

Institution: University of Sussex
Unit of Assessment: UoA 36 Media Studies
Title of case study: Using multimedia to enrich public and specialist perceptions of immigration detention
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The multi-media exhibition and publication <i>Border Country</i> (2007–2010 and 2007) by photographer Melanie Friend, with its research focus on the experience of asylum-seekers at the point of their incarceration in UK Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), have contributed to national and international public understanding of standards of well-being and human rights in relation to asylum detention, challenging assumptions about national detention practices and their impact on individual detainees. It has also informed campaigning materials and training sessions for immigration centre visitors and lawyers working with immigrants and detainees. <i>Border Country's</i> impact is on-going: its images and text continue to be shown six years after the first exhibition.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Key researcher: <i>Melanie Friend, Senior Lecturer in Media and Film (Photography) at the University of Sussex (2003–present)</i></p> <p>While dominant representations of asylum-seekers focus on ‘our’ view of ‘them’ as ‘Other’, <i>Border Country</i> employed migrants’ perspectives, captured as audio recordings, and photographic images, to reflect both on the immigration system and on UK cultural systems and practices. Through its focus on subjective experiences of immigration, <i>Border Country</i> positions the disillusionment of the once-hopeful immigrant within the context of the institutional framework that comprises the UK immigration system. It shows how the very order and rule of UK law, for which the aspiring asylum-seeker yearned whilst experiencing the anarchy of their home country, now entraps them, both in the detention centre and in the labyrinthine bureaucracy which processes asylum claims.</p> <p>The project’s research method involved, first, 43 hours of interviews with 11 asylum-seekers in detention, recorded between 2003 and 2007. After a two-year period of negotiation, Friend was also permitted to carry out photographic research at all eight IRCs in England. The research interviews focused on male detainees (who comprise 85–88 per cent of immigration detainees), but also included material from two women detainees in Yarl’s Wood IRC. Interviews were designed to explore meanings of home, memory and identity in the context of confinement. Individuals were followed over an extended period, and also interviewed following attempted deportations.</p> <p>Using her highly unusual level of access, Friend explored the use of indefinite detention and the ways in which the bleak, chilling institutional structures affected detainees’ states of mind. Interviewees describe their earlier experiences of civil war and torture, and their present debilitating experience of detention: two talked of suicide; one described his suicide attempt. Detainees described what they felt to be the inhumanity of the UK’s immigration detention system. Through the use of audio recordings of interview fragments from these first-person narratives, Friend’s research encourages its audiences/users to reflect critically on themselves rather than on the asylum-seeker.</p> <p>The research also explored photographically the meaning and impact of institutional space, through a series of landscapes of the external security structures of the UK’s IRCs, and a visual exploration of the design and seating arrangements of Visits Rooms, several of which used a rigid demarcation between asylum-seekers and visitors. The particularity of immigration and detention</p>

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was emphasised through aesthetic strategies developed in the work – notably the juxtaposition of these clinical, bleak images (devoid of people) and the first-person intimacy of the individual voices of asylum-seekers in the recorded interviews.

The *Border Country* publication (2007) included images, interview extracts, essays by three contributors (including Friend), biographical details of detainees and a 75-minute audio CD of a linear fragmentary soundtrack. The travelling exhibition (2007–2010) comprised 17 images, made within the confines of the UK's immigration removal centres, and five simultaneous soundtracks. Friend also published an academic article discussing her project methodology (2010).

3. References to the research

R1 *Border Country* publication including audio CD with 75-minute soundtrack, published in 2007 by Belfast Exposed Photography and The Winchester Gallery, Winchester. Includes essays by Mark Durden, Professor in Photography at Newport School of Art, Media and Design, University of Wales and Dr Alex Hall, Research Associate, Department of Geography, University of Durham (the exhibition and publication were submitted as one output for RAE 2008).

External funding:

- Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Leave funding for Melanie Friend, 1 January 2007 to 31 March 2007 (£19,272);
- Arts Council England (ACE) 2007 (Grants for the arts – National activities; £2,520 towards the publication of *Border Country* – see Section 3, R3 below).

R2 Solo touring exhibition *Border Country* (17 prints and five fragmentary soundtracks):

- Belfast Exposed Photography, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 16 November 2007–11 January 2008;
- The Winchester Gallery, 6–29 February 2008;
- The University of the Arts London, Well Gallery, 6–24 October 2008;
- *Border Country* was selected as one of the ten best works nominated for the European Central Bank Photography Award, 'Europe' 2008, and was exhibited that same year in the finalists' group show at Fotokina, Cologne, and at the European Central Bank headquarters in Frankfurt;
- BCA Gallery, Bedford 16 December 2009–27 February 2010;
- Gallery 44, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto, Canada, 14 September–16 October 2010.

R3 Friend, M. (2010) 'Representing immigration detainees: the juxtaposition of image and sound in *Border Country*', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(2). Online at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1484/2998>

4. Details of the impact

Friend's work has been used to inform and enhance the training of lawyers and visitors working with detainees, and has contributed to activist campaigns and to building public understanding of the lives and situations of immigration detainees. This was through the impact of the *Border Country* exhibition itself, as well as via extensive press and curatorial coverage of the exhibition [see Section 5, C1].

Requests for the re-use of *Border Country* material were received from filmmakers, campaigners and visitor groups working to help asylum-seekers. Despite some restrictions imposed by the Home Office, activist organisations (including *Dover Detainee Visitor Group*, *Bail for Immigration Detainees* and the *Testimony Project*) were able to use images from *Border Country* in their

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publications and on their websites, and audio material from the project at conferences and workshops [C2]. The *Gatwick Detainee Visitors Group* used the project's images at its Annual General Meeting (2009), in training for prospective new Visitors [C3]. Both *Dover Detainee Visitor Group* and *London Detainee Visitors Group* raised funds through selling copies of the *Border Country* book, the latter at the launch of the research report *Detained Lives* at Amnesty Human Rights Action Centre, 29 January 2009 [C4].

Friend was invited to talk about the project at public lectures and exhibition openings. The Belfast Exposed public opening in 2007 included a discussion of immigration detention between Friend and Northern Ireland immigration lawyer Anna Morvern. As a result, Morvern then employed the project's images and interviews when training lawyers for the Law Centre (NI) in 2008, prior to the opening of the Larne detention centre, as well as in professional talks on refugee rights. For Morvern, the presence of detainees' voices in the training room provided an immediacy and tangibility to discussion of theoretical issues about the practice of human-rights law in the field of immigration, vital for legal practitioners new to the field [C5].

The work has also had cultural impact. As a result of press coverage, Friend was invited by writer Natasha Walter, director of the activist group Women for Refugee Women (WRW), to participate in the staging of the play *Motherland* on 14 January 2010 in Bedford, close to the Yarl's Wood IRC, by using the *Border Country* images as stage backdrop. The play, focusing on female and child asylum-seekers in Yarl's Wood, was directed by Juliet Stevenson and performed by Stevenson, Harriet Walter and others. Natasha Walter said: 'We wanted to bring the play to a local audience. There were MPs present – Patrick Hall and Alistair Burt, who took part in a post-performance discussion of the work – and local activists, as well as the management from Yarl's Wood and Serco [the private company in charge of the centre], although they refused to engage in discussions [C6]. The overwhelming response from the local people was: "Not in our name" (July 2010) [C7]. Hall and Burt went on to speak against immigration detention practices [C6].

Direct audience responses (demonstrated through exhibition visitors' books) similarly evidence the project's power to inform and challenge public perceptions about immigration detention and the experiences of asylum-seekers.

Examples of visitor comments are:

- 'Absolutely chilling – absence of people in images and presence in sound works so well – the images are somehow *gorgeous* too' (University of the Arts, London);
- 'The sound installation gives that personal edge and impacts on the highly evocative and haunting spaces. Very moving work...' (UoA);
- 'Fantastic insight to what actually goes on' (The Winchester Gallery);
- 'As a student social worker on placement ... this was a great way for me to gain an insight of what other detention centres look like behind closed doors...' (The Winchester Gallery);
- 'The images tell a compelling and moving story of humanity and inhumanity which we witness but fail to acknowledge until we are faced with the reality...' (Gallery 44, Toronto) [C8].

Border Country continues to be a highly engaging and powerful reference point for public and specialist discussion about immigration detention, with its images and audio still being used, six years after its original exhibition [C2].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

C1 Media and curatorial report held in Department.

C2 See corroborating emails from Vebi Kosumi, former Director of *Dover Detainee Visitor Group* DDVG, July 2004–July 2012. The *Bail for Immigration Detainees* website (www.biduk.org): still images from *Border Country* on its home page (24 October 2013: <http://www.biduk.org/>). Holly Pelham wrote about *Border Country* on the website of campaigning group The Testimony Project, 13 August 2010. Online at: <http://www.testimonyproject.org/testimonyprojectuk/article/news/border-country-melanie-friend-review-1>:

'Border Country is a particularly powerful illustration of asylum and makes an impact without the need to push an opinion. Any reader no matter what their thoughts on immigration would be unable to deny the miserable existence of detainees seeking asylum in the UK and for this reason, *Border Country* is unique'.

In July 1, 2013 Friend was invited to present *Border Country* at 'The Politics of Detention', an ESRC-funded, public, multidisciplinary seminar which brought together academics, practitioners, activists – including some from Detention Action (<http://detentionaction.org.uk/>) – and those who have experienced detention. Her research was described as 'highly engaging' in this context (<http://immigration-detention-seminar-series.org/73-2/>).

C3 Nic Eadie, Co-ordinator, *Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group*. See also: 'Book on Detention: *Border Country*', GDWG Newsletter, Spring 2008:

<http://www.gdwg.org.uk/downloads/newsletter-2008spring.pdf>

C4 Emails from London Detainee Support Group Director, Jerome Phelps, 1–7 November 2008, and from Vebi Kosumi, DDVG [see C2].

C5 Emails from Anna Morvern (including the following, dated 14 March 2013):

'I played extracts from the *Border Country* CD as part of my training of lawyers for Law Centre (NI) in 2008. [...] having the "voices" of detainees in the training room made the theoretical issues about the practice of human-rights law in the field of immigration appear much more immediate and tangible ... especially to practitioners who were only just beginning to practise in this area and were unlikely to have visited an immigration detention centre or to have witnessed a "removal".'

C6 Details of *Motherland* and the January 2010 Bedford performance online: <http://www.refugeewomen.com/index.php/what-we-do/events/previous-events/104-motherland>. Email from Natasha Walter, Director of Women for Refugee Women (15 February 2010) confirms the impact of *Border Country's* images in the show.

C7 See: <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/refusing-to-be-silenced/>

C8 Indicative Visitors' Book comments from UK and Canada exhibitions and events available in photocopies upon request.