Virtual Migrants

Imperialism as Deportation, Art as Ideology —a contextual framework for creativity

"How do we collectively acknowledge our popular cultural legacy and communicate it to the masses of our people, most of whom have been denied access to the social spaces reserved for art and culture? [...]Progressive and revolutionary art is inconceivable outside of the context of political movements for radical change."
Angela Davis, "Women, Culture and Politics" (Women's Press, 1990).

Art along with media is a form of ideological production—consciously or unconsciously it reinforces, represents, questions, or attacks various views we hold about our world, hence it always has an educative component, positive or negative. Many artists (unlike media practitioners) feel unable to think of audience and the political effects of their work—a writer once said "If I worried about that, I'd never write anything at all!" This mistaken and self-indulgent form of individualism, fostered by western art education, is as foolish an approach as it would be for a politician, scientist or media moghul to divorce themselves of any responsibility for the social consequences of their work. Furthermore, the art establishment is over-critical of art that speaks out with a direct voice—I recall the continual scepticism during production of the *'Nach-ural Struggle'* CD-ROM, which we described as a 'digital art polemic', as to whether it was 'True Art' or an educational CD. Yet in effecting change, art and ideological production is most powerful when linked to progressive struggles. It is as important for campaigns to use the arts and creative media as required to meet their immediate and foremost objectives as it is for artists and media practitioners to raise awareness and generate discussion around those campaigns and the relevant issues. With reference to the new digital media it is also the social use of a new technology which finally determines its future, and the *'Virtual Migrants'* new media research project is developing this area through collaboration between artists, educationalists and campaigners.

The title 'Virtual migrants', while alluding to the 'digital technology' aspect of a project about migration and deportation, essentially describes the sense of displacement among those peoples who are constantly reminded that their area of residence is not necessarily their home, a sense of an incomplete migration which is perpetuated along racial lines. There is a great lack of CD-ROM material on such a subject, with "the first CD-ROM on racism and the black presence in Britain" (entitled 'HomeBeats') having only just been produced by the Institute of Race Relations. 'Virtual Migrants' focuses on globalisation, barriers to migration, state ideology and the paradox between the shrinking world with freedom for information to travel, and yet the increasing tightening of racist immigration laws and ever-increasing gaps between the 'first' and 'third' world. Imperialism is more than ever the dominant global system perpetuating extreme oppression and inequality. Its pre-development created modern racism, and therefore attacks on racism will only scratch the surface unless they relate to anti-imperialist struggles. This places the Black artist concerned with race in direct alliances with the grass roots of the Third World, and the story told must be as much about strength and resistance as about abuse of state powers.

By 'Black', I mean the term progressed here in the 80s indicating people of non-European descent, marginalised here by notions of imperialist British nationality. While not without contradictions, 'Black' is still better than those subsequent liberally backward and anti-political moves resulting in phrases like 'cultural diversity' and so on. Increasingly, aspiring black artists seem to want the freedom to not tackle race since whites don't have to be similarly pigeon-holed, yet this naive position plays into the establishments' hands. Under a dictatorship artists who innocently ignored the political reality around them are used as testimony to the creative output of that regime while opposition is ridiculed and suppressed; a broad consciousness of resistance informs art work even at intuitive levels, and within this framework of a need for political change there is no such luxury to avoid the social reality around oneself. Wealthy liberal democracies such as in Britain cloud their injustices, inequalities and global sufferings with a biting air of comfort and decency, but in essence the framework is the same.

But let us take the relationship between art and ideology a step further—how can a work of art consciously and purposefully describe and express an ideology, and thereby develop the tangibility and currency of the concept itself? If an ideology is a set of related beliefs, attitudes and opinions, then the old linear narratives have surely done a dis-service to their understanding. The non-linear nature of the CD-ROM lends itself particularly well to the artistic exploration of such abstract social concepts which are not normally described easily using such narratives as in films and books. The medium carries with it the potential for enabling the active viewer to link together seemingly disparate events and pieces of information into a well-defined conceptual framework, in any order. To this end, 'Virtual Migrants' initially focuses on the story of Liverpool-based Nigerian dissident Bayo Omoyiola (currently threatened with deportation) and the layers of interwoven connections that link together Euro-British racism, colonial history, global economy, and definitions of nationality. We will return to this story later.

Our last piece 'Nach-ural Struggle' was an attempt to achieve a non-linear experience of a politicised yet abstract concept, and did at least establish the strength of a piece which was undeniably visually and aurally stunning *as well* as being rich in informative, educative content. However, it remained arguable as to how far the piece created an emotive sense of its central concept through the multiple connections gained via non-linear exploration, and also whether experiencing the whole really was greater than simply the sum of all of its parts. Nevertheless, the piece clearly demonstrated that the CD-ROM medium enables possibilities for a piece to be discretely artistic, educative and also campaigning all in one physical format, due to the ability for a user to navigate through specific sections without the need to encounter other entire bodies of content. So with 'Virtual Migrants' we're trying it again. But rather than simply engaging in cultural action, we need to think and understand the political concepts and global contexts before any statement can hold firm. Deportations are highly charged with politics, suffering and emotion, creating life or death situations requiring people to take to the streets to demonstrate anger and opposition. But looking at the construction of national identity and global power concentration, the story is more complex and after some decades of such action the goal-posts haven't moved - cultural activists and campaigners alike need to further our understanding before we can act with greater clarity and strength.

The example of Bayo Omoyiola (summarised)

Bayo is currently threatened with deportation. He has lived here many years, has one child born here who has the right to stay, yet his wife and other children are currently in Nigeria awaiting Bayo's status here to be resolved. It was in 1995, just a week after Ken Saro Wiwa was killed, that Bayo was given a deportation order by the Home Office and from there his already two-year long campaign intensified. The campaigners have weekly meetings, though typical of long-running campaigns attendance can become erratic until something happens; he has recently been given a 6-month reprieve before his next hearing and his campaign has won the particular support of Unison along with some Churches, MP's, and the local community and friends. Although 118 Labour Party MPs had signed an early day motion for Bayo's right to stay during Tory rule, it is uncertain if they would still go along with this now as Labour is deporting people at a higher rate than the Tories ever did.

Nigeria gained 'independence' in 1960, yet its economy continues to be dominated by multinationals. Within the oil mining sector Shell is the largest company and is widely held to be responsible for various forms of ecological destruction. A military coup in the mid-60s and further coups subsequently have led to military control for most of Nigeria's history, despite a brief period of democracy from 1979-83. Human rights abuses, detentions and deaths have been well documented. The military remains accused of shooting down a demonstration against Shell, who in turn is understood to support the military rulers. The USA also has an interest in oil imports from Nigeria at favourable prices. Despite this unholy alliance serving 'western' interests and those of the Nigerian military elite minority, international pressure has slowly criticised Nigeria (though without any material clout) who has claimed it will release detainees and allow elections; the Pope's visit did indeed trigger a few to be released.

Broadly speaking, it seems that the exploitation which colonialism began is continuing through the multinationals, and is continuing to destabilise the country—right through all the coups and military regimes it would appear that only the multinationals reaping their profits has remained constant. Dissenters and human rights activists are frequently forced to live in exile, such as Bayo who was and still remains involved in the pro-democracy movement. It was also the income from exploitation for the white colonising countries which allowed them to stabilise their own economies and diffuse political unrest; racism itself was constructed during the colonial era to justify colonial exploitation, and white workers were brought into this ideology. It is the same racism which through colonialism created Nigeria as a third world country, which destabilises and therefore in turn encourages corruption in Nigeria, which was also able to bring about the influx of migrants into Britain from

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the late 40s to early 60s, and which now denies Bayo the right to political asylum from the corruption which it created the conditions for.

Bayo is constantly in touch with Black issues in Britain via his own experience and community involvements, and is clear that the threat of deportation against him would not have happened if he were white. He has also received racism in various other forms, including threats from clients of reporting his supposed bad conduct to the housing office (while working for Liverpool City Council's Housing Dept.); as a result he had to be moved to work on other estates. Bayo's continuing experience of racism as a Black citizen in British society is an equally significant microcosm of the global whole. The racist history of changes in immigration laws and rules together with the associated publicity is usually tied in with particular shifts in the economy, migration patterns or nationalist sentiment, such as the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act under the Labour government to prevent the rightful entry of British passport-holding Kenyan Asians. Every such change has invariably whipped up a wave of racist feeling, attacks and even murders; it is a cornerstone of British racism. Immigration laws are also almost unique in terms of how fast major changes are pushed through with almost no public debate; the 1968 Act was typically rushed through in just three days.

In these ways, the British state continually raises the question of national identity and its need to identify Black minorities as never having any real claim to full social and economic participation in this society; the laws and their practice are a continual reminder to every Black person, and indeed every white person, of this fact. In this role, the legal system and infrastructure is a major contributor to the *production* of the racist ideology rather than merely an instrument of it. Within a global context we must also remember this is a key component of the system which also acts to ensure that cheap labour continues in poor countries to enable cheap goods for wealthy countries such as Britain, and ultimately to maintain the divide between rich and poor nations.

Towards a synthesis between digital art and campaigning

In Britain it has been the numerous anti-deportation campaigns which over the years have been in the front line of opposition to racist immigration laws. For the past three years the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC) has played a co-ordinating, lobbying and consciousness-raising role at a National level and also linking with like-minded organisations globally. In response to the 'Virtual Migrants' project they pointed out that the immediate issue for their campaigning groups was the lack of computer access. Out of 28 core campaigns of NCADC, only 6 had regular (but not ongoing) access to a computer, which belonged to and was normally used by the host agency for that campaign. Other campaigns used computers (e.g. for leaflet production) by irregular or special arrangement. None of the campaigns had a central computer or internet/multimedia access for campaign use. However, NCADC recommend that all campaigns be linked to the internet with their own computer due to the increasing speed at which changes in immigration and nationality take

place; it would be much faster and efficient to publish those changes on a website or email them to a specified list than to organise a mail-out and publicity. NCADC intend to develop this internet access as soon as any possibilities arise, therefore the access for campaigns could change significantly over the next few years.

With media such as interactive CD-ROM, the direct benefits for and usage by individual campaigns needs to be gauged, despite difficulties of access to the medium. Digital art practitioners and cultural activists need to bear in mind that current problems of grass roots access to the 'new media' (CD-ROM and the Web) may be partially resolved in the near future, and that progressive media aesthetics and practices have to be developed now in anticipation of this. Previous examples of campaigning videos produced have often been linked in with student projects, have been sold within campaigns to raise money and have possibly been shown at meetings, but they have tended not to develop issues further than the campaign leaflets and have mainly preached to the converted due to the lack of any distribution or exhibition strategy. Nevertheless, they may have raised the consciousness and resolve of campaign members/supporters by giving them a more intimate and emotional insight to the issues at stake than simply a leaflet or even a well-delivered speech. As with any media production, there always remains the issue around the need to develop a series of 'screenings' or an exhibition programme to encourage the visibility of the material produced. The bottleneck for such products is indeed in distribution; no artwork can be radical unless seen or heard and while production tools seem to be increasingly accessible the distribution channels are not, and even the supposed exception of the internet is under mounting criticism. The cultural activity of an arts or media project within a campaign may also assist in sustaining active member support and public interest, particularly in lengthy and drawn-out campaigns which struggle to maintain regular active presence until something happens.

Indirect benefits to campaigning must also be recognised through their educational role in a wider context thereby raising public awareness and insight; it may be possible for NCADC (who publish a vibrant website and quarterly newsletter) to link in with the project in this context. In the case of 'Virtual Migrants' this will initially involve community networks, education and arts audiences and at a later stage probably also some form of independent or semi-commercial distribution. Even more, media activism of this kind which not only documents real struggles of principled opposition but also imaginatively develops it further must also be recognised as an essential part of creating a history of resistance for future activism to learn from. Involvement with local struggles in an ideologically conscious creative process which in turn is embedded in a global context is a springboard towards a more holistic political culture; let's pass it on.

TOP: BAYO OMOYIOLA *Virtual Migrants CD-ROM*
ABOVE: *Natch-ural Struggle CD-ROM*