

**This conversation was commissioned by Noam Segal for the Refugee-Ness issue of the *Bezalel - Journal of Visual & Material Culture***

**Nirith Nelson:** In political theory there are so-called “open border” theorists, who support individual freedom and point out the material inequalities between states, which are stressed when borders are closed, claiming that allowing border crossing benefits all parties involved (both populations and states).

On the other hand, “closed border” theorists contend for the right to exclude. They focus on the importance of a community that shares values, norms and interests. They think first and foremost of what the state gives to its people.

Therefore, the “closed” think in terms of territory, while the “open” think globally and for the benefit of both the individual and the world in a broader sense, a thinking, which in the words of Michael Clements, considers that "development is about people, not places". Some even believe that this is the way to eliminate global poverty forever.

You and Matteo definitely belong to the “open borders” kind in your private and professional life –could you reflect on that point in relation to your life and work?

**Giuliana Racco:** My parents both boarded boats departing from Italy in the 1950s. My father, alone, as an adolescent migrant to send remittances home; my mother as a child reuniting with her father who was heading for California to join relatives –something that never happened due to quota laws. Luckily, when I was a child growing up in Toronto, my parents could afford yearly family visits to Europe and so I’ve been travelling as early as I can remember. When I graduated from university, it was a natural decision for me to begin working and living abroad, which was facilitated by my dual citizenship –conferred to me by factors of which I carry no merit– and allowing me to spend considerable amounts of time in different countries through Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Since I always changed countries for indefinite amounts of time, living and trying to integrate myself as best as possible, each place distinctly affected my practice and formed my vision, particularly concerning questions of labour, citizenship and mobility rights and the likes, especially in view of own mobility privileges.

The strongest closed border experience I have had is the period I was doing research in Palestine. As usual, it is the small everyday experiences that strike you and make you realise the scale of things, even in such an extreme case of a military occupation, like what it means to live behind this massive concrete border. An Italian friend had found a very ill stray near a refugee camp. Since the veterinarians in Bethlehem are not used to treating dogs, she began

taking him to a vet in Jerusalem. This also implied vaccinations and the procedure for a travel passport for the dog. One day, driven by an English friend, I went in her place and was amazed. I had no idea that Jerusalem is only about 10 minutes by car from Bethlehem. It had always taken me almost an hour to get there using the transportation that Palestinians –those who can cross the checkpoint– use. The dog and I, of course, were able to pass the checkpoint with no problems whereas most of my friends –refugees or not– can only dream of visiting Jerusalem. This and other experiences eventually led to the questions driving *The Artist and the Stone*, concerning mobility rights and borders, the value of people versus goods.

**NN:** In Hebrew, the word “refugee” shares the same root as the term for “slip of the tongue”. They both relate to crossing borders in a non-traditional way –not going-by-the-book. However, it is known that often slips-of-the-tongue have exposed an important aspect of the conversation or opened a whole new way to relate to it. One can treat refugee-ness in a similar way. Do your works intervene in a coinciding manner?

**GR:** I appreciate this point because I am very intrigued by etymology. The work I do with my colleague Matteo Guidi, who is an artist anthropologist, is concerned with how people manage their movement through strongly defined systems that tend to objectify them and even induce forms of self-restraint. The main focus is on tactics used in everyday practices where simple gestures can act as a form of resistance. This shift in perspective reveals cracks or faults within the systems themselves, providing insights into how to move through these cracks. So, it is also very much about revealing what lies just below the surface, what is barely visible but still very much there, what the ‘slip-of-the-tongue’ implies.

Regarding crossing borders, even though I’m facilitated by my passports, it’s been a long time since I haven’t been made to feel guilty at one. This goes for Europe, Canada, the US and Israel, especially airports, which confuses me as to what going-by-the-book actually means. And I won’t even compare my experience with someone who is in a much more compromising position than I am, without either of my two privileged citizenships. The tactic for bypassing restrictive security measures, devised to protect my camerawoman and her equipment –even though we had done nothing illegal– the last time we flew out of Ben Gurion, is actually the basis of two of the works in the last exhibition, showing the opening of an envelope with the video material sent by post from Jerusalem to Barcelona.

**NN:** The word immigrant relates to the individual, refugeeness relates to a situation, the process and the being. Refugeeness is being in a state of flux. How do your projects relate to refugeeness?

**GR:** Citizenship itself and citizenship rights are in a state of flux. Take the case of the European governments that are applying new laws aimed at radically reducing these rights, like the ‘gag’ law in Spain.

But the idea of flux, of change and movement is also at the base of *The Artist and the Stone*, which is itself an open experiential process, transforming the tension created between desire and constraint by contrasting the process of the movement of a person with that of an object with the same origin across the Mediterranean. Going back to etymology, the term constraint derives from the Latin *constringere*, meaning to tie, bind together or shackle; while desire comes from the Latin *de sidere*, which can be interpreted as ‘from’ the stars (L. *sidus*), the preposition ‘from’ implying movement. Constraint is something fixing while desire is what moves us, and is itself in a constant state of flux. This idea was also behind *Só estás be onde não estás* (*You only feel good where you aren’t*) the results of a workshop we developed for the Soft Control/Technical Unconscious exhibition in Porto last October, together with students from the Faculty of Fine Art and professional school students coming mainly from former Portuguese colonies.

**NN:** In refugeeness, there are a few points one can relate to: leaving the home and the home country; crossing (stealing) the border; facing a new environment and culture; and the issue of hosting and being hosted. Your project *Survival English: The Practice of Everyday English* from 2006 deals with the latter. You came up with a suggestion that gratifies the needs of the immigrants, giving them practical guidance and information on how to get-about and knowing their rights. This generated a two-fold effort: on the one hand, the study of English and, on the other, the mastery of the rules and laws that are in their favour (protecting and helping their integration into the local society). Could you please elaborate on the project and its different versions?

**GR:** Although one module of *Survival English* is dedicated to the theme of immigration, the work was not intended solely for migrants, but it is more a reflection on the general rules and political situation weighing down on citizens, new citizens, migrants, return migrants and refugees alike, obviously in different measures. It began with my questioning of my own role

as an English teacher –questions which began in Japan– imposing my dominant language (and hence, culture) over others. As I said, I’ve changed countries many times always attempting to integrate as best as possible, working, going through the bureaucracy of residing in a place, learning new languages etc., and I’m keenly aware of the privileges conferred to people from certain areas of the world (myself included) and how language is an instrument of power.

As a published book, *Survival English* ended up being used in a wide variety of contexts of which I actually have little documentation, just hearsay. My version (with the audio component) was used for exhibitions, and I know it was applied as a tool for discussion concerning its specific modules (survival, immigration, labour, housing and crime) in English classes in a town hall in France, in art schools in France, in language classes for young migrants in northern Italy, etc. This was important for me, that the work has a life of its own, is used by different people in different ways and as a tool for discussion.

**NN:** Research shows that work seekers, who are mostly denied refugee status, not only do not change local employment and wages. Rather, after periods of massive migrant work influx, standards of living rise. There are many examples, but the best is the US where immigrants in the nineteenth century arrived without passports or visas and immediately started working. Further statistics show that this trend continues to this day. In spite of this, developed countries continue placing bureaucratic obstacles and falsifying claims to justify "closed border" policies.

Artists often position a metaphorical mirror in the face of society.

Your project *The Artist and the Stone* shows an interesting aspect on this issue. These stones have substantial weight, therefore cannot be used as tools (not in the sense of violence or defense) and, unlike humans, cannot cause damage. However, their presence prevails and when you presented them on public grounds, they even had a function. The interaction involved sitting on them, but the real experience was realising their origin and journey.

Please tell us about the inception of the work, the process and the presentation in Barcelona.

**GR:** The work originates from *In Between Camps*, a walk piece focusing on the problematics of daily life in a fragmented territory where connections between towns, cities, and camps are broken down, preventing people from visiting friends and relatives –even very close by–, crushing social and economic relations. Some places just grab you; I find the landscape

throughout the West Bank breathtaking, but it is very difficult to understand who controls the areas you are crossing and the effects for refugees and non-refugees alike is like that of the very land you are standing on shrinking around you. In 2012, with a small group comprised of Palestinians and foreigners, we decided to follow the ground embedded stone traces of an ancient Roman aqueduct, built to carry water from a Herodian pool (located in the Hebron area) to Jerusalem. Our intention was to transform the simple daily practice of ‘taking a stroll’ –extending it over an expansive and contended territory– into an immersive experience concerning landscape, geography, history, and politics. This search for the ruins from a prior era of colonisation (Roman), using a map dating from yet another period of colonialism (British), was interrupted by the appearance of a giant quarry, from which a whole new series of questions emerged.

With *The Artist and the Stone*, we decided to deal with mobility restrictions shifting outside of the area, this time also treating contemporary Europe’s relationship with refugees, 65 years after the Refugee Convention in Geneva. *The Artist and the Stone* is a process-based work that literally negotiated the twofold movement of a subject –an artist who is a born refugee– and an object –a 22-tonne block of stone– from Palestine to Spain. So far, in Barcelona it has taken on a number of forms, such as a temporary installation in public space, an exhibition in the Fundació Suñol, workshops with art academy students, primary school children and also adolescents, a public projection cycle and so on. At the moment, the artist is here beginning his residency period. He has actually already been to Europe several times for residencies and has always returned to Palestine. This also raises questions as to the exceptionality of the art and cultural sphere, which enables people to move based on invitations as opposed to those who do not pertain to these fields. This was an impetus behind one of our video pieces *The Artist and the Stone: On Negotiation*, which also emphasised that many refugees can be and are active contributors to culture and knowledge communities.

**NN:** The title of the work embraces the “phlegmatic” role of the stone versus the action of the artist. However, eventually you granted the inanimate with a procedure of movement, forcing it to follow the footsteps of a refugee. What are the milestones of the process where you see similar obstacles and where are the faults of the artwork in face of reality?

**GR:** The stone was able to move while the artist remained blocked as his visa was continuously declined, despite invitation letters for the residency programme and from the

municipality of Barcelona. I expected problems, but not to this extent. Imagine how much can change in a person's life as they are suspended or waiting to move. How can anyone make plans, organise themselves, do anything when they are not even able to guarantee being able to travel, even when all the papers are in order? I think the milestones are those moments when the subject and the object are blurred. When the stone is granted 'special status' as an art piece and when a whole network of partners (in Palestine, Spain and Canada) work together to get both the artist and the stone moving. The 'fault' of the work in the face of reality –if you can call it that– is its belonging to an art context, but this is inevitable, we are artists, so is the artist/refugee. And this is the same fault of this conversation. Despite the critical framework, it still pertains to the 'ivory tower' of academia. Moreover, 'socially engaged' art risks functioning as 'doing-good' or worse providing a 'clean' image for art institutions and governments alike. In fact, one of the interesting aspects of the project was how the arrival of the giant mass catalysed relationships of exchange and support, while also revealing flaws and interests among and within different organisations. Everyone has interests and it is important to be aware of this all the time, but I don't think this should stop artists from making work treating political or social issues, nor academics or critics from studying and writing about them.

**NN:** Both projects use narration as a grid from which thoughts and questions arise. What do you see as the role the narration takes in your works and how does it serve your concepts?

**GR:** Much of my work exists through the telling of experiences. Despite the semblance of heterogeneity, I feel there is an overwhelming media-driven dominant discourse that reduces the space and our capacity to acknowledge, listen to and understand the experiences of others. What are we willing to listen to? And what and who are we afraid to listen to?

*Survival English* has a peculiar structure, permitting each user to complete the exercise-story by filling in the blank spaces that are framed by the module themes. I think this is why it ended up being used as a platform for discussion in the different situations I mentioned before. With *The Artist and the Stone*, the whole process is a story that needs recounting because of the way it 'crashed' into and against a whole series of systems –embassies, customs, public administrations, art residencies, schools and so on– really catalysing reactions and questions along its course. And it is still going on after more than two years.

**NN:** With *Survival English: The Practice of Everyday English*, one goes from the macro –the roles and rules of socio-political infrastructure– to the micro –the individual who uses the booklet for his or her personal use. With *The Artist and the Stone*, the idea sprung from obstructions an individual encountered in the process of fulfilling his wish-of-movement (his state of refugeeness) and your work eventually reflected a collective experience by using something that was not human.

How do you see the stream-of-movement in these two artworks and, perhaps, in other examples you may have from your work?

**GR:** For me there is a constant oscillation between micro and macro, a continuous shifting in scales, also at the basis of other works. In the postcard piece, *Postcards Venice*, and the fotonovela, *In Attesa Di...* –also text-based editions, like *Survival English*, but constructed from interviews– it is the individual story that expands toward the collective experience. In the former, the stories of daily life in Venice during the ration period of the autarchic Fascist regime, as told by people who lived it, addresses the relationship between language and power under dictatorship and conflict to then connect to what I perceived over a decade ago as an imminent rise of the far right in Europe. In the latter, the different interpretations of waiting as described by thirty workers of a furniture factory near Padua address the greater theme of the relationship between labour and time.

As I mentioned, *The Artist and the Stone* stems from *In Between Camps*, which was moved by the simple intention of taking a walk across a territory as an act of resistance. So a basic action reveals a macrocosm of problematics affecting the lives of the individual and the collective, both the actual limits of moving through space and the subsequent self-restriction caused by the fear of what might happen to one who does. With *The Artist and the Stone*, we inverted this. Moving from a simple individual wish to travel, we instigated a macro-action – that of moving a gigantic mass across borders, territories and the Mediterranean Sea– manifesting the complexity of the process through its unfolding, opening up a series of unexpected questions along its routes.