

# PhotoIreland Festival 2012

## Migrations. Diaspora and Cultural Identity

### Curatorial Text

Migration is as old as mankind itself, but has gained new dimensions on our over-populated planet at the beginning of the 21st century. It seems that the only difference is that the mechanisms at work have become more sophisticated, mechanisms to pull in workforces at one moment and to keep unwanted migrant workers out at another, mechanisms to separate political from economic asylum seekers, mechanisms to fence in nomadic societies or fence out illegal immigration. It is particularly significant in this context the recent efforts to close national frontiers within the European Union have been made in order to stop non-communitarian migrants to move freely within Europe. While one historical iron curtain has fallen, other fences are reinforced, or even newly erected, always with the same underlying aim: to stop people from moving from east to west, from south to north, from outside to inside, or vice versa.

The photographic medium has always been on the forefront of investigating migration, producing iconic images (such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*), recording moments of change, and questioning cultural identity. This has often been achieved by aiming the camera at the artists themselves. In its third edition, PhotoIreland will explore Migration, Diaspora & Cultural Identity, in order to pinpoint these occurrences in a wider perspective, from more than one angle.

Migration goes hand-in-hand with globalisation, which can be seen both as a challenge and an opportunity, with many political, cultural and economic implications. The same truth can be applied when looking at the individual story, a personal experience of leaving one's place of birth in order to make a new start somewhere else.

Isabelle Pateer's ongoing series *Unsettled*, shows the relation of displacement and globalisation, of "progress" and demolition, as in the example of the Belgian village Doel, threatened by the expansion project of the Antwerp Port. The series includes intriguing portraits of young inhabitants, alternated by landscapes, which symbolise, in the words of the artist, "the international tendency of global political and economic shifts and the way they manifest themselves to the people and their surroundings".

Another example is Mark Curran's *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN*. He first visited the Lausitz, in the former East Germany in late 2003, seeking the impact of global capital on the periphery of Europe, as had been experienced in his native Ireland. Significantly and preceding the global economic collapse, he encountered the same globalising forces which had transformed unrestrained the landscape of his origins but through its forces of withdrawal and seepage. Since

the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the region has prophetically experienced rapid economic decline as jobs have gone further East while its younger population is migrating to the West.

*The Mother of all Journeys* by Dinu Li is a translation of the same process into personal accounts: Li's journey is that of his parents from Southern China to Northern England, and his own, as he revisits the places that are pictured in family photographs, from his mother's old school to the corner shop she ran after arriving in England. Many of the sites of family events have changed beyond all recognition. What remains are photographs as fragments of a time only truly kept alive as memories.

Jean Revillard's *Sarah on the Bridge* documents the journey of a young girl from Ghana to Europe, where she hopes to find a better future as a dressmaker. Once she arrives, however, Sarah enters the vortex of modern slavery often connected with migration, as she is forced to pay back her debts by selling her body, in a forest near the Italian town of Turin.

Artists themselves have always been considered "mobile" citizens, sometimes they had (and still continue) to leave their countries in order to live in exile, sometimes just preferring to "live and work" somewhere far from their birthplace. Tina Remiz explores the issues of migration and cultural identity, by challenging the notion of the word "home". Telling the story of her home country, Latvia, from a perspective of somebody who left in search for a better life elsewhere, she captures the experience of returning to her homeland where she no longer belongs.

The question of what is lost, and what is gained in the process of transition between leaving *home* and settling the host country is addressed in Ieva Baltaduonyte's Project *Migracijos*, a dialogue with Lithuanian women representing two generations who came to live in Ireland during the 'Celtic Tiger' years. The resulting 'conversations' reveal intimate intercultural complexities concerning notions of home, language and history.

The Irish Diaspora is another starting point for illustrating migration as a process of losing, rebuilding, defending and questioning one's own cultural identity. The term diaspora, long used only to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world, has been applied to all forms of dispersion of peoples, as Michel Bruneau expounds in his following text on the subject. After identifying four essential criteria for defining the term diaspora, as well as four different kinds of diaspora, he analyses the validity of the term "Transnational Community" for describing the question of migratory displacement. While it is worthwhile mentioning that, according to Bruneau's terminology, the Irish Diaspora should rather be defined as an Irish transnational community, it is the fact itself, rather than the academic discourse around it, which has attracted the attention of artists such as David Monahan and Maurice Gunning. In this sense, the exhibition *Living – Leaving* brings together two strands of one and the same story. While Monahan has been working over two years on documenting young people who have had to take the boat in order to get their career brought to life, Gunning's account of the Irish community in Argentina adds to the complexities of time and distance to what is often considered as a "cultural export".

The Jewish and the African diaspora are examples of massive displacements of historical dimensions, for the adaptation of old traditions into a new cultural context, and for a longing to get back to the roots. The exhibition *El Otro Lado Del Alma* introduces thirteen contemporary Cuban photographers who engage with the African heritage of a nation that has been called "Latin-

African” by Fidel Castro, who, until recently has been its political leader. The extraordinary iconography of the Afro-Cuban religions and their relation to the heritage of the African diaspora invite a careful look into “*The Other Side of the Soul*”.

Max Becher and Andrea Robbins have investigated the “international franchising” of a building in Brooklyn, New York, purchased in 1940 by the Lubavitchers, one of the largest groups of the ultra-orthodox Hasidic communities. Young Lubavitcher families are sent to distant parts of the world to set up and manage spiritual centres, which have been built to resemble the original building at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights. Becher & Robbins have documented all twelve 770’s centres worldwide, in countries such as the United States, Canada, Israel, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia.

Francisca Lopez’s project focuses on the Hungarian photographer Bandi Binder who was born in Transylvania in 1917 and emigrated when he was 18 years old, determined to dedicate himself to photography. Binder lived in Montevideo, Uruguay in the fifties and in California during the psychedelic era before settling down in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Lopez focuses her obsessive dissection of this emigrant’s story on Bandi’s European roots; his enforced exile during the crisis of the thirties, which paradoxically saved him from the Nazis; his acceptance towards change and its conjunction with one constant future – his passion for photography. The project is presented as a work in progress, before its publication as a photobook.

Presented already at last year’s Photolreland festival, Gergely Laszlo’s project about the Yad Hanna Kibbutz, officially founded in 1950 by young Hungarian holocaust survivors, has now taken on the form of a book dummy, to be published this year, together with Tehnica Schweiz, as *The Collective Man*. The artist has visited what is left of the kibbutz numerous times in the past 15 years, gradually becoming a witness to its slow continuous disintegration. Besides some descendents of the founders, new families have appeared, sharing the now-privatised land with Thai guest workers, Darfur refugees, and ex-settlers from former Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

In a collaborative process, Roger Eberhard and James Nizam have photographed the ruins of summer cabins demolished by their owners in the wake of a land dispute on the Katzie reserve in Pitt Lake, British Columbia. The resulting series, *Tumulus*, catalogues scattered structures throughout a forest landscape, which evoke the imagery of German Romanticism and American land art. On the other hand, it reminds us that the scorched earth “strategy” is closely linked to the issue itself of migration, preferring to destroy anything that might be useful to the enemy, especially when forced to leave what we call our home.

Darek Fortas’ *Coal Story* is the accumulation of an extensive photographic engagement (and archival research) with the subject being the two largest coal-mining companies in the European Union located in Silesia, the most industrialised part of Poland. The historic significance of the Solidarity-Movement of the Polish coal-miners with their struggle and resistance against communist regimes in the 1980s, initiated “the wildfire” and demise that spread throughout the whole Eastern Block. Carlos Albalá also presents a work on Poland, Nasz Dom (“Our Home”). After the Nazis were pushed back toward the heart of Germany by the Soviets in September 1944, and the displacement of the eastern frontier of Poland with the Soviet Union, cities like Lviv became part of the USSR, which led to often dramatic deportation proceedings. Albalá’s visual re-interpretation of these events exemplifies the search of “a possible (or impossible) pact between

history and memory", and the emotions resulting from such endeavours.

For his series *Assisted Self-Portraits*, Anthony Luvera breaks with the photographer/subject paradigm, as he hands over the photographic tools to his vis-à-vis, so they can create their own self-portraits. A special case of this practise is Ruben Torosyan, who had left Georgia in the late 1980's when the country was still under Soviet rule. Not issued a birth certificate and unable to get a passport, Ruben was determined to get to the capitalist West to create a better life for himself. He spent over five years travelling across Europe attempting to obtain political asylum in over 15 different countries. When Luvera met him in London, he had just arrived on a container ship from Ireland, and they started a close collaboration. Ruben's photographs and assisted self-portraits gain their strengths from discrepancy between what he expected London to be and what, in his experience, it actually was.

After the success of last year's Martin Parr exhibition, we have decided to invite another expert on the subject of the photobook, Irene Attringer, to curate an exhibition linked to the migration theme. The exhibition consists of 20 photobooks from Attringer's collection, covers the time-span of over a hundred years and a wide range of countries and circumstances. Starting with Augustus Sherman's *Ellis Island*, the systematic recording of a registry clerk with the immigration division, this exhibition features masterpieces of the documentary genre, such as Dorothea Lange's *American Exodus* (first published in 1939), as well as recent publications, such as Thomas Mailaender's *Cathedral Cars*, a recording of the often strange vehicles that cross over the Mediterranean from Marseilles to North Africa, visually defying the laws of gravity, expressing tied-up dreams.

Another highlight of PhotoIreland Festival 2012 is an installation on the migration theme, co-curated by the editors of five photography magazines. By choosing photography magazines from Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovenia and Germany), we focused on a region that has been shaped by migratory movements and hybrid cultural identities. The curatorial process has been dialectic and open, and the selected viewpoints illustrate the great interest of contemporary artists on the issue. Some of these projects include videos, such as Heidrun Holzfeind's *The Romanians (Live like a king)* and Kateřina Držková's *Borders*. These works will be shown as part of the video program, together with other pieces such as Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen's *Absolute Exotic*, in which the Danish artist of Philippine origins joyfully sings about discrimination and otherness, and Debbie Castro's *Focused identity, Unfocused spaces*, on the largest Latin American market in Great Britain, "Pueblito Paisa", located in north east London.

This year again there will be a symposium on the festival theme, in collaboration with GradCam and the Dublin City Council's Arts Office: the role of photography and image culture in relation to migration and migratory practices, in the wake of the economic crisis. It will bring together a number of international speakers and artists, who will talk about these issues in a broader context.

Last but not least, the festival theme will also be reflected in the film screenings, this time featuring *The Mexican Suitcase*, a documentary on Robert Capa, the Spanish Civil War, and the role of Mexico in the story of the Spanish Exile.

*Moritz Neumüller, Festival Curator*