

BELONGING AND THE TRANSIENT HOME: A SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART PROJECT

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Abstract

Notions of comfort, safety and familiarity are all themes commonly associated with the idea of home, concepts that can be challenged by migration and mobility. A sense of belonging is critical to the experiences of home, yet recent catastrophes and conflicts have led to an increase in people seeking asylum, resulting in challenges to both the meaningfulness of belonging and a sense of home. *Belonging and the Transient Home* (2016) was a recent practice-based research project, exploring notions of the Australian domestic experience in relation to migration, asylum seekers and diasporic communities. Central to the project was how artistic processes can contribute to a sense of belonging in a new society and challenge assumption about our social relationship to home and how we may experience the domestic in Australia.

KEYWORDS: Belonging, contemporary art, house and home

The meaning of home can be expressed in multiple and complex ways as suggested by Blunt & Dowling in *Home* (2006):

Some may speak of the physical structure of their house or dwelling; others may refer to relationships or connections over space and time. You might have positive or negative feelings about home, or a mixture of the two. Your sense of home might be closely shaped by your memories of childhood, alongside your present experiences and your dreams of the future” (Blunt & Dowling 2006, p. 1).

Blunt & Dowling suggest that the idea and meaning of home can be both physical and mental, the two definitions addressing the physicality of a building, structure or

geographic place, and mentally signifying a personal perception of relationships, memories, narratives and emotions related to people, places and time in the past, present and possibly future.

In relation to the project, I centred on the implementation of a socially engaged art activity developed in collaboration with the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Group's (VICSEG) New Futures Iranian Social Health Group, in Broadmeadows, Victoria. Collaborating with an Asylum Seekers group, I found that the idea of 'home' needed to be reconsidered in relation to the group's experience of having to leave their homes due to circumstances beyond their control and resettle here in Australia. Our workshopping led to redefining home as not only physical but also mental, emotional, time based and potentially multiple places associated with home. Through this project, I recognised that mobility is a part of the circumstance of new migrants and that the participants live between their conceptual idea of home and their new physical home. This paper considers the context of the project and reflects upon the findings to give artists insights into working on a collaborative socially engaged project. This paper proposes a model framework that identifies a series of recommendations for artists working on socially engaged projects.

Belonging and the Transient Home evolved from projects advocating that curating artistic practices in urban spaces can encourage the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1968) and encourage inclusivity. My research stems firstly from my experience as an artist personally interested in issues related to diasporic communities, secondly as a curator working with diverse urban communities and ongoing research into re-imagining cities as curated spaces.

During the collaborative process, I identified imagined narratives as a way of rethinking ideas of space, place and community. *Belonging* takes geographer Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996) concept as an underlying flexible and inclusive theory to position the concept of space in relation to home which brings together the physical, mental, real and imagined perspectives of the collaborative group through an artistic platform. Soja's expanded definition of space and place is relevant to artists because it includes the realm of the imagination as another perspective of how we interpret space.

In collaboration with VICSEG's New Futures Iranian Social Health Group, the partnering group of new migrants for this project, we redefined home from being a fixed physical state (as a suggested possibility of the definition above) to being associated with mobility. Home was interpreted for the group as transient and transforming and

related to how they saw their status as a new diasporic community, with uncertain citizenship status.

In Australia, there are frequently debated negative and positive perceptions in relation to Asylum Seekers, migration and illegal immigrants in the media. The impact of this debate has left the status of Asylum Seekers unresolved in regards to being accepted by the broader community. Although asylum seekers may not initially have the freedom of choice to migrate fully, they nevertheless experience similar issues to new migrants in navigating unfamiliar surroundings and gaining a sense of belonging in a new society. Mobility on the other hand, is often associated with global flows and freedom of the middle classes. Migration in these two instances is seen in opposing lights, the status of 'asylum seekers' is one of disempowerment and being 'mobile' as a vehicle for freedom and empowerment.

The aim of *Belonging* was to develop a project where an art based methodology was able to allow the participants to re-imagine their narrative from being vulnerable (which could be socially constructed or personal), transformed towards being in control of their own future and therefore gain a sense of belonging in their new geographic home. This is where my role as an artist, with creative capabilities of imagining alternative perspectives, was able to lead the project. This process allowed the participants to experience being active and engaged citizens in their new environment, as promoted by Victorian cultural policy commentator Jon Hawkes, in the *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning* (2001) which advocates that culture is a key pillar of our society's' values and that active cultural engagement is a key driver towards social and individual health.

FROM THE FLÂNEUR TO THE COSMOPOLITAN TO SHARING DIVERSITY

In searching for a suitable metaphor for the freedom of the mobile urban wanderer, I considered Baudelaire's *flâneur* (1863) which offers the idea of a type of mobile citizen that is empowered through their relationship, engagement and curiosity with many places. The *flâneur* approach to place is still relevant to contemporary life, particularly with the massive expansion of the tourism industry, given that, for many, mobility has become a lifestyle choice. The *flâneur* personality was realised with the rise of cities in the 19th century, a result of the industrial revolution. Baudelaire redefined home for his main character in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* as "To be away from home and to feel oneself everywhere at home" (1896, p. 9). The *flâneur* interpretation of home

relates to the emotional interpretation of home and the idea that one is able to feel comfortable, safe and familiar in many situations and different places, still feeling at 'home' when encountering the initially unfamiliar. Therefore the transient *flâneur* became a suitable starting point to consider the empowered migrant in a new society. There are however criticisms of the *flâneur* in contemporary times, suggesting it is middle class, a male gaze (which was critiqued by Janet Wolff where she re-imagines the *flâneuse*¹) and therefore exclusive, and that perhaps a more inclusive model suitable for contemporary globalized society is cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism offers an alternative cultural outlook that is defined as encountering the cultural practices and belief systems from people of all walks of life and is often referred to as 'super diversity'. It is becoming increasingly common in post-colonial societies and is even considered an everyday occurrence as suggested by Plage, Willing, Woodward and Skrbis (2015). In their paper *Cosmopolitan encounters, reflexive engagements and the ethics of sharing* they discuss the impact of giving and sharing of culture within a targeted group, to reflect on broader cosmopolitan society. The sentiments of the paper around the sharing culture also paralleled my own methodology of sharing, which occurred between the social health group and the broader community.

The main reason for the engagement of VICSEG's New Futures Iranian Social Health Group was to encourage an opportunity to participate and engage with the local community through a process that was creative, accessible, reflective and expressive. The project was designed assigning certain creative activities as workshops, to take place during their regular weekly social health group meetings, which would contribute to the overall presentation of the project. After the process of the development of the artwork was completed, the project was presented in the local community through the street festival platform, as a way for participants to take part in their local community. In this project, I was the lead practice based researcher, divided into two main roles: the curator of the community aspects of the project and also as a collaborating visual artist in the implementation of the project.

¹ As reframed by Janet Wolff (1985) with an inclusive feminist lens, she claimed women *flâneuse* were invisible and excluded from earlier texts.

MAKING THIRDSPACE DIALOGUE VISIBLE

My research into the curation of urban spaces argues that this type of exhibition offers a more accessible model of practice in the contemporary global city. The model offers a tool to allow citizens to access and engage with contemporary art in an everyday environment, rather than the gallery or museum, which can be viewed as elitist (and therefore exclusive) and requires audiences to seek out these sites. The intertwining of curated narratives in urban spaces can lead to a more inclusive urban environment where growth of the public urban sphere is encouraged, as suggested by sociologist, philosopher and Marxist Jurgen Habermas in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962).

Habermas states that the birth of bourgeois cultural forms such as museums, theatres and concerts developed in nineteenth century Europe, signifying ‘representational’ culture. With the growth of capitalist activity, the *Öffentlichkeit* (the public sphere) would develop as a characteristic of civil society. Today we see the public sphere presented to us in popular cultural forms such as the exponentially growing spaces of the media, social media and virtual spaces and places where people can physically gather to exchange dialogues such as public open spaces, cafes and restaurants. Habermas proposes that the ideal public sphere in a civil society would be a space outside the control of the state, which allows dialogue between individuals to create a newer form of democratic participatory cultural space and thus may explain the increased desire by artists to work outside of the traditional gallery and museum structures. Artists are seeking new methods to have dialogues with a broader cross section of their community and engage in different ways with their local environments.

Earlier research work in the northern suburbs of Melbourne focused on the place of Glenroy, defining Glenroy as not only a location but also a community. The project enacted was *Flavours of Glenroy* (2013-5) revealing Glenroy to be ‘many places within a place’ as suggested by geographer Doreen Massey in *A Global Sense of Place* (2013) and thus many communities within a community. The dilemma of working with such a diverse neighbourhood led to developing *Belonging* focusing the concept of the project on the specific needs of one partnering group. The emphasis for my research objectives in this project evolved, moving away from the physical location and towards a specific community and their relationship to a particular place or places.

Returning to Soja’s *Thirdspace* assists in reframing and expanding the notion of space and place, as not only a physical space, but as a combination of physical and mental spaces. In *Thirdspace* he defines space as “three-sided sensibility of

spatiality-historicity-sociality” which has evolved from “a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence” (Soja 1996, p. 3). Soja states these aspects in relation to space, are connected and he also considers the imagined concepts of places to rethink space and place in a more inclusive and flexible way, stating that the definition of space is capable of evolving and transforming.

Soja’s *Thirdspace* is particularly useful in framing the perspective taken in this project, in relation to the framing of place and the participants, their historical and social narratives in relation to place and concepts of home. The layered nature of the concept of *Thirdspace* also relates well back to definitions of ‘home’ as a space meaning both physical and mental attributes. Of particular interest in Soja’s theory is that it takes into account the realm of imagination in relation to place, particularly suitable in considering an artistic project which relies on taking a series of facts and fictions to creatively re-imagine a sense of place, home and belonging. Soja’s work was also influenced by Homi Bhabba’s writing on postcolonial cultures in *The Location of Culture* (1994), where Bhabba discusses the idea of cultural hybridity as a result of colonial process and his concept of third space (different from Soja’s) refers to hybrid cultural space.

THE MOBILE STUDIO AS A METHODOLOGY

Collaboratively, the group, which included social workers, designed a project where we would program in a series of art workshops embedded in the regular weekly social health group sessions. The group contained five to six families with children under five years of age, who were new migrants, asylum seekers and refugees of Kurdish background from Iran, with differing migration status. My aim was to create a mobile studio situation through the workshops, where participants were able to learn new skills and create a series of artworks reflecting some of their own cultural practices, with the outcome of presenting and sharing the works with the broader local community at a public event. Social workers leading the group supported the project, as they were firm advocates of artistic activity for their clients, which they believe could have multiple social and mental benefits as suggested by the use of the arts as therapy. The process of the arts allowed the participants to engage, observe, reflect, interpret and express ideas, contributing to a more defined perspective and clarity of their own circumstance.

Central to the execution of the project was the reframing of the traditional art studio into the idea of a ‘mobile studio’. There were limitations to the location of the workshops, as they needed to take place in an accessible site close to the participant’s homes. As a

result my studio travelled to where the social health group conducted their regular sessions, a community based childcare facility. Working with young children, I also adopted the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy *The Atelier* (The Studio in Italian) for early years learning, where the artist's studio concept became a core methodology of early years learning in the classroom in post war Europe. It was seen as a way to engage children in learning and discovery of their environments through the embodied experience of engagement with the arts, materiality, play and innovation. This philosophy was developed by Italian educator Loris Malaguzzi and is still influential in early years learning strategies (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell & Schwall 2015) informing the approach taken in transforming the classroom environment to a mobile art studio.

Activities were tailored to work with the skill sets and interests of women and young children. The making of ceramics was identified as an art form that would benefit the social health group due to its tactile qualities. Through consultation with locally based Iranian born Australian artist Sofi Basseghi, ceramic traditions and designs in Iranian culture was researched. Through this research the giving out of ceramic good luck charms to family and friends was identified as core to the art making workshops, which would be presented in transient homes and presented to the public at an event. Through considering the complex renewed conditions of home, I created a series of homes made from contemporary suitcases with wheels, using coloured and patterned felt and fabrics as a metaphor for the contemporary condition of migration.

These ideas have evolved from my own training in applied arts, based around a socially engaged practice. The applied arts have a natural social relationship due to the functionality of objects and the relationships between objects and people are always considered in my art making. The social relationship has often allowed me to consider how the applied arts may play a role in having a metaphoric function in relation to the repeated behaviours and rituals we develop in everyday life. Socially engaged practices focus on "a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production" (Field 2017) and are often open ended with processes becoming a part of the outcomes of the project. In my approach to this project, I focused on a socially engaged methodology, as there was a desire for the participants in the process to experience the establishment of new relationships formed through this collaborative relationship between myself as an artist and the group as new migrants in the process of resettlement, potentially leading to new knowledge production. Socially engaged practices are becoming more commonly characteristic of contemporary art practices, as artists incorporate processes, behaviours, participation and responses to a context they create. In working with a culturally diverse community there is an opportunity for more meaningful intercultural engagement through the

project, which is why socially engaged contemporary art as a methodology, which is more globally oriented in outlook and sees “the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole” (Smith 2014, p. 8) is an appropriate vehicle for these engagements. Contemporary art practices takes into account diversity, multiple perspectives and considers various cultural outlooks as interconnected systems of knowledge and therefore positions members of the collaborative group as each a source of differentiated yet connected knowledge with the potential to bring new perspectives to the project’s dialogue.

In further considering the role of social engagement, the site of Broadmeadows, the new home of the social health group was considered. Today, Broadmeadows is a suburb which could be described as having ‘super diversity’, the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics states that 56.4% of it’s 13,305 residents were born overseas from over 34 different countries. Originally agricultural land, Broadmeadows developed as a township when it became the site of community housing after World War II (City of Hume 2017) and the Ford manufacturing plant, which opened in 1959, was a part of post war economic expansion (Ford 2017). Before 1946 there were no residents born overseas in Broadmeadows, demonstrating how the population has rapidly transformed in cultural diversity in the post war era. The most common countries of birth are Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and India. Broadmeadows, located in the City of Hume is also the 11th fastest growing local government areas in Australia at 3.9% in 2015-6. The extreme cultural diversity of the site informed this project, seeking to focus on the suburb as a site of active global relationships.

My own art practice has often focused on the intergenerational migrant experience and being part of a diasporic community, often expressing living between cultural spaces, as an Australian of Cantonese-Chinese heritage and often feeling that the concept of a permanent home is allusive. My experiences of family, and the relationship between place and belonging, became the foundation for my role as a collaborative co-learner on this project. In unpacking the concept of home, ideas of transience and mobility became a relatable theme for the group. As a child, my Australian born Chinese grandmother would often comment on the importance of visiting one’s homeland, ironically something she never did. My discursive response was usually to question the definition of ‘homeland’, asking ‘...but where is home?’. Even to a young child of migrant parents, the idea of home was not something that was easily definable. My personal experience and knowledge was widened by the experience of working cross culturally with this migrant group, and allowed me to rethink issues of home from the perspective of new migrants. The experiences from this project gave me insight into re-imagining home as portable, as an increasingly common experience. In considering my own

experience of home as less connected to place, a part of my engagement in the area was to make use of site-specific practice as a strategy for engaging with ideas of home. Art historian Miwon Kwon, in *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002) concludes that as a society, we are less place bound and increasingly fluid as a result of increased mobility, artists are using site-specific strategies as a way of 'belonging-in-transience' (Kwon 2002 p. 8) and finding meaningful connections to place through creative interpretation and expressions. This was a theme, which influenced the way I thought about representing the complexities of home in an era of mobility and transience.

My experiences of family, and the relationship between place and belonging, became the foundation for my role as a co-learning collaborator of the project. In unpacking the concept of home, ideas of transience and mobility became a relatable theme for the group. By focusing on this theme, the asylum seekers group took ownership of the idea that home is perhaps transient and mobile, yet through active participation in the artistic process were able to express that this mobility was a part of their newly emerging identity as new residents. As the collaborating artist, I responded to this by building a series of transient homes from contemporary suitcases using fabrics such as felt and patterned dress fabrics, which the group culturally associated with. My intention was to take the suitcase as a contemporary representation of travel, mobility and perhaps freedom and recreate this as the site of home, a site that is constantly in transition and to change the narrative around asylum seekers and new migrants to an empowered narrative. I made use of soft felt, as it is able to convey a feeling of softness and comfort as one relates to their idea of an ideal home, a place where you feel safe and relaxed.

It was important for participants, both adults and young children, to be able to reimagine the concept of home. The use of bright colours, the small scale of the suitcases, and the ability for the created artefact to be a play piece, meant the work was able to act as a trigger for their imaginations. The ceramic charms made by the group were then to be handed out to the public at the street festival and to be contained with the transient homes. The idea of sharing a cultural tradition was to imply that a sense of home is not only a physical structure but also a series of routines, habits, behaviours, customs and cultural outlooks which allow an individual to orientate themselves and gain a sense of comfort.

PRESENTING OURSELVES AS PART OF THE BROADER COMMUNITY

As a group, we participated in the *Broadmeadows Street Festival* (2016) by presenting the project to the public. Participants of the group shared good luck charms they had made with an explanation, as a way of sharing their cultural traditions and to promote intercultural learning in the wider public sphere. During the festival, we met with and engaged local people, including the event organisers, other community groups, audience members, the research team, volunteers, local government staff. The Mayor of Hume, Helen Patsikatheodorou, also enthusiastically welcomed the group for their public contribution to the event commenting on how it was great to see the social health group being actively engaged with the broader community. Through attending and managing the project, the group became proud of their contribution.

The project also attracted positive local media attention and also International media in Hong Kong and Chinese media, demonstrating how a community can creatively work collaboratively on aspects of new migrant resettlement. It also demonstrated how a local news story about new migrants can have an international impact, as it is an issue that has resonance in a globalising society. The attention to the participants in the project at the festival and through the media did generate a sense of pride in the participants, as expressed through their keen participation in the project.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF A RENEWED RELATIONSHIP WITH HOME

The project provided a platform for the group to explore and own their status in relationship to the concept of home. Through art, we were able to creatively re-interpret the idea of home and spatial mobility as a way of living and how this allows a sharing of cultural traditions of new migrants in a diverse society. As a group, we were able to present ourselves as active engaged citizens and perhaps it influenced the way asylum seekers and new migrants are viewed in the neighbourhood. From my observations there was a level of acceptance and engagement from the community indicating a success of the project. During our setup, it was clear our location within the festival could be challenging, we were situated next to a classic Australian motor club car show complete with loud V8s, revving engines, carnival amusements and men in Akubra hats, as to be expected in a suburb of super diversity. It created an amazing cross-cultural dichotomy, and as the festival progressed, it became more of an alignment than a

challenge and perhaps represented the fluidity of cultures that exist in globalising Australian suburbs.

The project provided a platform for the social health group to engage with a greater cross section of society, from working collaboratively with the group members, social workers and interns, RMIT researchers, cultural events staff of local government, local audiences, local government officials and the media. The project attracted positive media attention in the local newspapers, drawing attention to the group's public creative contribution to the street festival. This led to positive attention for the group whilst being photographed and interviewed. It was evident that young children involved developed a pride in their participation based on their enthusiasm for the interaction.

Audio-visual documentation of the project also became an invaluable tool for the social health group, particularly for those unable to participate or attend the public event. The short video demonstrated the process of making, the social engagements and the outcomes of the project and allowed other staff and volunteers related to the social health group to engage and understand the project implementation and results at another time and extending the life of the project and creating ongoing meaningful connections through current technology, which allows for this process to occur.

A MODEL FRAMEWORK FOR ARTISTS WORKING IN A SOCIALLY ENGAGED MANNER

The project allowed me, as a practice based researcher, to thoroughly explore how creative methodologies can be applied when working with a specific community. Through the research process, the identification of Soja's inclusive concepts of *Thirdspace* (1996) provided me with a theoretical position to consider the flux of the physical and mental, emotional, real and imaginative spaces of a community and place in relation to the development of a socially engaged art project. The research process of this project has allowed me to refine and reflect upon my own research processes and thus informs this framework for artists to consider when working in a socially engaged manner.

The framework for consideration:

SITE AND COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT – THE PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

- **THE PARTNERING GROUP AND BROADER COMMUNITY:**
Assess the different types of communities, ages, gender, interests, professions, racial and cultural background and their relationship to the broader community in which they are located etc.
- **THE PHYSICAL LOCATION:**
Assess the kind of physical environment you are working in. Is the location urban, suburban, rural? Does the physical environment impact on the project? Is it an area that is informed by landscape or infrastructure of a local activity?
- **HISTORICAL NARRATIVES:**
Assess local historical narratives related to the place – investigate local histories and activities. How does the community relate to these histories?
- **IMAGINED IDEAS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES:**
Are there any artistic interpretations of place already existing? Or local myths? What do these narratives indicate about the community? Are there any community led or local government led re-imagining of place and community?
- **DOMINATING NARRATIVES – PAST AND PRESENT:**
Are there any dominating narratives of those observed? Which community has the loudest voice? Which ones are quiet?

WORKING WITH YOUR PARTNERING GROUP:

- **BUILD DIALOGUE AROUND THEMES:**
The site analysis will give you a series of themes to build dialogue with your partnering group to further tease out ideas suitable for the basis of the design of your artistic project
- **SUITABLE COMMUNITY PARTNER:**
A suitable community partner/s with an openness or enthusiasm to work with artists and artistic processes is vital to developing a project

- **COORDINATING WITH YOUR PARTNERS:**
Designing workshops to fit with your partnering groups schedule, so activities can be embedded into their regular activities. Artist should observe or consult about the groups routines, to understand what activities may be suitable for them to work on. Good to have clear roles defined in your partnership and a structure for your activities.
- **CHOOSING APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES:**
Through an assessment of the age appropriate and skill level of the participants, assess the kinds of activities you think the group would be able take part in. In collaboration with the partnering group design a project and allocate particular tasks to the participants suitable for their skill level and interests.
- **BUILDING TRUST:**
Building a trusting relationship between the participating group and yourself as an artist can take time and may require a series of meetings or events to form a relationship before starting on a project – through getting to know the participants, you may find some of the themes found in your site analysis may resonate well with your partnering group and help you to form the core concepts of your project
- **BECOME A CO-LEARNER:**
Think of yourself as a co-learner during your project, observe the course of the project, reflect on your approaches and how the dynamics of the group impact of the processes and outcomes.
- **PUBLIC PRESENTATION:**
Encouraging your partners to take part in a public presentation will assist towards social participation and active citizenship in their local community, which can lead to building confidence in engaging with broader society. Public presentation can vary in scale from an intimate showing to attending a much broader public event and should be tailored to the group appropriately.

CONCLUDING THE PROJECT

Belonging and the Transient Home, as a practice based art research project focused on the implementation of a socially engaged public art project investigating the

increasingly complex ideas of home, culture and mobility in a globalising and ‘super diverse’ society. Taking into consideration Soja’s *Thirdspace*, which re-imagines space as multi-dimensional and fluid, the project was a platform for refining approaches to socially engaged art and thus leading to the development of a framework for consideration by artists working in a socially engaged manner. The development of the project also gave me an opportunity to investigate how preconceived ideas of ‘home’ may be reconsidered through the development of narratives re-imagining ideas of house, home and Australian domestic life. Ultimately, the project *Belonging and the Transient Home* provided a platform to voice our position as empowered migrants, contributing to the urban public sphere and thus demonstrating not only our right to be included in the city, but as a valuable voice in our increasingly super diverse society.

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All images taken by Tammy Wong Hulbert.
Images of the participants are not included for privacy issues.
(Image 1 is my son).