

# TERMINALS AND FRONTIERS: art practice, campaigning and progressive change

*Lalchand Azad talks to video and digital artist Kooj Chuhan from the group Virtual Migrants, about the -ory, practice and in particular their set of works collectively titled 'Terminal Frontiers' which bears the strap-line 'deportation, terror and murder by paper'.*

LALCHAND: Virtual Migrants have produced educative works, artistic works, and worked in association with campaigns. How do you see the relationship between these areas of activity?

KOOJ: Campaigning is generally to gain support and lobby—whether through militant action or otherwise—for a specific change and to provide focal activity for progressive energies. Political education is to impart positive or suppressed information and ideas, to generate critical discussion and present systematic, coherent, alternative perspectives and practical approaches; also to assist your understanding of your own position among the power structures of society. Progressive art practice in this context is that which enables heartfelt engagement with the ideas, structures and human realities which political education deals with.

The question is how these fit into social or political change. For any given issue or theme, the associated campaigning, education and art practice will be part of a movement whether closely and actively or distantly and with minimal reference. Change with any significance, foundation and continuity can only be produced if the elements of a movement can support each other. Ultimately, fundamental political change will only take place when a whole range of diverse and developed elements of a mature movement can be organised cohesively and integrated within a logistical and philosophical framework. In Britain at the very least this is a long way off, so for now let's talk about appraising current art practice in relation to campaigning.

Central to Virtual Migrants' work has been a connection with anti-deportation campaigns for some years. These campaigns are part of a movement supporting mainly asylum seekers to gain legitimate refuge in this country where it has been denied. Over a long period of time—including the twenty years since I first got involved in such campaigns—the success of such campaigns has not moved forward despite certain forms of organisation within the movement having advanced—laws have tightened and people are being snatched and unfairly deported more than ever. Maybe this isn't the fault of the movement and is just inevitable, along with the wider downturn of political consciousness over the same period. On the other hand, maybe the right seeds were just simply not sown way back. Maybe short term victories were the order of the day and swallowed

up all available energy, in which case we should be able to redress this with benefit of hindsight.

LALCHAND: So is Virtual Migrants about sowing seeds?

KOOJ: Recently we have worked on two responses—an educational CD-ROM and the Terminal Frontiers series of art works. The almost unfunded CD-ROM, titled 'We Are Here Because You Were There'—which me and Aidan (Jolly) put together with a lot of contributions—is an introductory critique about immigration and asylum in Britain, particularly geared towards schools key stage 3 onwards. In compiling material for the CD-ROM we realised that such introductory perspectives and information simply did not exist in any form—we had to write it ourselves rather than being able to modify existing literature that possibly should have already been available. Perhaps that in itself answers the question about whether seeds were sown before and whether we might be considered to be sowing a few? I mean, after all these years it really feels to me that I have had to create this CD-ROM to move forward from the history of the legal discrimination focus which has dominated critical literature about deportations. The theoretical broader base of links and contexts has never been established, let alone popularised. The CD-ROM serves to introduce a broader contextual base while the Terminal Frontiers art-works allow passionate and empathetic connection with the ideas in a vivid, moving and memorable way. But this needs to be part of a movement of sowing similar seeds if worthwhile fruits are to be reaped in the future since we are up against reactionary ideological seeds being sown all the time.

LALCHAND: And how does this fit in with the process of the campaigning activity?

KOOJ: The CD-ROM addresses the need to impart information and perspectives to a broad cross-section of the public. We felt this to be particularly important because of the power of the media in areas where there are no refugees yet people are very anti-asylum, and also because of the lack of any involvement of a campaigning or progressive voice in such geographic areas. In fact, much sincere progressive involvement of local campaigners is directed towards assisting and working with the victims of state immigration policies, which may be welcome but leaves behind the more awkward effort to debunk myths and encourage proper debate with local indigenous people. I might go on to argue a similar process having contributed to the rise of the BNP around Greater Manchester to show it is part of a broader tendency, and how the

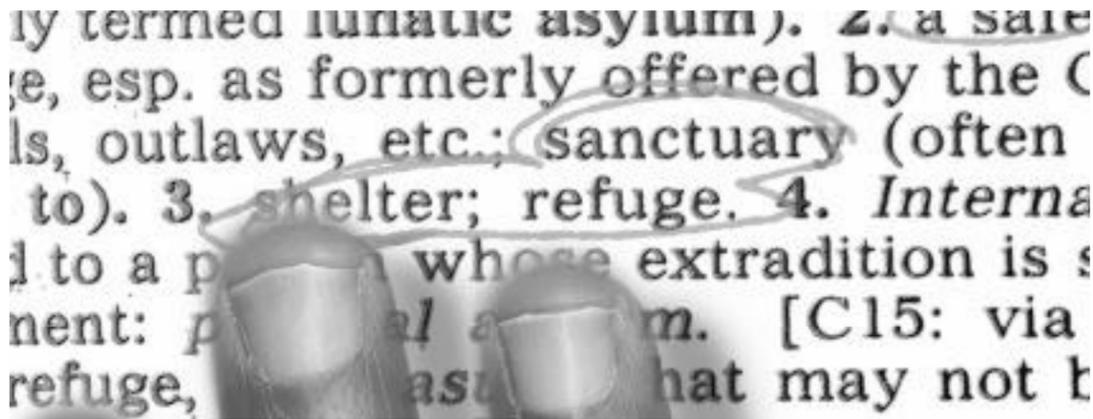


results of this lack of 'seed sowing' can allow some seeds from the far right to be successfully planted instead. Basically, I am saying that there are too few activists who venture outside 'converted' territory, and while doing so may feel the most unrewarding and even the least mobilising it may in the long term be the most politically useful. Perhaps there is a short-termism about much activism and campaigning, whereas serious political education is a long-term affair through which we are trying to lay the foundations for the future. I think there is a general lack of understanding among the left, progressives and minority activists about the possible roles of art other than as putting on a benefit or cultural event, or providing promotional media.

LALCHAND: And within progressive art practice is there perhaps too much 'preaching to the converted'?

KOOJ: Having used the phrase myself I have to say it is a really misleading and unconstructive concept. It certainly is an accusation levelled at progressive artists but it misrepresents the needs of progressive movements. Similarly, my arguing for the greater sowing of educative seeds is not the same as preaching to the 'non-converted'. First of all, what is 'converted'? Within any group supporting progressive activism there are many differences of opinion, a range of contradictions and (like for everyone else) many suffer from a lot of misinformation from the dominant discourses. There is little opportunity to explore, understand and focus, or to resolve perspectives and further questions. Art and media works are a key way in which people can come together and do this in a less didactic way and retain a closeness to the central concerns, a sense of purpose, along with the 'sing it together' sharing of common ground which necessarily sustains any interest-based group. Though didacticism also has its place—for example the 'We Are Here...' CD-ROM which was intended as an educational work with a capital 'E'—for use in schools and so on rather than as an art product. Having said that, it is certainly no more didactic than any school history book and probably less so; didacticism has to be placed in context and we should challenge those accusations of being didactic and dogmatic when indis-





criminally used against work which states a progressive critique.

LALCHAND: Lets move on to the Terminal Frontiers exhibition. Can you briefly describe the project?

KOOJ: It was a two-year long project with a number of sections which resulted in five different electronic art works being produced by a range of artists at different levels, including Keith Piper, with a range of contributions including from people seeking asylum and also from school children. The processes involved in creating the works were very intensive with a general attempt to scratch below the surface at the underlying causes for and contexts around issues to do with asylum and globalisation, while at the same time wanting to be true to our personal responses to these issues. It's all well documented on our website.

LALCHAND: One of the two key pieces (Keith Piper's being the other) was the 'What If I'm Not Real' installation which you directed and which involved collaboration with a number of artists. How did this work and what was it about?

KOOJ: 'What If I'm Not Real' was developed through much collaborative discussion with the entire group of six artists, which included five of migrant origin. Across three screens in a circular arrangement, accompanied by other sculptural elements, the viewer can follow the simple movements of the adult, child and official on their respective screens producing a visual narrative accompanied by finely crafted, multi-directional and alternating musical atmospheres. Among other things, the adult tries to sew together the borders of two maps with a thread that will always be too short, the child tries to piece together assorted fragments of photographs of faces, and the official both sends off military vehicles and receives money from the 'ground' of water. The

interplay between the characters leads to a final retaliation from the adult, although equally the power of the piece is that it allows a range of mentalities between aggressor and underdog to be woven together, explored and played out. The mask work and plain garments were intended to minimize the specific gender and cultural references while at the same time keeping the sense of character and drama—the intention was to create a simpler and more universally applicable set of meanings.

LALCHAND: Originally coming from an expression of a group of artists, how does it work as art and as a contribution to progressive change?

KOOJ: Well, the work was very much our personal response to the issues presented before us, though we clearly wanted the final work to support our political sympathies. Being true and authentic to yourself and also to your politics and beliefs is a difficult trick to play and takes some commitment, arguments and a learning curve to achieve. The work is incredibly rich with personal approaches and ideas such as the sense of opposites which was so critical to our poet Tang Lin. The characters were all placed on water suggesting on the one hand a relief from the problems of land—both which the migrant has left and also which the migrant must go to—yet on the other hand the disturbing sense that as land creatures they can't float there forever and will need to leave this temporary respite. Blood is also used to represent both life and death with the adult migrant finding her own resolution by using her own blood along with that of others as a form of fuel. Keith Piper's immediate comment was, 'God, the production values are really high!' And a number of people who have generally held the painfully common view that 'political art is just an excuse for a slogan at art's expense' were all persuaded otherwise once they had seen this work. In fact, a fuller text about its aesthetics would be a significant piece in itself

but unfortunately the work's strength of provocative content usually leads the discussion away, as it will do now.

As with many such works, it is essentially about engaging people with human feelings and realities at a deeper level than facts and statistics, managing to emotionally distil global processes and relationships into simple, universal human narratives. It is clearly non-didactic, allowing exploration of a range of metaphors within a structured framework, yet still makes a clear statement that is largely free from specific cultural references. It reached out to those interested in the art and the issues, and to art audiences more generally who would not normally frequent such a space. Further to this, it has stimulated interest in such work amongst artists and art spaces. I would add that the whole set of Terminal Frontiers works—along with the CD-ROM—is a compelling, complementary combination at all levels. One of the works was designed to be portable and toured various public and community venues away from the gallery space. Even though we had variable responses to this 'community tour', its value and possibilities are enormous and we want to try it again. It is part of our commitment to make work geographically accessible, even if demanding, while simultaneously avoiding it being marginalized from the mainstream where it can also be seen in a more dedicated environment.

*'Terminal Frontiers' will be coming to Street Level gallery in Glasgow this autumn, and is due to continue touring through 2004. The show was premiered at Castlefield Gallery (Manchester) in late 2002 and was subsequently shown at the ICA (London). The artists involved in the Terminal Frontiers series of works are Kooj Chuhan, Aidan Jolly, Tang Lin, Hafiza Mohamed, Miselo Kunda-Anaku, Jilah Bakshayesh and Keith Piper.*

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