

Institution: The Glasgow School of Art		
Unit of Assessment: 32: Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Deepening Public Understanding of the Global Refugee Crisis through Curatorial and Arts Practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 to 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Ross Birrell	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Contemporary Art and Critical Theory	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1999 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 to 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Birrell's collaborative research has enabled curators to engage the public with the global humanitarian crisis of forced human displacement in new ways, attracting new and larger audiences in Scotland (at the Edinburgh Art Festival and the CCA, Glasgow), Greece and Germany, as part of <i>documenta 14</i> (attracting 1,200,000 people worldwide), and in the United States (at Virginia MoCA). Birrell's work has enabled the development of a new partnership, between Edinburgh Art Festival and The Welcoming, an Edinburgh based refugee resettlement charity. The research has enabled two organisations within Scotland – the CCA and Creative Scotland – to deliver their strategic objectives to reach broader, more diverse and international audiences. Perhaps most importantly, Birrell's work has helped to preserve cultural traditions and, through co-creation, has supported Syrian refugee musicians and performers, including the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra (SEPO) to reach new audiences around the world.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>For twenty years, through a series of iterative performance, music, film and installation works, Professor Ross Birrell's practice-based research has investigated issues of borders – geopolitical, national, economic and metaphorical – to advance an ethics of coexistence between peoples across various lines of separation. Birrell's work forms part of a larger body of practice-based research into art and activism and art as cultural diplomacy, as advanced by internationally acclaimed artist-researchers such as Tania Bruguera, Jeremy Deller and Suzanne Lacy. Birrell's body of work deploys poetic, site and place responsive approaches as methodologies of engagement that seek to elicit meaningful responses to contemporary global crises as a counterpoint to negative images created in the popular media and in populist political discourse. Recent research is characterised by a method of contrapuntal or polyphonic orchestration, where – as Ness and Glăveanu state – 'creativity is... the dynamic and evolving quality of the relationships we develop with others within a shared cultural environment' (2019). Birrell's role is one of orchestrator and guide rather than leader of the creative process, a method that supports a process of co-production and 'bidirectional exchange' based on the practice of listening and dialogue as a means to include different voices and expertise. This method has meant a divestment of power that, at times, sees Birrell as absent during the 'making' or 'enactment' of the work; his role to instigate a dialogue and to guide, often at a remove, the work as it develops, entrusted to the skills of his collaborators, the research process providing spaces for creative opportunity. Since 2010, much of his research has been collaborative, with the Glasgow-based artist-educator David Harding.</p> <p>Birrell's recent research finds expression in two closely connected subject areas. The first explores responses to the global refugee crisis, creating spaces for collective and individual reflection on the plight of forcibly displaced persons, and employing forms of lament to connect audience and subject matter on an emotional and empathetic register. This approach is encapsulated in Birrell's <i>Symphony of Sorrowful Songs</i>, a piece that builds on earlier collaborative work with Harding</p>		

focused directly on music, politics and social conflict. *Symphony*, and the attendant film (*Lento*) and installation works, features a performance by the Athens State Orchestra (KOA), the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra (SEPO) and Soprana Racha Rizk, a political refugee from Damascus, of Polish composer Henryk Górecki's *Symphony No. 3. Opus 36* (1976), written in response to the Holocaust. [R1] The performance of *Symphony* at the opening weekend of *documenta14* in Athens began with *Fugue*, a composition developed by Birrell and Syrian violinist Ali Moraly. Birrell's starting point came from Paul Celan's *Death Fugue* – also responding to the Holocaust – the shared etymology of 'fugue' and 'refugee,' and the interplay of multiple voices that characterises fugal counterpoint. Taking these initial cues, Moraly developed a four-part composition for violin, *Quatrain for Solo Violin after Paul Celan's Death Fugue* (2017). [R2] These outputs have informed the development of *Triptych*, designed for different spaces and featuring a central screen which documents a wide view of the orchestra and conductor, while two side panels appear to focus upon an empty space – a space which awaits the solo performance of Rizk. [R3]

A parallel and related strand of research investigates the crossing of borders through physical acts of endurance that simultaneously explore the regulation of people's (and animals') movement through the operations of border control. *Criollo*, a film work that begins with a solitary horse standing at the Artists' Gate on the threshold of Central Park, New York, is inspired by *Tschiffely's Ride* (1933), an autobiographical account of a 10,000-mile equestrian journey from Buenos Aires to New York, and named after the South American breed of horse. At a time when movement north was being closed off, and filmed in the same week as Trump became president, *Criollo* raises questions about the agency of the animal, its right to be in New York, and what that might signal for the future. Known for its stamina and capacity for hard work, the criollo – a variant of creole – also carries associations of postcolonial culture, capitalism, globalism and creolization. [R4] Developed simultaneously with *Criollo* and *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, and framed by the same context, *The Athens-Kassel Ride* captures a 3,000km, 100-day equestrian ride linking Athens and Kassel, the two cities of *documenta14*, as part of the ongoing *Envoy* series of site-specific action and interventions (see: *An Envoy Reader*, LemonMelon, London, 2014). The *Ride* continues the South-North focus, also the organising theme of *documenta14* – from Greece, through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria to Germany – reflecting contemporary forced migrations. At the same time, the *Ride* creates a response to the Anthropocene, informed by the concepts of 'companion species' (Donna Haraway) and 'trans-species solidarity' (Rosi Braidotti). *The Transit of Hermes*, the attendant film to *The Athens-Kassel Ride*, mirrors Birrell's focus in *Criollo* by honouring the Greek Arravani breed of gait horse, now in decline. Birrell named the Arravani 'Hermes,' after the Greek god of border crossings, also drawing reference to the thought of Michel Serres. [R5,6]

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1. Birrell, Ross and Harding, David (2017), [Symphony of Sorrowful Songs](#) [Performance]
- R2. Birrell, Ross and Moraly, Ali (2017) [Fugue](#) [Performance]
- R3. Birrell, Ross and Harding, David (2018) [Triptych](#), Edinburgh Art Festival. Trinity Apse, Edinburgh, 26 Jul - 26 Aug 2018 [Exhibition]; (2019) [Triptych, installation for Charged!](#), Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Virginia Beach [Exhibition]
- R4. Birrell, Ross (2017) [Criollo](#). Neu Neu Galerie, Kassel, 10 Jun - 17 Sep 2017 [Exhibition]
- R5. Birrell, Ross (2017) [The Athens-Kassel Ride: The Transit of Hermes \(d14\)](#). Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, 9 Apr - 10 Jul 2017 [Exhibition]
- R6. Birrell, Ross (2018) [The Transit of Hermes](#). CCA, Glasgow, 19 Apr - 3 Jun 2018 [Exhibition] and [Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, 21 July - 15 Sept 2018](#) [Exhibition]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Birrell's body of research has deepened cultural understanding of and shaped public attitudes towards the contemporary global concern of forced human displacement. By providing alternatives to dominant media narratives and modes of engagement, the research has benefitted two main groups: enabling curators to engage audiences in new ways; and creating new opportunities within the creative and cultural industries. Birrell's work has enabled the development of new partnerships

and helped to preserve cultural traditions that shed light on political and cultural issues. The research has also enabled two organisations within Scotland – the CCA and Creative Scotland – to deliver their strategic objectives and reach new and larger audiences.

Enabling curators to engage audiences with global issues in new ways

Birrell's work has been used by commissioning curators in Scotland (Glasgow's CCA, the Edinburgh Art Festival (EAF) and Inverness Museum and Art Gallery), Europe (Athens and Kassel, as part of *documenta14*) and the United States (Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art) to engage the public with urgent global issues of the refugee crisis, migration and the barriers to it. Four of Birrell's works – *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, *Fugue*, *Criollo* and *The Athens-Kassel Ride: The Transit of Hermes* – featured in the international quinquennial *documenta14* (d14), which took place in Athens and Kassel throughout 2017 and attracted a global audience of 1,200,000 (making it the most frequented contemporary art exhibition of all time). Explorations of neocolonial and neoliberal attitudes from global north to global south were at the heart of d14, with the humanitarian crisis of the escalating war in Syria taking centre stage. Birrell's research was pivotal in enabling Adam Szymczyk, d14 Director, to widen and deepen public understandings of forced human displacement, provoking rich public discussion on the European refugee crisis and simultaneously demonstrating the efficacy of art in providing alternative understandings of the plight of refugees worldwide. Specifically, for Szymczyk, Birrell's research provided 'a larger metaphor for what [d14] wanted to achieve.' As Szymczyk states, Birrell's project 'allowed us to make a very clear statement' in relation to the humanitarian crisis and was 'paradigmatic for the type of approach that we wanted to explore in *documenta*' acting as 'a kind of embodiment of the idea of the project of *documenta 14*.' The d14 research was reviewed in the *New York Times* and *The Observer* and Birrell was interviewed by CNN. His *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* was one of just two selected by internationally acclaimed artists Naeem Mohaiemen (2018 Turner Prize nominee) and Didem Pekün to discuss in their *e-flux* article on d14, with Pekün stating: 'As the concert finished, I walked out in a trance state. Leaving the hall, I saw a number of friends who were personally wounded by political problems of their geographical locales, and we looked at each other quietly.' [S1]

This engagement is mirrored in other public exhibitions of Birrell's work, with outputs prompting extensive discussion and debate in broadcast, print and online media, and exhibition visitor comments. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Virginia Beach, USA, programmed Birrell's work as part of the 2019 group show, *Charged!* (featuring just 6 artists), a decision based specifically on what they saw as its ability to engage the public in difficult dialogue and reflection. Heather Hakimzadeh, Curator at MoCA, has said 'The aim of the exhibition was to explore the ways in which artists connected emotionally to their audience through technology.' She invited Birrell to exhibit *Triptych* because 'it included an element that was missing in the other works in the exhibition: stillness. *Triptych* provided emotional undercurrents that demanded silence and listening skills to facilitate reception.' MoCA is in a region of the United States which has a heavy military presence and the museum has what the curator describes as a 'moral obligation to our community to discuss uncomfortable issues in a manner that encourages many voices and differences of opinion,' something which Birrell's work was able to fulfil. She says, 'Through *Triptych* the understanding of displacement and loss could be conveyed with deep emotional resonance in a space that could enable further discussion and exploration,' the work making 'a meaningful contribution to the dialogue we have begun in the museum.' [S2]

The effectiveness of Birrell's research is further evidenced by the collective voices of journalists and audiences, who repeatedly comment on the work's ability to move its audience: 'its overriding sense of a world in endless exile makes it an essential experience.' Neil Cooper, *The List*, 2018; 'What is evoked is a sense of absence, of loss.' *The Scotsman*, 2018; 'A cumulative emotional impact likewise builds in Ross Birrell and David Harding's *Triptych* [...] it feels desperately heartfelt.' Hettie Judah, *The I*. The most frequently used audience description for the Edinburgh Art Festival was that it was 'moving', a word included in 13% of comments. Audiences described it as 'An overwhelming, powerful and beautiful piece. [The] singing almost moved me to tears.'; it was 'Very powerful and moving.' Refugees who visited the EAF exhibition were also moved: 'It made me think of my country. In a sad way, but the exhibition was wonderful.' [S3]

Co-creating new spaces and opportunities for Syrian refugees

Birrell's work has also supported a wide range of new opportunities for solo Syrian artists and the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra (SEPO), all of whom are refugees themselves. *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* centred around a recital by classical musicians, who had fled the Syrian civil war. SEPO performed in collaboration with the Athens State Orchestra, on the opening weekend of *d14* (April 2017) in the 2,000-seat Megaron Concert Hall in Athens. Reflecting on the experience, Soprano Racha Rizk describes the opportunity not simply to perform but to *represent* the work, in remembrance and tribute to those suffering in Syria. Following the *d14* concert and showings of the film, she was invited to perform in Canada and with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. In the days prior to the *d14* concert, SEPO and Rizk also performed a concert of Arab music at the Eleonas Refugee Camp in the South East of Athens. Syrian composer and violinist Moraly's performance of *Fugue* has led to a number of other high-profile professional opportunities to participate in visual art contexts, including performing: at the opening press conference of *d14* in Kassel; as part of Australian-Aboriginal artist Gordon Hookey's book launch also part of *d14* in Kassel; in the Scottish Parliament as part of the EAF 2018; and as a participant in 'Residing in the Borderlands,' a series of talks and screenings by cultural experts from diasporic communities, at SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin 2019. Exhibitions of *Triptych*, which includes elements of the *d14* performances, has extended the global reach of both the research and the musicians. [S4]

Creating new opportunities for professional practitioners

To realise his work, Birrell has created employment for film crew, production companies and photographers in Europe, Buenos Aires and New York, documenting *Criollo* and *The Athens-Kassel Ride* projects, enabled through GBP99,000 Open Project funding from Creative Scotland, e.g. support crew member Mark Wallis was required to learn new skills, including acquiring horse trailer driving certification, and has subsequently been hired by one of the leading Long Riders, Peter van der Gugten, to provide support and to film a long ride from Mexico to Canada. [S5] The Athens-Kassel Ride also prompted the first ever Arravani Festival, organised to celebrate the Arravani breed. The festival was held in the mountain village of Prastos, Arcadia, in April 2017, and was attended by 50 Arravani riders from across the region, members of an Arravani Society in Germany, and around 500 local villagers. The first ever festival of its kind, the Arravani Festival brought wider public attention to the Arravani breed and provided information on the principles of Long Riders and the Charter of Reken, which calls for the right to ride across borders. As participating Long Rider and Board member of the VfD (the largest network for recreational riders in Germany), David Wewetzer has used *The Athens-Kassel Ride* as the focus of 20 presentations at regional meetings of the VfD across Germany, highlighting the political and cultural challenges of the Long Rides. In 2018, fellow Long Rider van der Gugten self-published a two-volume book documenting his experience of *The Athens-Kassel Ride*. The riders also made their own website to document the ride. [S6]

Enabling new partnerships in Scotland

By enabling the curator of the Edinburgh Art Festival to engage the public with the refugee crisis, Birrell's research has supported EAF to build a new relationship – which they continue to sustain and develop – with The Welcoming, an Edinburgh based refugee resettlement charity. As part of their activities, EAF also held a workshop and festival visit with a Syrian men's group in partnership with the charity the Thistle Foundation in Craigmillar, a national Centre of Wellbeing. Due to the relevance of the subject matter, Birrell's research also paved the way for EAF to use the Scottish Parliament as a venue for the first time – something they had been attempting to do for a number of years – hosting a concert performed by SEPO and thereby extending its audience beyond the usual visual art audience to reach both a music/ performing arts and broader civic audience. [S7]

Preserving and promoting the cultural traditions of the Long Riders

A central part of Birrell's work has focused on preserving cultural traditions that are at risk of being lost. His work with SEPO, Rizk and Moraly seeks to preserve and celebrate the music and poetry of Syria. *The Athens-Kassel Ride: The Transit of Hermes* honours the people throughout history who have used horses in long-distance travel and exploration and the cross-border routes they followed. The project was developed in collaboration with four participating Long Riders – van der Gugten, Wewetzer, Szolt Zsabo and Tine Boche – who used the project to promote best practice in

Long Riding at public events along the route. The team was joined for agreed stages by local riders and, when they arrived in Kassel on 10 July, they were welcomed with a public reception attended by 2,000 people, including 30 riders from local equestrian associations. The ride was welcomed by the CEO of *documenta* gmbh and the Culture Minister of Hessen, and attracted a substantial amount of press interest, including TV and radio news coverage in Hessen and in Slovenia. The ride was also the subject of an exclusive deal with *d14* and *Zeit Magazine*, which has a print circulation of 2,000,000 and selects just one artist for each iteration of *documenta*. Birrell's *Ride* featured as the cover story on 10 June, published to coincide with the opening weekend of *d14* in Kassel. [S8]

Enabling arts organisations to increase audience figures and meet their strategic objectives

Finally, Birrell's research has played an important role in enabling arts organisations in Scotland to increase their audience figures and meet their strategic objectives. Birrell's 'highly topical' work has been identified by EAF Director, Sorcha Carey, as a leading contributor to a 95% rise in international press coverage in 2018. [S7] The festival also saw an increase of 8% in visitor numbers from the previous year. [S3] *The Transit of Hermes* at CCA for *Glasgow International* 2018 was attended by approx. 6,000 people, the second largest attendance recorded at the CCA since its inception in 1992. Because of its trans-European nature and connection with *d14*, the CCA exhibition addressed their key objective to show international work and support international networking for Scotland's artists and curators. It also fulfilled one of their programming aims: to highlight and include discussion and work around immigration and the changing demographics of Europe, Scotland and Glasgow. As CCA Director Francis McKee states: 'One of the underlying themes of the exhibition was border crossing which was easily read in the light of immigration issues across Europe and that chimed well with our broader public engagement programme which focuses on diverse communities, refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow.' The show also enabled the CCA to support objectives of its funder, Creative Scotland, to internationalise Scottish art, in this case by bringing Creative Scotland-funded international projects by Scottish artists/ researchers back to Scotland and making it available to local audiences. Amanda Catto, Head of Visual Arts at Creative Scotland, confirms that the project met their objective to directly support artists 'to undertake projects of scale, ambition and international significance' and to support 'the opportunity for an artist based in Scotland to achieve high levels of professional/ industry recognition for their work.' Creative Scotland also recognised the 'benefits of the work in terms of public engagement and audience development/ diversification in Scotland through further touring and presentation of the work.' [S9]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. Audience engagement with global issues at *d14*, including testimony from exhibition director, audience numbers and press coverage
- S2. Testimony from VoCA curator, Heather Hakimzadeh
- S3. Audience engagement with global issues at Edinburgh Art Festival: press articles and audience feedback
- S4. Testimony from Syrian musicians
- S5. Evidence of Creative Scotland Grant and employment for projects
- S6. Testimony from Long Riders and their Athens Kassel Ride website (including information on the Arravani Festival)
- S7. Testimony from EAF Curator evidencing the new partnership with The Welcoming
- S8. *Zeit Magazine*
- S9. Testimony from CCA and Creative Scotland and evidence of audience figures