

'The Condition of England.'

Exhibition dates: 29 April – 25 June 2005

Preview: Thursday 28 April 6:00 – 8:00pm

Oliver Walker

"A true-born Englishman's a Contradiction! In speech, an Irony! In Fact, a Fiction! Daniel Defoe

In 2003-4 Walker was presented with the opportunity to work with asylum seekers from Iran, who had fled their homelands and recently arrived in England. The work, 'Here is Home: Here is England' is what the artist calls "overspill from the struggle to make sense of encountering another people from another place". The refugees displacement, Walker found, often resulted from expressing a Christian faith in a Muslim state, or from political oppression. Despite the fact that migrants' experiences can illuminate the largest issues and challenges the West now faces, such groups are rarely if ever given a voice or represented in main stream Western media. Migrant communities invariably remain largely unseen, existing on the peripheries of society, whether legally or otherwise.

'Here is Home: Here is England' came out of the attempt to comprehend the complex changes in the country's cultural constitution, and to imagine how they might be rethought and re-presented. Walker takes his cue from Benedict Anderson's analysis of how our 'imagined communities' can be permeable rather than rigid, dynamic rather than static. Whilst interviewing the refugees to let them tell their stories, it became apparent that a simple documentary presentation would not convey the complexity of their situations, nor speak about the wider issues that gave rise to them. The resulting constellation of videos might best be seen as a way of mapping an actual yet imagined territory: each fuses factual knowledge and explosive emotions with found objects and 'fictionalised' scenarios. Seen as a room-sized installation, Walker's project might best be described as a form of history painting continued via other means – a 'painting of modern life' on an exceptionally expansive canvas.

The installation incorporates four separate video channels seen on a combination of projectors and screens. Crucially, they are united by the fact that each soundtrack is experienced on headphones, broadcast by an FM transmitter. This ingenious device means not only that we are isolated in our own individual headspace, but that we mimic the experience of hearing illegal transmissions and being reliant on others for information. We feel to be eavesdropping onto a conversation, and in the position of 'the other' – of being the object of surveillance ourselves. Each aspect of Walker's work similarly prompts us to develop a nomad's perception of space. For example, when initially entering the gallery space, we are confronted by an oversized map of the country, which reaches from floor to ceiling. Manoeuvring ourselves around it, we become aware that shafts of light are emitted from points around the national borders, as though the whole country were a gigantic landing strip or beacon. We have the sense of being at an enormous height in an aircraft poised to land. The odd scale of the map gives us contrasting sensations; on the one hand it is sculptural and overwhelming, and on the other it gives the impression, as Walker describes, that "we are, after all, a very small and very isolated island..."

Three of the channels of video footage are centred around individual interviews, though their formats can be initially bewildering. A wall-sized projection shows a face projected on a Boeing 727 parked in an airport. Listening in, we hear an Iranian man describe his illegal journey to the UK. Unnervingly, we hear about how he went about obtaining a false passport and even details about the different modes of transport he took when leaving Iran. However, as the footage is mediated by both translation and re-recording, we realise that there can be no simple or privileged access to the interviewee's thoughts, even if we feel encouraged to empathise with him. Moreover, Walker's use of outdoor projection to re-frame and contextualise his footage amplifies rather than dilutes the poignancy of the story – without exploiting our emotions. The runway and plane become transfigured: the location of the shoot becomes "a metaphor for a 'nowhere space' between two cultures; a no man's land between not only places but between a past left behind and a future which can only be imagined."

Planes, after all, are 'non-places' between one culture and another, without their own cultural characteristics.

On one monitor, our view is seemingly at knee-height, as though we were being smuggled into foreign territory. Seeing the world from such a different angle reverses our orientation; we are effectively rendered powerless. The screen, displayed inside a suitcase presented on the floor, shows footage of itself being wheeled around an airport – so that we are made to imaginatively occupy the same spaces as the migrants. The interviewee is seen as a talking head, as though claustrophobically trapped inside the case. A third monitor resembles security surveillance equipment, and its footage amplifies this, appearing to have been secretly filmed. In this part of the work, the artist recreated the point of view of a migrant about to board a plane and departing through customs. As Walker notes, the film observes a “transitory period” between both nation-states and between states of being.

A fourth miniature screen reveals a single tracking shot through a mountainous landscape in which pine trees are shrouded in mist. Such small monitors are ordinarily seen built into the backs of airplane seats and are intended to reassure passengers on a journey. Our initial response to such pastoral imagery is to take delight in such a heavenly setting. Furthermore, the footage is overlaid with the country and western standard 'Take me Home, Country Road'. The dreamy sentimentality of the music and the charming naivety of the lyrics are also comforting – it is left up to us to decide falsely otherwise. Rather than offering an ironic counterpoint to the troubling stories, however, the soundtrack amplifies their themes. As Walker notes, “country music carries connotations of story telling, wide-open spaces, and colonial settlers.” Rather than being about a return to a place of peace and comfort, our attention is directed to how places are defined more by imagination than latitude or longitude. 'Here is Home' comes to echo the poet Derek Walcott's dictum that there is “no nation but the imagination.”