

## Report on Stories in Transit III

Two-day workshop at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, and Birkbeck College, London, 22nd-23rd Sept 2017

Report by Marina Warner and Valentina Castagna, October 11 2017

The first day of this event, September 22, was held at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, with their generous support, because we envisaged that this workshop would draw on the special knowledge and skills of artists, designers and architects to create a space for storytelling and bring together ideas for the ‘story box’, that is, for a tool/catalyst for imaginative storytelling activities in refugee communities, such as we have experimented with and developed in previous workshops.

### **Friday 22 September 2017**

#### **Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University, Oxford**

#### **‘Stories are a form of action’(Arendt): Imagination on the Move**

- Selma Dabbagh chaired this first session and she recalled our stemming idea - how the root for the verb to water, *raawa*, in Arabic is the same as for a word for storytelling: a *raawi* is a storyteller.
- The writer and campaigner Ben Rawlence, author of [\*City of Thorns\*](#), gave the first talk, based on his experiences chiefly in Daabad in Kenya, one of the largest camps in the world where 300,000 refugees, mostly Somali, are held. He illuminated the difficulties of carrying forward our work in such

turbulent conditions, which differ from the urban housing of the *minorenni* in Palermo. For those attending Stories in Transit for the first time, his account alerted us to the complexity of the crisis. He drew on Hannah Arendt, who writes about the need for those who are marginalised and excluded to gain visibility, to be present in ‘a space of public appearance’. The ‘polis’ she writes, is founded on people acting and speaking together and communicating with one another towards that end, wherever they might find themselves. Telling stories from the cultural baggage of one’s life so far can be a way of taking occupation of that space. He also evoked vividly the absence of such expression: musical instruments are kept locked up in a cupboard by the authorities until an official holiday requires them; weddings are celebrated silently, and a singer in the camp, once a famous performer, no longer sings at all. He emphasised the importance of ‘the community of memory’, but also warned that many people in the shanty parts of Nairobi did not share a narrative and wanted to keep their own stories secret – or at least, not publish them or broadcast them widely. The pressure of bonding and sharing can be unwelcome. **Ben recommended making it possible to open channels of communication – radio, digital platforms, Youtube, blogs, live streaming – to establish the public spaces the refugees would run themselves.**

*Ben’s experience gave valuable insights into the context beyond Palermo. It was clear that while these insights also apply to the Palermo situation, the latter has local, specific aspects, and that the difference between locations and circumstances must be borne in mind when thinking about tools for storytelling. The refugees themselves will be the best sources of information about their needs*

*and how imaginative activities can meet them. SiT should build on this and develop a highly adaptable prototype which could be copied with variations.*

- David Herd spoke next: he is a poet and scholar, and Professor of English at the University of Kent; he co-founded [Refugee Tales](#), a campaign specifically directed at ending Indefinite Detention in the UK. The campaign organises an annual walk on the lines of Chaucer's pilgrimage, when tales, inspired by the experiences of detainees, are told by writers who have met and talked with the victims. It is a remarkable combination of literature and activism, and is gaining followers – and the ears of MPs, so there is a chance it might bring about a change in the practice (which is illegal). David's research focusses on the poetry and thought of Charles Olson who was the rector of Black Mountain College, the successor to the Bauhaus, an arts school in the Fifties where Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Anni Albers (the weaver) and Joseph Albers (artist and philosopher) all thrived. The school aimed at 'imaginative experiment and creative utility' and cultivated methods of trusting spontaneous creativity, adopting mixed media, improvisation and chance discoveries (the geodesic dome, a 'portable refuge' itself, since used in camps such as the Jungle, with [Good Chance Theatre](#), was arrived at through hit and miss at Black Mountain). The history and approach of the College are key to what SiT is attempting and has always been an underlying principle and model for the project since its inception. David spoke about how the situation after World War II saw the largest mass displacement of people until the crisis that is taking place now. He described the School's deep connections with refugees from Nazi Germany. Olson, who was the Rector during the School's final years, saw language as 'a recognition machine' for individuals to open a space for

themselves. His theory of ‘projective verse’ and his concept of the Open Field were provocations, not blueprints or manifestos. Performance and recitation matter, and listening to others is essential: all of this is denied the detainees at Gatwick, for example, where they are not even allowed pencil and paper; it seems that in the UK legal system, asylum seekers also do not have their statements taken down by anyone, as the tribunals where they give evidence are not courts of record. Their voices and their words are deliberately treated so that they leave no trace. These aspects contribute to the complexity of the refugee situation, of which Ben Rawlence spoke.

- Steve Willey (Birkbeck) in the Q & A asked about the importance of chance processes in the Black Mountain method: this applies to the games and storytelling processes Phil Terry and he have been developing for SiT workshops.
- Marina Warner showed images, giving examples of different lines of direction which the ‘story box’ might take. These range from sites for storytelling, such as wellheads and nomadic campsites (Bedouin carpets and wind breaks), to bundles, bales and camel bags, painted Sicilian *carretti* and the ubiquitous Ape Piaggio or 3 wheeled carts, to the crates and hampers and bags of itinerant pedlar/storytellers/women going to market. Jane Wentworth, the designer, captured many of these vehicles and portable containers in wonderful notebook drawings.

- Valentina Castagna (University of Palermo) and Clelia Bartoli (CPIA Palermo) then introduced the collaboration of Giocherenda (a word in Fula which means ‘solidarity/unity/interdependency/negotiation’), and the objects and games the Giocherenda group have been making: story dice, *Ronde dei desideri* (Wheels of Fortune/wishes), and Rorschach and storytelling cards (Carte acchiapparcordi). Clelia stresses that the arrivants have a great deal to give Europe and they see their role and their future participation in that light. We reached them by Skype and several of them – Dine, Maga, Mustafa, Omar - spoke to us. Their zest and eagerness were palpable.

*We were hoping to bring some of them to Oxford in person, but we did not succeed in obtaining even one visa in time.*

### **Making a Toolkit for Stories in Transit**

We then embarked on the practical work of the day: we divided up into groups, picking coloured ribbons out of a hat (Pomodoro; Azzurro + Limone; Rosa; Arancio; Gelsomina; Zafferrano). The Ruskin gave us the main project space and some studios off it, including one equipped with a clamp and a saw. We had raw materials, some of it in the Ruskin’s stores, some ordered specially, some cardboard etc scavenged locally.

Pomodoro/Red:

Stephen Brichieri-Colomb

Steve Willey

Antonia Karaisl

Rahila Haque

Matthew Reynolds

Claudia Gualteri

Azzurro + Limone

Joan Ashworth

Judith Cowan

Jane Wentworth

Liz Wickett

David Herd

began as two groups and joined forces, to create a sequence, arising from the motif of *water as a vital resource*, like stories.

Joan had brought with her a Kavad, or model of a storyteller's booth, with opening shutters painted with scenes. They discussed making the three stages fit into a large portable version of the Kavad. Trying to make the storybox a portable shadow theatre/animation stage was discussed too, with the lights and tools all contained. Possibly a camera and screen/projector too.

Rosa

Sara Fanelli

Luke Jones

Jose Mario Dello

Renato Pino

Arancio

Jem Finer

Conrad Shawcross

Roma Tearne

Liz Wickett

Valentina Castagna

Sasha Nemeckova

Pete Laidler

Daniel Trilling

Gelsomina/Jasmine

David Swift

Marcia Farquhar

Stevie Wishart

Phil Terry

The makers want to draw attention to this proposal as the result of their hour or so of ‘serious play’ in the spirit of SiT: *We all wrung out our wire and spun wheels in a happy go lucky bonding and binding, thinking alongside each other about the liberation of being serious with junk. This is a process that I think benefits all who join together to think and make and so is a good model for Palermo. It is not an end in itself but a stage; sketching, essaying, binding and bonding. In defence of bending wire I always loved that Alexander Calder said: 'I think best in wire'. Realising everyone had proper presentations to give we gave our Heath Robinson type cart an account of itself. It was not a disrespectful industry but certainly on the Absurd side.*

## Zafferano

Ben Rawlence

Lauren Bon (who had joined us late morning direct from LA)

Mercedes Kemp

Marina Warner

James Attlee

## The Cyclopean Eye

We took up Lauren's experience of making a camera obscura inside a container, which would also act as a safe interior space, or open its door to the outside. It has a canopy which extended outwards – over any area covered in a rug or mat.

*Many of their ideas can be adapted and developed, separately or, in some cases, elements can be mixed and matched.*

- We then watched one of the films Mercedes Kemp made in Tunisia with local children in the Medina of Tunis and local film director Hichem Ben Ammar, during a period after the attacks in 2015. The script was written by the children themselves: a little boy, going to school for the first time, is ashamed of his father, because he is a street sweeper. He asks strangers to come to parents' day and play the part of his father; when they won't, he plays truant and stays out the night in a ruined building where a ferocious dog lurks, howling and snarling; then a jinni appears to him, and tells him to go home. His father has been looking for him, in great fear, and reported him

missing. When he takes him back to school, the teacher hails the father as a hero, fulfilling the greatest needs and desire of the people of the Medina, for their streets to be clean.

*It was shot with effective reticence and gentleness; the acting sensitive and appealing, the fable very touching and eloquent.*

- Clelia Bartoli then directed us into groups to play the *Gioco dei Desideri*, with the story wheel game the Giocherenda group have made. The outcomes were surreal – totally unexpected conjunctions follow from the shuffling of the characters we chose and the slips on which we wrote our ‘heart’s desire’; the process was a bit confusing, but exhilarating and made us all laugh very delightfully.

**Saturday 23 September 2017**

**Keynes Library, Birkbeck College, London**

The whole day was directed at reviewing the ideas put forward at the Ruskin and building on them to plan Stories in Transit IV, the last of the workshops to be funded in this cycle.

**The Morning Session: what form the ‘tool kit’ might take.**

We each took a few minutes to draw up at least two points; we then shared them with a small group, distilled them, or at least tried to, and presented them.

*The discussion was lively and at times heated, with several different proposals and opinions. Marina Warner chaired.*

- Daniel Trilling put some tough questions, and drew attention to the point that ‘refugees’ above all need work and pay for that work. Ukrainians, for example, form the largest group of displaced peoples in Europe at present, but because they are allowed to work, they are not identified as a problem.

Segregation is an obstacle to any arrivant’s success and indeed survival, but life in a ‘tent city’ in eg Jordan is very different from a hostel in Palermo.

Conditions in Catania and Siracusa, which he knows well, are far worse – some asylum seekers have been housed 2 hours’ walk from any town centre. Two of the Giocherenda group were also moved to a similar remote location, and managed to return to the city when they were offered lodging with a family. Valentina and others agreed that we must never forget the precariousness of refugees’ situation, the power imbalance between them, local citizens, and visitors like us. Clelia Bartoli however stressed that the young people she teaches want to take up their lives in full autonomy and do not want to dwell on the past, on the sufferings and ordeals they have undergone. Nevertheless, individuals are suffering from trauma and stories can trigger crises for them.

#### Key questions that arose:

- What will make politicians change their attitude? (and, one might add, behind the politicians, the ‘people’?)
- Are the community of refugees being kept segregated from the locals? Or was the project disrupting that social division?
- What cultures were being carried in the box?
- Various people endorsed the need for skills... is this the purpose of the project?

- Are they learning – through SiT – things of use to them in the world?

### More points/developments

- Phil Terry said that listening is crucial: to the arrivants' songs, poems, thoughts, stories. **We are *their* audience, and possibly the first for this kind of free imaginative play; the project is a *listening post*.**
- Marcia (Farquhar) reminded us that Rebecca Solnit has written that *Hope is not a lottery ticket you clutch waiting to get lucky. It is an axe to break down doors*
- Jem (Finer), Phil (Terry), and Valentina emphasised openness, flexibility, the spirit of play, expressed through a continued experimental approach and use of cheap materials to hand ('a plastic bag and a ball of string'). Dramatic possibilities of language: Charles Olson's use of huge letters could be adapted.
- Sara, Judith, Lauren, and Liz (Wickett) picked out the theme of 'devices of wonder' such as the camera obscura container (Jem noted that a smaller, modular concept of a camera obscura might be better adapted to the rabbit warren streets of Ballarò), the bicycle-powered cinema, the possibility of Giocherenda making kaleidoscopes and lending them to the audience: Giuseppe Mastruzzo has made them out of found materials. Mercedes emphasised the importance of musical instruments. There was strong support for the modular umbrella trolley proposed by Conrad.
- David (Swift) and Clelia Bartoli talked about Philip Zimbardo and his [Heroic Imagination Project](#), which he is involved in in Sicily, to develop resilience. They proposed that the young people in eg. the Giocherenda group, could act as 'ambassadors' and travel to other hostels and centres to pass on the ideas for imaginative expression. Steve Willey endorsed this

strongly: connecting one community to another using the ideas and the 'box', and suggested using short animations to give guidelines to playing the various games.

- Selma Dabbagh, Roger Malbert, Kate (Bland), Renato Pino: Kate told us about [Radio Alwan](#) in Syria, a hugely popular long running serial, radio dramas about ordinary experiences.

*Theatre can give different communities a place to encounter one another: the performative element plays a part. The promenade theatre idea began taking shape at this stage in the discussion.*

*Their phones are the chief connection to any community they have and in one group of 30 he (Daniel Trilling) had encountered, they would all view something together on the one phone they had.*

A discussion of Giocherenda followed with David Swift, Clelia and Valentina in the chair.

- They drew attention to the potential and talent of the students.
- The need for training other young people: to involve more of them.
- The need for a Giocherenda Website from which orders can be made. See their [Etsy](#) page, [website](#) and [facebook](#) page.
- Sara pointed out that better materials, e.g. inks and better tools would raise the standards of artistry – she suggested buying a small relief press for lino cuts, rubber stamps.
- Giocherenda can visit venues such as the new Eco Museum of the Sea in Palermo. Selma emphasised the rich interweaving of cultures and histories in Sicily, and urged Giocherenda materials to reflect this.

- Publicity: the Repubblica article 15 Sept 2017 did a great deal to support the work:

<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2017/09/15/gioche-renda-ovvero-dellarte-di-raccontarsiPalermo14.html>

### **Afternoon Discussion: Plans for Stories in Transit IV**

Phil Terry chaired, using game of throwing the ball of twine to each speaker in turn, making a web of connections between us.

The dates for the next Stories in Transit workshop were set (November 16-19, 2017). The spirit of Stories in Transit IV will continue to be collective and communal. The project is NOT the X-Factor, looking for special gifts; it is about social freedom for each and every one to express themselves through imagination and creative means. An analogy would be a public park in a city (not a square to which only residents have keys).

Giocherenda will run as a separate, inspired practical enterprise which offers a wonderful model for other groups of talented individuals to follow.

#### Planned objectives:

1. The frame story remains The Epic of Gilgamesh - participants to interpret and improvise freely. For example, their own remembered fables, legends etc will be actively elicited and woven in. Also local Sicilian material, for example, legends about Morgana herself (she lives under the straits of Messina and raises castles in the air during the Dog Days).

Mercedes offered to catalyse a ‘promenade performance’, through the streets of Palermo, along the lines of a festive procession as often take place in the town.

Yousif Lateef Jaralla and David Swift will help prepare the ground for around 7-8 scenes, building from the work done in May. We shall ask Yousif to give the young people a sense of the poem, as he did before. Their approach and treatment will be very free: they can take charge of the story and move it in directions they are inspired to.

All *nessi* will take part in helping: puppets, music, masks, words, etc. all to be involved.

2. We shall concurrently make a replicable, low-cost story vehicle/box as part of this exploration of the poem. A ‘performance’ in the form of a polished spectacle is not the paramount aim, but finding means of expression and being together in the city.

3. We shall find ambassadors and *nessi* among the refugees and arrivants themselves, interact with and involve more Sicilians, too, so that the ideas for story-making continue to circulate.

4. We shall work on offering digital platforms: blogs and other channels of communication.

5. We shall hand over the project as a prototype or prototypes to the community itself.

6. We will think towards possible events at Festival di Morgana and Manifesta Biennale.