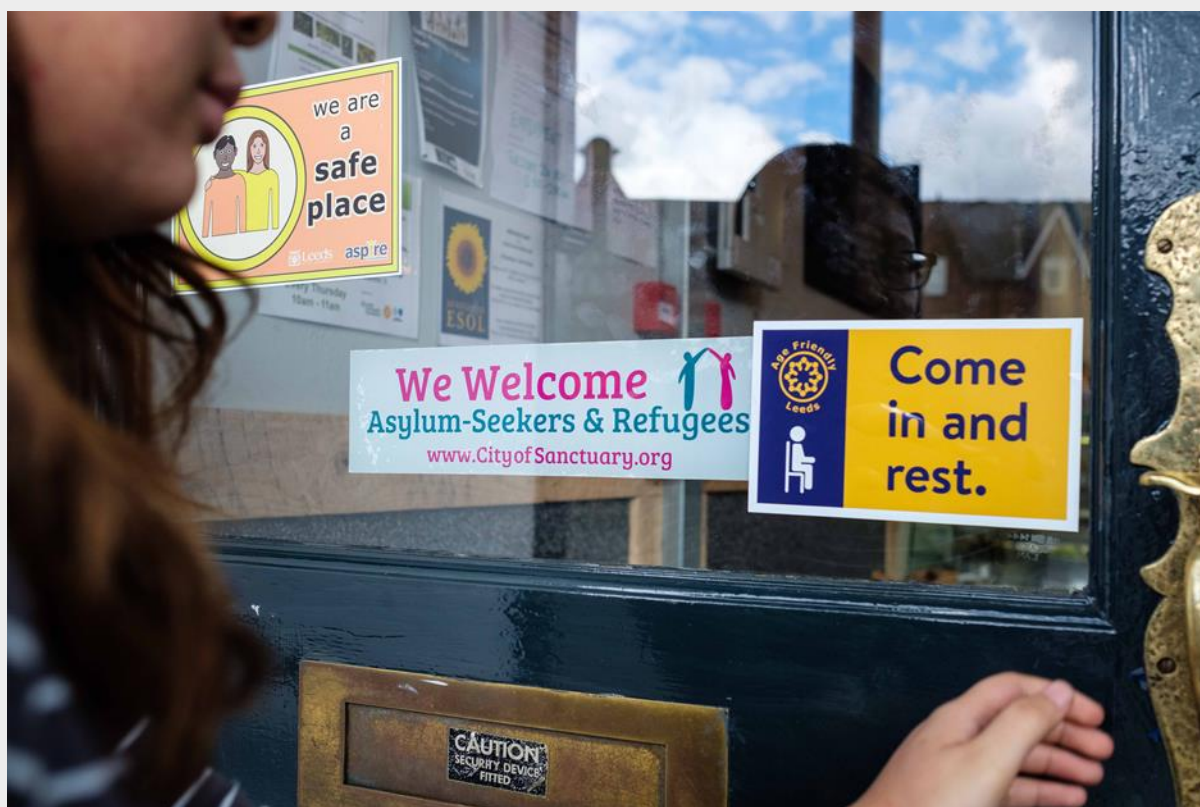
What does the image tell us? This photo-narrative provides a qualitative understanding of an asylum seeker, being taken into detention because something is not quite right in terms of paperwork or legal status. It speaks to the immorality of offering sanctuary in a setting that is carceral in nature. The fact it provides facilities like a gym, hair salon, or computer room does not detract from being imprisoned against their wishes. As Trinity (52) from Nigeria remarks, this only constructs a 'glorified' prison environment. Beyond this, it queries the very legitimacy of these institutions. As Kia (41) from Uganda explains: 'there was one lady in with us, classed a foreign national, who killed her husband and her child and had a history of fighting the guards. She said the toughest place they brought her was the IRC [laughs]. How can this be right when it's not a prison and we are not criminal?'



*'Volunteering has been
my resurrection.'*

Photo No 9: Rebuilding Lives

What does the image tell us? Rebuilding lives and feeling productive is a struggle when in limbo – unable to plan or work whilst awaiting an immigration decision on the right to remain in the country (Turnbull, 2015). As Linda (42) from Zimbabwe says 'I'm not doing anything because I'm not allowed to do anything. Staff from the Refugee Council told me you are allowed to volunteer, and I said *really?* I was so surprised at this. I met the co-ordinators of the different projects I could volunteer for, and when I started volunteering, it was like I'm a human being again. I loved it so much. I told Rose 'volunteering has been my resurrection' and she took it for her slogan. I have a slogan on a website. Who would have imagined that! I was given another chance in life'.



*'We give food out to
British citizens in need.'*

Photo No 10: Belonging

What does the image tell us? A truer measure of belonging in and to a community is 'active mixing' outside institutionally imposed time and space (Ager and Strang, 2004), where how and who you mix with is dictated by the institution and its rules. This is so strongly embodied by Linda (42) from Zimbabwe that her post-release actions can be read as reversing the exclusionary table onto the State. As Linda explains, each year asylum seekers from her church 'cook a proper Christmas dinner for British citizens' and support them with 'their social problems' (alcohol, drugs, loneliness), 'so they get a happy day. Sometimes I think society needs to hear this and not just what the media tells them about us'.



*'We sing about the
importance of freedom.'*

Photo No 11: Asmarina Voices Choir

What does the image tell us? There is much to be learnt about detention from within and without its walls. Wema (32) from Malawi explains how forming a choir inside detention is a transgressive challenge to restrictions placed on women's free association. 'Every twelve midnight, we'd go into our friend's room because she was a pastor. Staff would knock to say you are making noise. We would say we are not making noise - you are. We can hear your footsteps in the corridor and your bunch of keys rattling. We are praying. But [laughs heartily] we are Pentecostal and when we sing it's very noisy...Guards weren't happy but they allowed it. They just said we were stubborn people'. On release, Sita (25) from Ivory Coast describes going with her friend to check out her local community choir: 'We sang for international woman day, yeah, all the choir, roughly 15-20 persons. We sing about the importance of freedom and why people need freedom. And love and hope! And, yeah, so it's kind of the freedom of acceptance and belonging - that kind, rather than political freedom, yeah'.

A CLOSING COMMENT ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

There is a steadily growing body of material-culture and craft-art emerging from inside these Centres. However, when contrasted to the quantitative data produced on immigration (outlining trends and statistics), the visualisation of lived narratives is rare. The exhibition's use of photo-narrative seeks to advance the innovative trend for a more qualitative and human understanding of what life is like without rights of citizenship. Of course, the 11 photo-narratives cannot fully or definitively express what individual life is like inside one of the six IRCs in England, or post-release into a community. Rather, each photo-narrative is designed to capture a key moment of emotion, protest, and belonging – open it out to experience by the visitor – and prompt new public engagement with the UK's system of asylum administration. The fifteen women who embody this exhibition were fuelled by hope for a better legal-policy-community reception for new arrivals. In this spirit of public engagement, participants and critical friends invite us to anchor this photo-narrative exhibition into our respective education, training, research, artistic and community initiatives.

Project Lead, researcher & author: Maria De Angelis (Leeds Beckett University).

Exhibition photographs: Jeremy Abrahams (www.jeremyabrahams.co.uk)

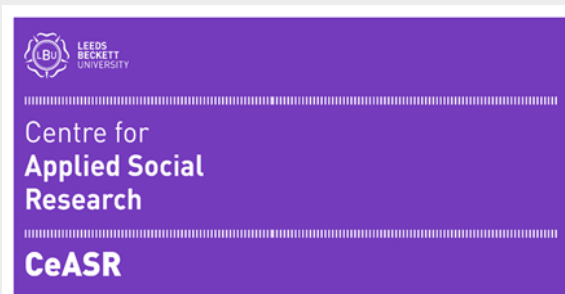
Public engagement photos: Maria De Angelis

To access a digital tour of the October 2020 exhibition filmed by Ben Jones of Missional Generation see: <https://lcileeds.org/asylum-in-art/>

Photo-narrative: a composite of shared experience by 15 female former detainees in search of asylum in Leeds, West Yorkshire.

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