

SCAN Summit 2019

'Unsettled Status': Brexit, Border and the Hostile Environment

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Report by Chris Sharratt

The recent SCAN Summit at Glasgow Women's Library was a chance to think hard about the world and the progressive role that art, artists and visual arts organisations can play in it. Its title, 'Unsettled Status', could hardly have been more appropriate, summing up the mood of many of us as we grapple with a contemporary moment defined by its unpleasantly slippery character. Brexit chaos, climate change, the rise of the far right, Trump in the White House – who knows what might have happened by the time you read this?

Through a combination of discussion, talks, provocations and, in the final 20 minutes, visceral poetry, this was an outward-looking summit that at the same time encouraged those working in contemporary art in Scotland to take a look at themselves and their sector. As SCAN chair Sarah Munro explained: "Joining SCAN is a political act not a business model." A day of inspiration and information, it also acted as an introduction to new director Clare Harris and enabled members to take part in a pre-launch feedback session on SCAN's forthcoming Art In Action campaign, aimed at engaging MSPs with the visual arts.

After a morning given over to the members-only AGM, the public afternoon session began with 20-minute provocations by two Scotland-based journalists. Their words seemed to sum up the unsettled status theme. First was Peter Geoghegan, investigations editor at openDemocracyUK and a founder member of the investigative journalism co-operative, the Ferret. His task was an impossible one: to explain to the room where things stand in terms of Brexit. Of course he couldn't and he didn't, but his tales of growing up 40 miles south of the Irish border, his belief that Brexit is fundamentally an issue of English identity, and his assertion that the push to leave the EU has "heightened and allowed divisive views", made for compelling listening. His final provocation: "Brexit Britain is a complex state increasingly described and circumscribed by borders and enclosure. Marx famously said that the role of philosophers was not just to describe the world but to change it. What is the role of culture and cultural producers at this moment in our own lifetime?"

Geoghegan was followed by Edinburgh-based journalist Chitra Ramaswamy, author of *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy*, winner of the 2016 Saltire First Book of the Year Award. Drawing on her own experience as a woman of colour with what she describes as "an atypical story", Ramaswamy talked about the need for greater diversity and cautioned against "the danger of a single story". Her nuanced approach addressed the complexities of race, gender, social class and economic exclusion, stressing that "this is not and never has

been a level playing field". In another memorable line, and one that feels particularly pertinent for artists and arts organisations, she pledged: "I won't speak on behalf of people but I will be an ally." Her provocation stressed "this uniquely divided and inflammatory moment" and her belief that "the arts has an increased and urgent responsibility to champion and nurture diversity". What then, she asked, "can each of us do to reflect, celebrate, and nurture diversity more genuinely and actively in our organisations and professional lives?"

With both provocations delivered, the delegates were split into groups, three tables given the task of responding to Brexit and the other three looking at the issue of diversity. With SCAN board members on hand as facilitators, lively and wide ranging discussions ensued as each group worked through a series of questions about individual and organisational responses, policy change, cooperation with others, and how SCAN might respond publicly in the face of such urgent questions. Notes were scribbled on A3 sheets before being transferred to rather more manageable A4 forms – the contents of which will be collated and posted on the SCAN website.

Unsurprisingly, bearing in mind its proximity to 29 March, the spectre of the UK's imminent departure from the EU was ever-present throughout the day. The second session of the afternoon dealt with this head on as it sort to address 'Brexit, Borders and the hostile environment'. Maria Fletcher, Senior Lecturer in European Law in the School of Law, University of Glasgow, gave a fascinating introduction to the reality of the 'hostile environment' approach to immigration and asylum, while also outlining the difference between a rights-based (ie, prior to Brexit, EU citizens have a right to live in the UK, no form filling required) and permissions-based approach to citizenship (post-Brexit, EU citizens will need to apply for permission to remain stay). Fletcher ended with a call for collaboration, arguing that lawyers and artists working together could be a powerful force for public education about the complexities of law.

Tanja Bueltmann, Professor of History and Faculty Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor at Northumbria University, who is originally from Germany, talked about the reality of being an EU citizen in the UK and the atmosphere of hostility that has grown since the EU referendum. Expressing her anger and frustration at how the concerns of the more than three million EU citizens in the country have largely been ignored in the Brexit narrative, she was scathing about the process of applying for 'settled status' that she and others need to do if they wish to remain after Brexit. She described the situation as one of "eternal limbo", due in part to the fact that immigration policy is dealt with through secondary legislation and therefore could be changed at any time without any democratic scrutiny. Bueltmann is behind the campaigning charity, EU Citizens' Campaign (<http://eucitizenschampion.co.uk>), and urged people to become 'angels' in the community in order to help EU citizens. The day finished with the written and spoken word, as the Edinburgh-based poet Nadine Aisha Jassat talked and read from her new collection of poetry, *Let Me Tell You This*. A compelling reminder that, however unsettled we may feel, art can be a repository of

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resistance, a focus for community, a way to construct a different narrative. Or as Jassat put it: "Don't underestimate the power of our stories."

[Watch a video](#) of the 2019 Summit highlights.

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