

# **“They will think I have gone to the moon!”:**

A report on *Traveling with art*, a project for  
asylum-seeking minors at the  
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art



Two students prepare to enter Louisiana from the Boat House.

Photo: Zachary Whyte

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

This report takes its title from the words of a young Somali student. He was describing what he thought his friends would think of the pictures he was going to post to Facebook from his visit to a Yayoi Kusama installation at the Louisiana Museum for Modern Art. He was there as part of the ongoing learning project, “Traveling with Art,” which brings asylum-seeking minors from Red Cross asylum centers to the museum to engage with art in a variety of ways. Through art exercises, visits in the collections, and formal and informal discussions, the aim of the project is to leverage art as a shared, potentially transformative space for these young people. For the Somali student this sense of the museum as a separate space of contact was so acute that he felt it barely seemed to belong on Earth. But his words of course also speak to the fundamental social relations in which he was enmeshed. His delight in sharing his experiences at the museum with his friends underlines the importance of the social dimension of this kind of project. Following these themes of space and sociality, as well as materiality, this report describes and analyses the project, based on ethnographic fieldwork with the project, carried out in November and December, 2013 and in May and June, 2014.

## 1.2 Report structure

The report is structured as follows. In the remainder of this introduction follows a brief review of two key concepts: contact zones and participation; a terminological note; and a short description of the methodological approach taken.

The next section, *Background*, begins by introducing the project through its aims, structure and history. It then briefly describes the two cohorts of students followed for the report, the working relation between the Danish Red Cross and Louisiana, as well as some fundamental challenges faced by the project.

The third section, *Encountering art*, begins with a consideration of the ways in which the term “art” was deployed in the project, and then describes and analyses a selection of concrete art exercises.

In section four, *Space*, I describe the key spaces in which the project operated to underline the importance of its spatial dimension.

Section five, *Sociality*, deals with the ways in which sociality at once framed and was framed by the project. It first considers the social relations between the students and how the project impacted them, and then looks at the relations between students and staff.

The sixth section, *Materiality*, considers some of the important ways in which the materialities of the art exercises shaped the experiences of the project. It also discusses the place of documentation in the project.

The final section, *Conclusion and recommendations*, brings together the themes of the report and presents a series of recommendations for future practice.

### **1.3 Contact zones**

The report draws on a section of the academic literature on museums as contact zones to analyse the ethnographic data collected in the research period. In particular, the ways in which space, sociality, and material objects all can work together to create zones of potential transformation in participatory arts projects with young people (Askins and Pain 2011).

The fundamental idea of the museum as contact zone was proposed by James Clifford in his classic essay (Clifford 1997). Drawing on the work of Mary-Louise Pratt (1991), he proposed that museums should think of themselves as contact zones, characterized by cultural encounter and collaboration, though also by power inequalities. Clifford argued that this conception entailed a shift in the understanding of museum curators as privileged presenters of knowledge to persons engaged in mutual social interaction, however potentially unequal. By now this is a largely uncontroversial point in museum practice, though the idea of the museum as contact zone is not uncritically embraced in the literature (e.g. Boast 2011; Lynch 2014). However, it speaks to one of the fundamental premises of the “Traveling with art” project: namely that the point of the project was not teaching an authoritative understanding of what does and does not constitute art to the students, but rather engaging with them in fruitful ways to support their capacities for communication and reflection. The didactics were not so much to do with the

dissemination of knowledge but with the transformative potential of the process itself.



Students sketch fragments of Hilma af Klint's paintings among the other museum visitors. Photo: Line Chayder

In thinking of the project as a contact zone, I want to focus on three related dimensions: space, sociality, and materiality. The placement of the project at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and the uses made of the collections in the project structured the project in particular ways by setting the spatial context for the project. The absent spaces of the Red Cross asylum centers, where the students spent the bulk of their time provided an important contrast. Further, the distinct social space of the project at once allowed students to continue and transform a variety of social relations with their peers and with staff. This was of particular significance for the students in a wider social context marked by transitoriness and uncertainty. Finally, the materialities of the project, the particular tools and objects used, were also significant in marking out the project as a contact zone.

The key insight I draw from the literature on contact zones is that these three dimensions are related. As Askins and Pain put it, “where an activity (in this case

art) is the contact zone, objects as conduits may facilitate transformative social relations to seep across spaces of encounter” (Askins and Pain 2011: 817; original emphasis). The three dimensions will be discussed in more detail in sections 4, 5, and 6.

#### **1.4 Semi-participation**

It has been argued that projects involving young asylum seekers should strive to be as fully participatory as possible, to engage the young people and create spaces for positive social transformation (Couch 2007; Lockowandt 2013): “For young refugees and asylum seekers who face a multitude of issues surrounding resettlement, overcoming traumatic experiences and combating negative stereotypes, participatory activities can be an important step in appreciating their unique skills and building their confidence to tackle some of the problems they face” (Lockowandt 2013: 4). Art projects in particular have been identified as productive in this process, involving as they do non-verbal expressions and embodied experiences (Tolia-Kelly 2007). Indeed, the very idea of the contact zone, as originally formulated by Clifford urges something similar: “Contact work in a museum thus goes beyond consultation and sensitivity, though these are very important. It becomes active collaboration and a sharing of authority” (Clifford 1997:210).

Though this ideal was largely shared by the project, it was never conceived as fully participatory. As the introductory brochure to the project explains, “the creative work at the museum offers the children the chance to engage in a kind of organised play where the framework is provided and defined by adults, and for that very reason it gives them peace to experiment and immerse themselves in their own expression” (“Traveling with art” brochure).

Nevertheless, the project included significant elements of participation. While Line Chayder, the art educator in charge of the project, defined the individual tasks and put out the relevant materials for them, she strongly encouraged students to take control of their individual art projects. This was expressed both positively through praise for those students, who added personal touches to their work, and negatively through a diminished attention to students, who simply copied themes

from peers. Further, the project was flexible enough that Line on multiple occasions changed or added new exercises, based on ideas or responses from the students.

Beyond organisational choices in the project, there were also practical limits to the possibilities for participation in the project. First, the difficulties of communication (see 2.4.2) meant that it was difficult for the students to clearly express alternate suggestions, much less co-define art projects. Second, the flow of the students (see 2.4.1) meant that the kind of longterm engagement encouraged in participatory approaches were often impossible. The facts of the asylum system meant that longterm social relations between different groups of the students were unlikely. This meant that the transformative potential, which often motivates participatory approaches, was severely limited.

While the project, thus, did not live up to the ideals of participation presented by some advocates and academics, it nevertheless strove for some level of participation within the constraints set by the circumstances within which it operated. We may thus think of it as semi-participatory, rather than fully participatory.

### **1.5 Note on terminology**

In this project, I refer to all the minors as students, which follows the lead of the Red Cross teachers. This has the advantage of not addressing the age of the students directly, which could be a matter of some delicacy. The first group of accompanied minors were around 10 or 11, while the second group comprised unaccompanied minors, who were either accepted as being under 18 by the Danish authorities or had not yet been age tested. Some of them were subsequently determined to be older than 18 and moved to a different asylum centre.

I have anonymised all my informants except for Line Ali Chayder, the art educator.

### **1.6 Methodology**

The methodological approach adopted for this project has been primarily ethnographic, mainly drawing on participant observation and informal conversations (e.g. Okely 2012). In addition, the art exercises the students engaged in provided

opportunities for discussion along the lines of art-based methods (e.g. Leavy 2009), but with the advantage that they were a natural part of the research environment. This approach addresses four key challenges in carrying out the research project. The first two are addressed more fully below, as they also were challenges faced by the project itself. I mention them here, as they also posed methodological challenges in carrying out the research. These are issues of flow and communication: Many of the students were only in the project for a short space of time, meaning that it was difficult to establish the level of trust necessary to carry out more formal interviews. Further, there were recurring problems of communication, as I did not share languages with a significant number of the students. For both of these challenges, the ethnographic methods employed had advantages. Participant observation and informality allowed the establishing of trust in part by using the researcher's time in a different way than asylum authority figures. They also usefully allowed communication in situations where spoken exchanges were less straightforward.

The second pair of challenges speaks to issues in doing research with young asylum seekers. First, as research on asylum seekers has shown elsewhere, more formal interviews are often experienced as alienating by asylum seekers, no matter the seeming innocuousness of the subject. Informal ethnographic approaches by contrast, tend to allow a more nuanced perspective to emerge. Focusing on the art exercises in which I myself also participated further contrasted with these formal interviews. Secondly, young asylum seekers are particularly known for their reticence (Kohl 2006). Kohl has noted the uses of silence among asylum-seeking and refugee youths, describing silence as "at once burdensome and protective" (710) for them psychologically. However, as he further points out, though it is often attached to these children as a symptom of their status as refugees, it is also a normal part of adolescence. Secrets and silences are ways of establishing autonomy among young people in many parts of the world, and we should therefore be wary of ascribing their silence to refugee status and trauma alone. From a methodological perspective, this again underscores the importance of an informal and patient approach, rather than one that probes and demands answers.

I participated in all but a few sessions of the project with two different cohorts of asylum-seeking minors in two periods (November and December 2013 and in May and June 2014). Here I took part in art exercises, joined in visits to the museum, and chatted informally with students and staff both during and between exercises. In addition, I visited the two asylum centers, the Red Cross schools, and joined in one of the bus rides to and from the asylum center. I took fieldnotes at the end of each day, so as to minimise my intrusion and so as not to cause suspicion that could be difficult to allay, given the condensed schedule and the communication issues that framed the project. In addition to ongoing, largely informal discussions with Line, I also conducted a formal interview with her.



## 2. BACKGROUND

This chapter gives some background for the project, including a description of the aims, structure and history of the project; the two cohorts of students that attended the project; a brief discussion of the working relationship between the Danish Red Cross and Louisiana; and finally some of the fundamental challenges the project faced in engaging with the specific target group of asylum-seeking minors.

### 2.1 The project

This section will provide a brief summary of the project aims and structure as well as a potted history of the project itself.

#### 2.1.1 Project aims

The official aims of the project differed slightly among the different actors. As one might expect, Louisiana puts more emphasis on the role of art in creating spaces of transformation, while the Red Cross focuses more on the wellbeing of the students.

In an early project description, the two organisations thus present the following aims for the project:

#### *Red Cross aims:*

- The students attain experience with and methods for producing their own artworks
- The students attain experience with and methods for conversing about and understanding art.
- The students get positive and enriching experiences, supporting them in navigating their life situations
- The school's pedagogical and practical work with arts-based concepts and methods is developed and strengthened, not least through a course for all the Red Cross teachers

#### *Louisiana aims:*

- The development of new learning approaches relevant to the target group of asylum-seeking children – including a “toolbox” of new teaching methods
- A strengthened theoretical foundation through cooperation with the researcher
- New experiences with longer term multicultural courses in cooperation with the schools – experiences that also will be of use in the regular teaching practice
- Museum attention to the possibilities of art as a safe space for vulnerable groups of children, also through the establishment of a museum network, focusing on the possibilities of art for this group of children

In a slightly different vein, the brochure that Louisiana Learning has produced to introduce the project describes it as follows:

The aim of this learning programme is to create spaces for good experiences that both open up the world of art and as far as possible involve the refugee children’s own experiences. And - not least - let them encounter through art the different, the surprising and other things that can help them to create an inner space and perhaps give them new tools with which to appropriate the world and strengthen their ability to deal with their life situations. (“Traveling with art” brochure)

The project has thus expressed its aims in fairly diverse terms, which may however be summarized in two related sets of concerns: One is to do with providing enriching experiences for asylum-seeking minors, the other is to do with developing pedagogical methods for arts-based learning. The first set of concerns ranged from actually teaching the students concrete skills (like drawing) to providing “spaces for great experiences” (as the brochure puts it) as well as opportunities for non-verbal self-expression; the second set of concerns involved trying to document and generalize concrete didactic approaches to learning with the arts. It is in terms of these two overarching aims that the report will evaluate the project.

The students expressed their aims in the project less explicitly. When asked about what they hoped to gain from the course or what they liked about it, they often gave quite vague replies. Some spoke of wanting to learn how to draw or

paint. Others simply replied, “It is not boring here!”, when I asked them what they liked about the project. Again others talked about participating because their friends were there. Finally, a great many of the students spoke about the attraction of Louisiana itself. “This is such a beautiful place,” as one Somali student explained to me. This last point had also been made to center staff, I spoke to, and is one I will return to in section 4: Space.

### 2.1.2 Project structure

The latest version of the project was structured as an eight-week course, meeting on average twice a week at Louisiana. This involved the students being bussed from their asylum center to the museum, while the teachers arrived separately. The students arrived at 10:30 and were picked up by the bus again at 14:30. The students usually travelled for about an hour and a half each way. Lunch was provided from the Louisiana kitchen, paid for by the Red Cross, usually around 12:30.

The project was led by Line, who was solely responsible for developing the teaching plan and for the actual teaching. In addition, three Red Cross teachers worked in support capacities. These were the students’ regular teachers, who therefore knew them as well as the flow of students allowed. At least two of them were involved in the hands-on facilitation of art exercises at any time.

### 2.1.3 Project history

Founded in 1958, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art is one of the most important Danish cultural institutions and a leading international modern art museum. It presents its history as one of participation and cultural debate, proudly claiming that the museum, through its famous founder Knud W. Jensen, “helped teach the Danish people to look at art” ([en.louisiana.dk/louisiana-history](http://en.louisiana.dk/louisiana-history)). In this sense, the desire to talk and teach art to asylum-seeking minors is a natural extension of its founding principles.

The idea for developing specific exercises for asylum-seeking children came to Line in 2006. At the time, the museum had an exhibit with an artist who worked with self-portraits. One of the exercises, they had developed for children presented them

with a mirror and some coal and asked them to draw their own faces. As Line passed by a group of kids from a Red Cross school, she saw them happily drawing on their own faces with the coal. This inspired her to contact the Red Cross and ask about developing specific courses for asylum-seeking children. In addition to this specific experience, Line was motivated by a desire to expand the user group of the museum, “particularly as we see ourselves as a democratic meeting place here.” The idea garnered immediate support from both the Louisiana leadership and from the head of the Red Cross schools. A contact teacher was appointed, who enthusiastically worked together with Line. To begin with, Line was told that the best approach would be to create one-day, stand-alone courses, or “art injections” as she called them. Following this approach, the courses centered on specific formal characteristics tied to themes, like “Painting and imagination,” or “Body and sculpture” to make things as simple as possible. The idea here was to communicate basic things like showing how colors can express emotions, or seeing what is required for a sculpture to look like a body.

But after a while, Line realised that there were a number of returning students. As she started to develop a more coherent art programme for the students, she abandoned the divisions in form (e.g. painting and sculpture) to focus on more thematic elements, often tied to specific exhibits. She kept a focus on observational drawing, which has traditionally been an area of attention for art learning at Louisiana, in part because of its non-verbal aspect, which mitigated the issues arising from not sharing languages with the students. But the majority of the project exercises were developed specifically for the asylum-seeking students.

The project was expanded significantly through grants from the charitable foundations, Ole Kirk’s Fond and Knud Højgaards Fond, which also included funding to attach a researcher.

Initially, the expanded project was aimed at younger students, aged 11-12, who were seeking asylum with their families. These were housed at Center Auderød at the time, meaning that they were within a manageable bus ride of the museum. However, because of structural changes in the Red Cross reception system, these children were moved to different centres. Following a period of doubt as to whether there would be any students able to attend, an agreement was made that the

project would involve slightly older students, who had arrived in Denmark as unaccompanied minors.

## 2.2 The students

I followed two cohorts of students in the project. The following table summarises some of the key differences between the two groups:

First cohort	Second cohort
Accompanied minors, living with their families	Unaccompanied minors
11-12 years old	15-17* years old
Largest group was Albanian-speaking	Largest groups were Somalis, Eritreans, Afghans
Many had been in DK more than six months, one over three years	One had been in DK more than six months
Many spoke Danish, little English	Some spoke English, little Danish
Lived at Centre Auderød	Lived at Centre Vipperød
Low rates of acceptance of asylum applications	Higher rates of acceptance of asylum applications
Maybe 1/3 of the students were girls	Maybe 1/8 of the students were girls

\* Note that not all the students were under 17. Age here denotes the date of birth provisionally accepted by the asylum authorities. All unaccompanied minors are age-tested, and some were subsequently deemed to be adults and moved to the normal asylum system, also removing them from the Louisiana art project.



A group of the younger students show off their mini-museums. Photo: Line Chayder.



Some of the older students show off their mini-museums. Photo: Line Chayder.

The focus of this report is on the second cohort for two reasons. First, because their course was the longest, and their experiences therefore represent the bulk of the ethnographic data that forms the basis for this report. But also because future sessions will be aimed at this older group of unaccompanied minors, meaning that their experiences should be weighted.

The students came from quite diverse backgrounds in terms of region, social class, religion, education, and so on. Though they often grouped themselves by language, this did not necessarily reflect the countries in which they had grown up. Some Dari-speakers thus had grown up in Russia or Europe, rather than Afghanistan, just as some of the Somalis had lived in Kenya before coming to Denmark.

While many had some sort of schooling, its length and quality varied considerably. In terms of arts, very few had visited an art museum or received any formal art history education. Drawing skills varied similarly. At least one Eritrean student told me that he had taught himself to draw out of personal interest, having never received any formal training in school. As one Red Cross staffer put it, many of the older students still drew at what would be considered first grade level in Denmark. However, the students were often quite good at accurately rendering art works they saw in the museum. And a good few, not least of the younger, female students, were able to produce impressively realistic drawings of things like lip sticks or polar bears.

Both asylum centres had art materials available. Indeed, Auderød had an entire, reasonably well-equipped art workshop available for all residents. However, these facilities were seldom used. The workshop at Auderød was notoriously empty most of the time, while only a few of the older students reported that they occasionally produced art of any kind. One of these examples, was a Syrian girl, who told me that she had drawn a few things she missed from home: Some fruits that were not available in Denmark and a vase, she remembered from Syria.

While they waited for their asylum applications (and for the younger students, those of their parents) to be processed, the students stayed at Red Cross asylum centres and attended Red Cross schools. While the older students stayed at a special centre for unaccompanied minors in Vipperød, the younger students lived

with their families at Center Auderød. These centres diverged substantially on a number of points: Auderød was very large, comparatively, and housed its own school as well as a range of other facilities for adult asylum seekers and their children. It was also relatively isolated, the nearest shops being some five kilometres away in nearby Frederiksværk. The buildings were run-down, some of them non-operational because of repairs needed. It has since been closed down and the asylum seekers moved to other facilities. Some of the younger students had been in the system for longer periods of time. One student had thus been in the asylum system for three years. Many of them thus spoke fair to good Danish. However, their longer waits also reflected their families' much-decreased chance of receiving asylum, which had profound consequences for their families experiences of waiting and possibilities for a future that seemed viable to them.

Vipperød on the other hand was relatively small, housing only unaccompanied minors. This meant that the number of staff per asylum seeker was significantly higher and that they were generally more engaged with the individual students. In addition, all the older students had a "contact" [kontaktperson], who were mostly Danish volunteers. Red Cross staff explained to me that they tried to present the unaccompanied minors with as structured a daily routine as possible: Set meal times, set school bus departure times, and so on. However, there was also a more noticeable flow through the centre, partly because their cases were generally resolved more quickly, partly because a significant proportion of them were age-tested to be adults and moved on to other centres.

There was, however, a significant overlap between the two groups especially in their schooling. Red Cross schools have particular challenges, compared to normal Danish grade schools, which are echoed in the challenges faced by the project. These include communication, flow, and the marks left by both the children's experiences before arriving in Denmark and their experiences in the Danish asylum system. Red Cross schools generally try to bridge these gaps through creating a supportive learning environment with a strong focus on teaching Danish. The pedagogical model for this (and indeed for all of Red Cross' work with children, also at the centres and at other childcare institutions) is what is called the STROF-model.



At the older students' school, the class was divided into two groups. One larger group contained students who had 0-4 years of school. The other students with 5 or more years of school. The teachers tried to adapt the lessons to individual levels, but the spread was so large that this often became mere gesture. In addition, the flow of students through the schools was such that they often found themselves starting over with basic Danish words and phrases regularly. This could in turn be frustrating for those students, who did not move through the system so quickly. The schools also did a fair amount of what they called "structured activities," like "joyful play", which was meant to get the students moving and laughing in a non-competitive atmosphere. As a teacher explained to me, this promoted social contact both between the students and teachers and among the students through activities.

The Danish Red Cross has extensive experience in caring for and dealing with vulnerable children. However, the current state of ongoing institutional change and cutbacks has impacted the amount of time, Red Cross staff have to care for both unaccompanied and accompanied minors. At initial meetings, concerns were expressed about potential problems the students might cause at the museum. They were described as "good kids in a bad situation", who had trouble working in groups and had difficulty concentrating. This meant that one of the roles of the Red Cross teachers at Louisiana would be to head off trouble, but also set some ground rules for the project. The project should not delve too deeply into the students' backgrounds, it was argued, as this might stir up traumatic memory and violent emotion, which would not only be harmful to the student in question, but could also spark off wider trouble, minimally forcing one of the teachers to take the student back to the asylum centre.

### **2.3 Cooperation between DRK and Louisiana**

The original arts-learning project in 2006 laid the initial groundwork for the current project, particularly through personal contacts between Line and key Red Cross staff. From the beginning the working relationship was marked by a fundamental level of goodwill and interest from all the staff involved and a strong determination to make the project work. This extended beyond the sharing of costs and

responsibilities to ongoing feedback and developing and implementing exercises at both Louisiana and the Red Cross schools.

This having been said, there emerged a few challenges in the working relationships, mainly down to changes in the numbers of asylum-seeking children; ongoing structural changes at the Red Cross, in part because of financial cutbacks; and issues of communication with the centre staff.

Changing numbers of students at Red Cross schools combined with financial cutbacks meant Red Cross schools were relocated or restructured in the project period. At one point it was unclear whether the project would be able to continue, simply because the students who had been attending it were relocated to a center too far from the museum for reasonable access by bus. This was one of the reasons that the second cohort of students was found among the older, unaccompanied minors.

In addition, broader state interventions in the education arena meant that all Red Cross teachers were locked out of their jobs for a period of time, alongside Danish grade school teachers. This coincided with periods of structural change in the asylum area to compound the job insecurity of the teachers. While the focus of the Red Cross staff was on minimising the impacts of these changes on the asylum-seeking students, some general frustration was evident among the teachers. Remarkably, this frustration was mainly expressed in the early stages of the project, as the vast majority of teachers expressed great satisfaction with the project as they became acquainted with it. Red Cross teachers reported that they saw the project as having a positive impact on the students, and that it was a welcome change from their usual responsibilities. A few teachers even floated the idea of doing a similar course only for the Red Cross teachers.

The lack of direct involvement of the centre staff could also create issues, particularly to do with communicating information like the number of students, who got on the bus, or letting the students know about changes of plan. This was largely manageable, not least through the intervention of the Red Cross teachers, however it points to an area that could perhaps be more fully incorporated in the project structure.

## 2.4 Challenges

The project faced a number of fundamental challenges, engaging as it did with asylum-seeking minors. These challenges largely arose from the conditions in which the project operated. They could perhaps be mitigated against, but they could not be fully removed. I have grouped these challenges under four headings: Flow, communication, uncertainty and problems. Note that the challenges listed here do not fully reflect all the issues faced by the students. Rather, I have focused on these four headings as the ones most directly relevant to the project.

### 2.4.1 Flow

The flow of students was reflected in the roll-call that started out the course-day for the older cohort. Red Cross teachers would call out names from their list. Students would then either reply “Here!”, or often “Sleeping!”, if the person had not come on the bus. In addition, there were regularly students on the list who had moved on, just as there were often students present, who were not on the list.

There were two reasons for this turnover among the students participating in the project. First, asylum-seeking is by definition a temporary enterprise. Among the younger students, some were deported, some started in Danish schools, a few were recognised as refugees and moved to a municipality. Among the older students, more of them received residence permits, some were age-tested and designated as adults (meaning they had to move to a different centre and stopped going to school), and some were deported. Second, students’ engagement in school was often irregular. Personal news, depression and apathy, physical health, sleep problems, concern about their asylum cases, boredom with the course, social issues with other students, and so on, could all cause students to stay at the centre.

The first issue fundamentally structured the students’ experiences of the asylum period and in particular the sociality that was possible there. As one older Afghan student put it, after most of his friends had moved on, “I now have more friends in Jylland [where he regularly visited family] than in Vipperød”.

The issue of flow was a recurring challenge for the course, not least because it was only partial. That is to say, there were also some students who participated in all or almost all of the sessions. This meant that the course planning had to account

for both a continuity in learning, building on previous exercises to expand the students' engagement with art, as well as the risk that the same students would not return. In practical terms, this meant regularly having to improvise if say an exercise involved photos taken the previous session. And it was perhaps most tellingly embodied in the log books, that were meant to help create continuity for the students by creating a scrapbook of their own work across sessions. When they got them, the students decorated and personalized them. However, students leaving and new students arriving meant that these log books were often passed on, the names on the front crossed out and the work of the previous owners ripped out or overwritten. Occasionally, the new owners of the logbooks would flip through their previous owner's work, but they did not dwell on it, nor seem particularly interested in figuring out what exercises had been done. Their focus was on the next exercise, not previous ones.

#### 2.4.2 Communication

Many students did not speak Danish or English. This could mean they had trouble understanding the teachers and Line. This was less of an issue for the younger, Albanian-speaking students. Many of them spoke a good amount of Danish, and one of the Red Cross teachers accompanying them also spoke Albanian and could translate. However, this could also compound the issue for the non-Albanian speakers, who did not speak any Danish, whose relative exclusion from the communication was thereby increased. For the older students, communication was often mediated through peers, who spoke some English. This mediation could be spontaneous, as when the peers supplemented halting conversations with explanations or translations, or it could be directed, as when the peers were asked directly to help along the communication. This role, of course, in turn impacted the social relations among the students (more on which below).

Communication thus could be a significant obstacle, for example when Line was explaining background information about particular artists, noting characteristics of specific works of art, or explaining how to go about a particular art exercise. However, communication was not rendered impossible. Barring much in the way of shared language, communication took on other forms. Much was expressed

through facial expression and bodily gestures, just as even small shared vocabularies could communicate significant points in the right contexts. For the art exercises, the students could rely on emulation of their peers and on Line's demonstration. As I will argue, this made the materiality of the art exercises all the more significant.

#### 2.4.3 Uncertainty

The asylum system is fundamentally uncertain for asylum seekers in the sense that the possible outcomes of it for them point to radically different futures. In addition to this wider uncertainty, asylum seekers often face uncertainties at an everyday level, not least because much of the bureaucratic system through which they moved was murky to them (Whyte 2011). For the students, this could range from being unsure about which of their peers could legitimately attend the project to not knowing whether or not they were being taken to Louisiana or the school, when they boarded the buses at their asylum centers. Red Cross center staff prioritised clear, structured communication, but many factors could cause communication to break down before it reached the students, enhancing their sense of uncertainty. Further, students expressed uncertainty about both the content of individual assignments (this obviously also related fundamentally to issues of communication) and to the aims of particular practices, like the documentation of the project (more on which below).

#### 2.4.4 Problems

A second set of issues arise from what I am terming "problems" here, evoking a term commonly used among the students. These could be anything from mental health issues, including problematic behaviour related to traumatic experiences before they arrived in Denmark, to hitches in their asylum cases. Even the most dedicated students could miss sessions because they had an appointment with a psychiatrist, while others stopped coming when they faced issues in the asylum determination procedure, such as being rejected in the first instance hearing.

It is worth noting that unlike the vast majority of arts-based projects for asylum-seeking and refugee children, this project did not take an explicitly therapeutic

approach. As Chatty et al. (2005) have shown more broadly, this focus on trauma and therapy is particularly strong in both the research literature and interventionist projects, when it comes to this group. They argue that this approach generates a number of issues, not least to do with assumptions about the universality of both childhood and suffering, a disembedding of children from their social relations, and a failure to engage with the specific experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee children.

By and large, the project resolutely focused on other aspects of the students' lives. And despite some initial concern and strong advice from experienced Red Cross staff to not bring up the students' background and so risk triggering traumatic reactions, there were no incidences of this nature at the museum. This is not to say that traumatic experiences were not expressed or present. One Eritrean student drew a dramatic picture of a burning boat with scores of figures leaping from it into the water and explained that he had been on that boat. Other students regularly attended meetings with psychiatrists to deal with their traumatic experiences. However, the project space and practice did not deliberately elicit these sorts of memories, and this allowed more room for other forms of sociality, which were not predicated on the various suffering of these young people. This in turn helped establish the project as more separate from the asylum process, in which traumatic memories might take center stage as the basis for asylum claims, and allowed the students to present themselves in other modes than that of asylum seeker.

### 3. ENCOUNTERING ART

This section details and comments on the specific approaches to teaching the students about art. In the first section, I reflect on the ways in which the term “art” was deployed in the project, and in particular the spatial and social metaphors that were commonly used. I contrast this with the students’ general lack of abstract reflection about the term. The second section describes and considers a selection of the art exercises, which the students engaged with. Through brief ethnographic descriptions, I try to show both the diversity of the exercises and the varieties of student engagement in them. The third section examines the ways in which students spoke about art, while acknowledging the limitations of this discussion given the issues of communication detailed above (2.4.2).



An older student examines a Hilma af Klint painting. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

### 3.1 Art in and as a contact zone

The metaphor of the contact zone has good deal of resonance with the ways in which the concept of art was articulated at Louisiana. Though loathe to give any hard-edged definition - as Line put it, her concern was not with what is, but what art does - both Line and other art educators at the museum routinely spoke of art in phrases with a spatial and an encountering aspect. Art was a “free space” [*frirum*], it was a “world” that one could meet, the project involved being “in the space of art together” [*i kunstens rum sammen*]. In this sense art played a double role. On the one hand it was *somewhere* one could encounter and learn from, on the other it was *something* one could use to make other connections or to express oneself in non-verbal ways. Art thus was at once contact zone and contact, context and text.

For the students, art was often ill-defined. As discussed above, few of the students had visited art museums before coming to Louisiana. Some of the students expressed an understanding that art was primarily - or even exclusively - visual arts and that “doing art” should thus involve painting and drawing. This was an understanding that Line actively worked to expand, through looking at and engaging with other forms of art like sculpture, collage, and photography.

These varying conceptions of art thus framed the project’s approach to teaching. Given the difficulties in engaging in abstract discussions about the limits of art, Line strove to show and let the students experience unusual installations to challenge their ideas about what was and – especially – what wasn’t art. It was in part for this reason that Line brought both groups of students to see Yayoi Kusama’s installation, “Gleaming Lights of the Souls”. Many of the students in the younger group in particular were struck with wonder, standing on the stones above the water that covered the floor of the small room full of shifting lights. While the older students also enjoyed it, they did not all think that it was “art.” As one female student put it to me, “It is pretty, but why is it art?” What is worth noting about this reaction, it seems to me, is not so much that the student’s sense of what constituted art was immediately expanded by entering the Kusama installation, but that it prompted her to reflect on what “art” is. At the same time, one of the teachers had stepped off the stones and in to the shallow water on the floor, drenching his shoe. This was an object of much hilarity among the older students,



and caused a good deal of good-natured teasing and laughter. In this sense, the breaking of the aesthetic impression made by the installation by the teacher's bodily immersion also served to create a situation conducive to particular forms of sociality. The installation thus performed the double role, described above: it at once was something to meet and consider and somewhere that other meetings and considerations could take place.

It is worth mentioning one further understanding of art, which was raised by one of the Red Cross teachers. He argued that art also had a cultivating [*dannelse*] aspect, and that the students who were recognised as refugees would benefit from their visits at Louisiana in their integration processes. Here he meant not just that the students would learn about art, but specifically that they would "learn how to learn". This included the more participatory systems of teaching, but also concrete bodily knowledge about how to attend museums. He explained that this approach was also practised at the Red Cross schools, where students were not only taught classroom subjects, but were also involved in a range of other activities, often involving non-verbal communication, designed to support the personal development of the students. These included "joyful play", a series of non-competitive, physical activities aimed at bodily activation and building trust between students.

### **3.2 Art exercises**

In this section, I discuss the art exercises that formed the backbone of the project. An initial subsection discusses, the work of planning the art exercises. The following subsection lists the art exercises employed and provides brief ethnographic descriptions of a selection of them along with observations on the individual exercises.

#### **3.2.1 Planning art exercises**

When Line began planning exercises for asylum-seeking children in 2006, she tried to make them completely self-contained. She called them "Art injections." The structure of these responded to the strong flow of asylum-seekers. By making each visit discrete, the principle was that they would not suffer if the asylum seekers

moved on. As the cooperation with the Red Cross schools expanded and as Louisiana's ambitions for their learning programme grew, the exercises were increasingly linked in to a more full-bodied course. With the additional funds from Ole Kirk's Fond and Knud Højgaards Fond a more ambitious programme was developed.

Line explained her thinking in developing exercises for the asylum-seeking students.

The important thing is to that one feels it is relevant. Things like dates and -isms you can always look up, if you're interested. The hard part is creating that relevance. My work is to try to find a way to work with these themes in a simple way. And there are big challenges here because of language, because of time, and because we haven't been working with drawing for 60 years, but are just getting started. So part of my task is to find exercises that can produce attractive results, that look like art, and where you say, 'Goodness. I could do more than I had expected.' That can give some pride and some satisfaction from structuring that little world that is your picture or whatever.

A fundamental focus of the art exercises was thus to make art as concrete as possible. [Show and experience]

The project became increasingly dynamic, as Line adapted the exercises and her presentations to structural changes (e.g. the logistics of getting the students to the museum), to feedback from students, teachers and myself, and to her own new ideas. This dynamism was not particularly apparent to the students, however, who were not privy to the full course plan and therefore did not know when exercises had been dropped or changed. Their experience was by contrast by and large one of planned variation.



The materials needed for the first day's exercises are lined up. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

### 3.2.2 Art exercises

This section examines the art exercises, the students engaged in. These art exercises formed the experiential backbone of the project. For the students, and indeed for the staff, these were what the project was about. They took place in various parts of the museum, were performed both individually and in groups, and employed a range of methods and materials. They thus involved in space, sociality, and materiality in various ways. These aspects will be discussed more fully in sections 4, 5, and 6.

To illustrate the variety of exercises, I have grouped the art exercises which the two cohorts, I followed, engaged with in the following list by activity. Note that some exercises appear in more than one group:

- Drawing (Horizon on roll of paper; Guston painting; Hockney details; Portraits on paper table cloths; Animal sculptures; Hilma af Klint details; One-line map

of the day; Calder sculpture; Giacometti sculptures; Ai Wei Wei trees with/out looking; Whales, polar bears, and man tugging boat in Arctic exhibit; Jorn details)

- Painting (Single color papers for later use; Jorn modifications; Marble-painting: String-painting)
- Tracing (Patterns in wood; Leaves; Homemade tattoos)
- Modelbuilding (Dream houses; Ice landscapes; Mini-museums; Calder sculptures; Kites)
- Collage (Hilma symbols; Mini-museums; Multi-perspective self-portraits; Ai Wei Wei trees; Arctic landscapes; Doors (from photos))
- Photography (Doors; Staged pictures in artworks; Heroic arctic pictures; Films of ice landscapes; Photos for multi-perspective self-portraits [note posed pictures])
- Cutouts (Snow crystals)

In addition, a few exercises were done at the Red Cross schools. These included pictures of objects to bring on a journey; paintings of northern lights; distorted portrait photos for collage; printouts of artworks for collage; printouts of symbols for Hilma collage.

The art exercises generally involved emulation and trial and error. While all the students participated, much of the activity was geared to the pace of the individual student. There was little “down time”, as there could be at the Red Cross schools, when other students were asked to answer questions or repeat phrases. In general, levels of concentration were high. This was remarked on by Red Cross staff in particular, some of whom reported surprise that the students were able to sustain their engrossment in their work for an hour or more at a time. This was said to be much less common at the Red Cross schools.

The art exercises almost invariably ended with some form of mini-exhibition, where the students various works were placed next to each other. This could be up against the large windows in the Boat House or underneath a painting in the collections. The students then could look over each other’s work, while Line commented on their various aspects. She generally tried to get students to explain

their thinking in their various works, but this was often hard going. However, the students were generally quite respectful of this phase of the exercise, even the ones who understood little or nothing of what was being said.

To illustrate the kinds of art exercises, the project involved, I present seven examples through brief ethnographic descriptions. I have chosen these exercises to represent some of the variation in method, material and space that characterized the exercises.

### *Dream houses*

The exercise was to build dream houses out of cardboard, tissue paper, patterned cloth, styrofoam balls, mosaic stones, and other materials. Line had taken the group to see the exhibition, “Arab contemporary” [*Det arabiske nu*], at the museum, where we had sat in a model of a traditional Arabic atrium, designed for guests (see below for a fuller description). Now we were sitting in “Børnehuset” cutting out cardboard and wielding glue guns, sitting around low, long, child-sized tables.

The students were, as usual, somewhat uncertain about how to start. But helped along by Line, explaining and showing off her model, which she had made earlier, and the teachers actively engaging the students, they began to gather materials and hesitantly put them together. Few had a clear idea of what they wanted to do. Instead they seemed to gather various bits of material that caught their interest and saw where it took them. One Somali student, laughing as the materials curled away from him, tried to construct what he called a traditional Somali house by building a skeleton frame and experimenting with wrapping foam or cloth around it. This got some of the other Somali students interested, and a number of them started suggesting modifications or additions. The house went through a number of transformations, as he experimented with various materials, some of which he found himself, some of which were suggested to him by his peers or by Line or the teachers.

We did not finish on the day, but continued four days later at the next session, this time at the Boat House. Here the students sat around the large table and stood at the small bar tables, near the wall plugs so the glue guns could reach. Since new students had arrived and some of the students from the first session were not there,

a few models were repurposed, while others were started anew. However, a significant number of the students continued their work, including the young Somali man, who added increasing complexity to his basic structure and finally settled on a cloth cover for his house. It was much admired both by teachers, Line, and his peers to his evident pride.



A student gives advice on the next step in building the dream house. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

One of the Afghani students built a rather abstract model, carefully adding patterns from cloth and cutouts. He was less happy about his peers meddling, and ended up moving away from the main table on the second day, so he could work in peace, removed from the other students. But most of the students seemed to enjoy the comments and enthusiasms of their peers. A good number of the students thus moved back and forth from their own projects to look at and comment on what others were doing. Some of them were inspired by their peers and copied aspects of the models. Most of this sociality around building the models occurred within shared language groups. The Dari-speaking students helped each other, just as the Somali-speaking ones did. There was however also some overlap.

Others were less enthusiastic, at least to begin with. One North African student required particular coaxing from one of the teachers, but eventually became engrossed in choosing and placing mosaic tiles around his house. His greatest laugh, however, was reserved for the way in which he placed paired figures made from pipe-cleaners in coupling positions around a tiny model table.

This exercise showcased a number of aspects of the project. The basic mode of instruction involved the presentation of a final product and then brief instructions on how to go about building the model. The students then proceeded by trial and error, trying their hands at combining the materials, receiving hands-on instruction from teachers and Line, and observing one another. It thus also exemplified the importance of sociality among the students in their working with art, not only through observation but also through active participation. This participation promoted sociality in a specific material context, where students moved or attached concrete objects to each other. The materiality of the art materials in this sense helped create the possibilities for sociality. However, as the example of the Afghan student withdrawing from his friends' participation to pursue his own plans for his project usefully demonstrates, there was a balance between the desire for sociality and a more personal ambition for creating artwork. The materiality of the artwork also had its own aesthetic aspect. It was not always merely an excuse for sociality. Finally, it is worth noting the students' particular interest in the glue guns, which were in constant use throughout the project. Many of the students seemed to simply enjoy using these unfamiliar tools, the fit of them in their hands, the movement of the heated glue as it left the nozzles and attached bits of material to their model.

### *Kites*

The students made kites on a bright summer's day. In a reversal of the usual student-teacher roles, Line had asked some Afghan students to take over the teaching and guide the group in constructing kites in the Afghan manner. Having consulted some of the Afghani students on the best materials to use for making kites, Line had bought semiflexible plastic tubing, cloth, and string. Two of the Afghani students stood at the whiteboard and explained how to build the kites with

the help of the teachers, who repeated instructions and tried to make sure everyone understood them. One of the teachers had drawn a diamond shape on the whiteboard. One of the Afghan students held two unequal lengths of the plastic tubing up in the shape of a cross. “Like this. But you have to bend the short piece a little bit. Not too much. Just a bit.” Things were not particularly clear for most of the students. But seeing the Afghans – and in particular one of the students, who had not volunteered to explain how to build a kite, but was in practice one of the most skilled at assembling the kites – actually stretch the plastic cloth between the tubing, bending them slightly to keep the cloth tight, helped understanding. The ends were tied off with string. Working in pairs, the other students tried to emulate the skilled Afghani student, but many had trouble with the mechanics of it. As the Afghan students finished their kites, however, they were able to help. The materials were somewhat limited, and there was occasional irritation as students tried to secure enough or more pieces of tubing or (in particular) line to fly the kite.



Students fly their home-made kites on the beach. Photo: Line Chayder.



As the students finished their kites, they stepped outside to the beach, where they flew their kites. Some found their constructions unwieldy or downright failures and so had to return to either modify them or start anew. This caused some frustration, in particular because a few of the groups managed to fly their kites immediately. However, some of the student groups that managed to get their kites to fly were clearly delighted. One group, which had managed to secure a particularly large amount of kite string, sent their kite soaring far above the museum and spent a good half an hour simply taking turns to hold the string and gaze after the kite.

This exercise also involved a greater measure of exhibition to others than the students involved. A group of Danes sat along the boat club, next to the Boat House, watching the students fly their kites. And on at least one occasion, students crashed their kites on to the lawn in front of the museum cafeteria above, only to have it sent aloft again by museum visitors. There was thus a measure of interaction with museum visitors and neighbours that was unusual for the project.

This exercise was also very popular. It involved working with materials in ways that were familiar to some and unfamiliar to others, but it also was an exercise that had a very clear measure of success. If the kite could fly, you had succeeded. This provided a contrast to the majority of the other exercises, where success was more relative and aesthetic.

Further, the exercise produced something that could be used. Flying the kite was in that sense also part of the art exercise. While this might not have struck the students, who perhaps thought of it as a reward for the work they had done, the physical holding on to the string, repairing or rejigging the kite, passing the string to one's partner, helping other students get their kites in the air again after a crash, all could be thought of as physical art performances. The documentation of this part of the exercise, not least by other Louisiana staff, all spoke to this understanding of the exercise.

### *Mini-museums*

This was an exercise that both the younger and older students tried their hands at. It involved combining collage and model-building to make "mini-museums" in

wooden boxes. Though they varied slightly, the mini-museums in both cases involved combining some of the landscape surrounding the museum (in the form of both photos and pattern rubbings) with museum exhibits and crucially pictures of the students and staff. Some glued on small stones, others put in folded photos to make small figures and add depth. The students were also asked to give their museums personalized names.

As always, the exercise began with Line explaining the purpose of the exercise and presenting her own mini-museum. We then brought paper and pencils outside to gather wood patterns from trees and wooden planks, by rubbing the pencil over the paper on top of the wood. Most of the students were familiar with this technique, but not all. Most of the students were happy to experiment with finding different kinds of patterns, and some also engaged in finding figures in the patterns they had rubbed in to existence on their sheets of paper.



Students rub patterns from wooden planks. Photo: Line Chayder.

We returned to the Boat House, where the wooden boxes were handed out together with various photos, printed out on paper. The photos were of the students

and teachers, the Louisiana landscape and exhibits, and close-ups of grass and flowers. The students grasped the exercise quite quickly and began finding the photos they wanted to use and cutting them out. They generally began, as Line instructed them, with gluing in pictures of sky at the top of the box and either grass or beach/water at the bottom. Having created a basic space in this way, a good deal of fun was had putting photos of themselves, their peers, and the Red Cross teachers in the box, and thus creating spatial relations between them.

The exercise was placed at different points in the course for the two groups of students. For the younger students, the exercise came almost immediately as a way of introducing and thinking about what a museum was. For the older students, the exercise came at the very end of the course, in part as a way of wrapping up engagement with the project. While it was popular among both groups, it seemed to go particularly well in the older cohort. A great deal of effort was put in to the mini-museums, and they were both proudly presented to the camera as part of the documentation, and carefully placed on each other for a fuller exhibition (see photos).



Two mini-museums on display. The top one includes a number of the student's friends. The bottom one shows the student alone in a garden. Photo: Line Chayder.

This was a very popular exercise among both groups. One of the striking features of it was the ways in which space, sociality and materiality were all combined in miniature scale in the exercise. By placing figures in particular ways relative to each other and to the objects and cutouts placed in and on the wooden box, the students were effectively creating miniature contact zones.

One issue with the exercise involved the limited range of photos available, which prompted some students to simply take the photo that was left, rather than the one they were looking for. In future versions, I suggest including photos of a wider variety of the artworks the students had engaged with from the museums for use in collage, and encouraging the students to pick some of their favourite artworks to include in the museum. This would not only allow the students to reflect on the entire course, but would also serve as a form of feedback on which artworks they were most interested in.

### *Hilma af Klint collage*

This collage exercise drew on a number of previously established elements. First, its theme was the symbolic presentation of self, drawing on the Hilma af Klint exhibition and the discussions related to it. Second, Line had asked the teachers to have the students find symbolic images and bring them along. As it turned out, there was some distance between the kinds of symbolism used by Hilma af Klint (often relating to snail shells, flowers, particular colours) and those the teachers and students brought with them from school (often relating to abstract categories, considered valuable like family, beauty, music, education, communication and illustrated through photos of celebrities, phones, diplomas, and so on) and national origin.

Line reminded the students that they should place all their cutouts on the cardboard, before gluing it, to make sure they were in the right place. This was heeded by some, but by no means all the students. A fair few thus immediately glued their cutouts on, more or less at random. This could be down to issues of communication, wanting to get their work over with, or perhaps just general impatience. A few of these students, however, seemed to regret it later in the process, carefully adding more pieces to improve the overall look of their collage. Line encouraged the students to add drawings to create further relations between the symbolic cutouts, but again this was met with limited enthusiasm.

A further issue for the students lay in cutting out and placing their photos relative to each other. Many students were clearly uncomfortable wielding scissors of the kind used at the Boat House. A number of the students simply glued the entire A4



printout on to the background, in some cases creating a grid-like layout. Though both Line and the teachers encouraged the students to avoid this and to try to create juxtapositions and connections between the elements, this proved either difficult or unappealing to a number of the students.



*A student presents his collage to the group. Photo: Line Chayder.*

Though this exercise was by no means a failure, it did not enjoy the same success as other exercises. This was to do with a number of reasons. First, as described above, the kinds of symbolic representations available were of quite different orders. This basic discrepancy made a challenging exercise all the more difficult. This speaks to a more general issue in improving the linkages between the work the students do between project sessions with the work they do in them. Second, the somewhat more complex nature of the exercise was difficult to

communicate properly to all the students. Third, not all the students had been at school on the day, they had found and printed out their symbols, meaning that some attention from Line and the teachers was diverted in to making sure those students had something to work with.

### *Guston drawings*

This exercise took place in the Guston exhibit and simply involved copying one of his paintings (Atelier, 1969) in to the logbooks. The group had passed through the Philip Guston exhibit a few times on the way elsewhere, and each time some of the students had stopped up to look at the paintings. There was thus some level of interest in his works to begin with. Before starting the exercise, the group had started out by looking at the painting. Line asked what the students thought. “It is like a head that is a mountain, smoking,” one Somali student said. An Afghan student joked that the figure’s hood reminded him of the KKK or Casper the Friendly Ghost. “His hand looks like the one on Facebook.” An African student got in to more detail, “He is drawing while smoking. He needs the light that is hanging there, and he is timing himself with the clock on the wall.” “What is he drawing?” Line asked. “He is drawing what he is seeing,” the student answered. “Or maybe what he is feeling?” Line suggested.

The exercise was easily understood and quickly resulted in an intense level of concentration from all the students. A few were a little overwhelmed by the exercise, as they did not feel their drawing skills were sufficient for the task. But the majority started drawing immediately and wanted to keep working even when Line was ready to wrap up. They each took a few pastels to work with, but shared them around as needed. While they worked, Line and the teachers circulated, expressing how impressed they were with the various students’ drawings. The Eritrean students in particular received a great deal of praise for their drawings. As I have noted, these were students who generally had a harder time communicating with Line and the teachers, and so also had had more difficulty with some of the other exercises. But this exercise absorbed them, and they sat among each other working and looking at each other’s work as it progressed.

When the students were done, they were told to place their logbooks underneath the original painting, as a mini-exhibition. Here again, Line and the teachers underlined how impressive the work done was. “They all are based on the same painting,” Line said pointing up at the Guston original, “But they are also all different. You have each made it your own.”

This exercise was also one, where the students were in some sense themselves exhibited. A number of visitors to the museum stopped up to see what the students were doing, looking over their shoulders, and in at least one case asking to take a picture. In addition, the official Louisiana photographer happened to be there, and he too took a number of pictures, including a group shot at the end. The student drawings were so good that Line also showed them to her colleagues.



Group photo with logbooks in front of the Guston painting. Photo: Louisiana.

This exercise was a great success. It drew on an interest in the works of Guston that had emerged as the students moved through the collections. The paintings with their somewhat cartoonish figures in somewhat surrealist situations, the focus on shoes, hands and cigarettes seemed to invite them in. This exercise thus illustrated the dynamism in the exercises. Responding to student interest in these particular artworks, Line adapted the course to engage the student interest.



## *Doors*

This exercise involved first taking photos of doors or door-like objects outside in groups and then a collage exercise, using these pictures, in the following session. It illustrates both the use of photos in art exercises, group work, working in the gardens and the issues of continuity, arising from relying on earlier work in a session. This exercise was undertaken only by the older cohort of students.

Line explained the general idea behind the exercise, again showing an example of an end product. Continuing the theme of envisaging dream houses, she explained that the purpose was to make a personal door by taking a picture of an actual object and then modifying it and making it one's own as a collage. Most of the students seemed to grasp the basic idea.



Modified doors exhibited on the floor of the Boat House. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

The students were generally quite eager to handle the cameras and did not have much trouble finding someone in their group, who could use them. The students moved around the gardens in groups, most of them with a teacher, Line, or myself

attached. As happened regularly in exercises that involved the students using cameras in groups, some of the students added snapshots of each other, posing in front of sculptures or vistas. With a little encouragement, some students also took pictures of objects that were not necessarily normal doors, like a revolving gate topped with barbed wire or door-like sculptures. Searching the gardens for doors provided an alternative perspective on that space. Rather than focus on sculptures, the search for doors sent the students moving along the outer walls of buildings, looking for back entrances and down basement stairs. Returning from the trip, the students handed over the cameras to Line.

The next part of the exercise took place in the following session. Line had printed out a selection of the pictures of doors in preparation. As always, this meant that not all the same students were present, and that there therefore were some students present, who had not taken any pictures, just as there were some pictures, whose photographers were not present.

#### *Jorn modifications*

After a powerpoint presentation on Asger Jorn in the morning (see below for discussion of powerpoint presentations), the students were brought in to the collections to look at a work of modification by the artist. The day was marked by the arrival of a number of senior Red Cross staff, which seemed to provoke some unease from the students. In part this seemed to relate to a sense of being under surveillance by persons thought to wield power of them.

The exercise involved drawing over a printed out painting to transform it in to something else. Line stressed the elements of appropriating the image, making it one's own, as well as the recycling element, using things that one otherwise might have thrown out. The students sat on the floor in front of the Jorn piece, using crayons to draw over the painting printout mounted on clipboards. Initially hesitant, they quickly grasped the idea and worked in concentration. One Somali student showed me two figures he had drawn on top of a bridge, depicted in the original painting: "They are two children, brother and sister. They will escape by swimming. They want to get to safety. But there are crocodiles here," he said pointing to the water. He had doodled long lines over and around these figures. Taking his queue

from comments Line made about discovering shapes and figures in the drawings, he laughed as he pointed out a shape he thought looked like a dog. Then he pointed next to the two figures, where he had drawn a rounded shape that looked like a thumb. “This is a fingerprint. They have to pass. Good joke,” he said without smiling. The themes of flight and danger and the migration control systems embodied in fingerprints clearly linked to his own experiences of asylum. But his delight at finding other figures in his drawing suggests that he was also happy to look beyond these themes. He looked at me and asked, “What else do you see here?”



"What else do you see here?" A student shows off his modification. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

### **3.3 Talking about art**

This section examines the ways in which the students talked about art. Like the participation in the art exercises, the three dimensions of space, sociality, and materiality continued to play an important role in this process. In the first subsection, I discuss guided discussions about art in the form of powerpoints, questions and answers, and observations as part of art exercises and the

understandings of art these gave rise to. In the second, I turn to more independent interactions with art and other aesthetics on the part of the students.

### 3.3.1 Guided discussions around art

The majority of the discussions around art were guided by Line. They came in a number of contexts. When preparing to start a new exercise, Line often spoke about some aspect of art relevant to it. For exercises that drew on particular artists, she spoke about the artists and their works. She presented PowerPoint slides a few times, but the most usual mode of communication was informal and conversational, often slipping between Danish and English. Major points were often repeated by the Red Cross teachers, or students were asked to translate for their peers.

Nevertheless, it was often a difficult job to communicate even basic ideas so that all the students understood them. The result was that it was often the same handful of students that answered questions. Occasionally, students with less shared language would be asked to speak, but they tended to retreat quickly, shaking their heads and excusing themselves, or opening up their palms and lifting their shoulders.

In one of their first sessions, the older students were taken to the sculpture park to sketch an abstract sculpture. Asked what it represented, the students remained quiet. At length and with some prompting from Line, someone suggested that it could be someone hiding. Another student immediately suggested that it might rather be someone sleeping. Line explained that the sculpture was abstract, and asked what that meant. One of the students suggested, “Something I can only look at, not something I understand.”

As a prelude to the exercise in building dream houses (see above), Line brought the group to the exhibition “Arab Contemporary” in the collections. We walked through the exhibitions, descending the stairwell from the cafeteria. Most of the students didn’t speak Arabic fluently, but many of them could spell out the words on display. They examined maps of the Arab world, though not with complete approval. Having seen Somalia depicted as part of this sphere of influence, one of the Somali students protested. “Somalia is not Arab. Somalia is African!” Line brought us in to a traditional Arabic atrium, which she told us was a space for

welcoming guests. We sat on benches along the wall and looked around at each other, some of the students putting on headphones to listen in on the audio. Line pointed out the latticed window, called a *mashrabiya* in Arabic, which she said was a place that women could observe through without being seen. “This place is almost like something out of 1001 Nights,” she smiled. One of the Afghan students quickly broke in. “1001 Nights is not Arabic,” he said. “It is Persian.” A bit of discussion followed between the student and a teacher, but the other students were mostly quiet. In general, conversation among the students was whispered, occasionally involving pointing something out or passing the headphones.

At times the Red Cross teachers also used the occasion of the class looking at the same artwork to present understandings of the work in a didactic mode. Looking at a work by Hilma af Klint, for example, one of the teachers explained that he thought of the pyramidal shape with the sun-like object glowing at its top represented knowledge. “As you move up the pyramid you know more and more. For example as you get better at Danish. Here you know only a few words. Here you speak a little. Here you can talk to people.” Using simple phrases and a good deal of gesture, eyes scanning the students, the teacher tried to ensure he was understood.

The students related to the aesthetics of the works they saw in quite varied ways. In a few cases, the discussions about artworks seemed to have struck some chord. This was perhaps most clearly expressed in the encounter of the younger students with Ai Wei Wei’s work, *Trees* (2009-10). As we entered the large hall, housing the trees, the students were visibly impressed. The large room was bare, but for the towering structures, some 5 meters tall at their tops, built of large pieces of dead wood, bolted together to form the shape of living trees. We sat down on the tiled floor, next to one of the trees, as Line talked about Ai Wei Wei, explaining that he was Chinese, but had been put under house arrest in China. She explained that Louisiana owned this artwork, but that it was not always on display. “Sometimes they are lent out to museums in other countries. They are shipped all over the world,” she explained.

This triggered a great deal of interest among the students. An Albanian-speaking boy asked, “Will the tree then be moved on to Italy or somewhere like that?” Then



he added, “How long will they stay here in Denmark?” He kept digging, asking about their movement and transience in Denmark. The resonance with his own situation was striking. Many asylum seekers in Denmark have traveled through Italy, and some are returned there under Dublin regulations. For Albanians, in particular, Italy is a common staging ground for further travel. So the choice of Italy as an example is apt. The question of the length of their stay in Denmark was also vexed for many of the longterm asylum seekers. While a long asylum period, at any rate meant that one had not been deported, it also of course entailed not being granted asylum.



[Ai Wei Wei's Trees \(2009-10\) with student sketches on the floor. Photo: Zachary Whyte.](#)

Interestingly, as he kept asking questions about the movement of the pieces of wood, it almost seemed as if he was identifying with the physical artworks themselves, rather than with the artist or any questions of form and matter. This speaks perhaps to the degree of choice available to him in his movement as an asylum seeker and as a child. He had no say either in coming to Denmark or in whether he could stay. But it also shifted much of the significance of discussing the

artwork. Starting from that identification, meant that much of Line's explanation was understood differently.

After the students had had a moment to look at the trees and walk around the room, Line asked, "What do you think of them? Do you like them?" The students nodded. "Why?"

One of the Iranian girls said, "Yes, they are special because I have never seen trees inside before." For her, then, what was significant about them was that they were out of context, in the wrong space. On the one hand, this once more marked an identification with the trees. Like people stuck in asylum centres, the trees did not belong there. On the other hand, this artwork also potentially pointed in the opposite direction. Being out of context made them special.

Moving the discussion on, Line asked, "What kinds of trees, do these look like? Are they young or old? If they were people, were they babies or old men?" Another Albanian student said, "They are just men. If they could get some water and light and be put in the grass, they could begin to grow again." Again, there seems some identification with the artworks. The barren waiting of the asylum process, is often described as a limbo, which is how he sees the trees. They are stuck inside, away from their natural environment, where their growth is stalled. But they could return to their natural state and continue their development, if they were only allowed to escape their confinement.

On one of the following days, the trees were dismantled and loaded on to flatbed trucks for transport away. The students immediately recognised the trees as they arrived and came running over to the trucks. Group photos were taken. Though the students continued to work with the trees, constructing large collages of them from closeup photos of bark, the sense of identification was much less prevalent here. The students were delighted with the collages, which were universally admired, but they did not talk about them in the same way, they had talked about the actual trees.

It was by no means all the discussion of art that drew on the students' experiences as asylum seekers. In discussing a Philip Guston painting (The Line, 1978), depicting a large hand emerging from the clouds with two fingers pointing to the ground, students quickly described it as the hand of God. But a spirited

discussion soon broke out as to whether this was a vengeful or punishing God and what possibilities this hand offered. The stick-like object between the two extended fingers and the line it seemed to be drawing, which Line drew attention to, was swiftly enrolled in the understanding of the hand as divine.

More often the discussions about artwork took on more scattered forms, as in the discussion of the other Guston work recounted in section 3.2.2 above.

### 3.3.2 Other engagements with art and popular aesthetics in the art museum

While the above subsection looked at the guided discussions about art, this subsection will turn to more independent engagements with art and other aesthetics at the museum. This could take a number of forms. While walking to see particular parts of the collections, students would often stop up and examine works they passed on the way. Though they seldom stayed for long, this sort of passing engagement with other works spoke to an interest in the objects on display on their own terms. This passing interest could be taken up by Line, who was quite responsive to the students' interests in the artwork they passed. The dynamism of the project allowed her to easily adapt exercises to include these, as she did with the Guston drawing exercise described above.

However, student interest was not limited to the displays. The younger students, for example, were absolutely enchanted with the design of the public restrooms, as I describe below. Many of the older students were quite taken with the gardens and many of them made sure to get their pictures taken in front of beds of flowers. My point here is that the students were often equally taken with the context as with the text, as it were.

Student engagements with the displayed art was not limited to discussions, however. In one striking case, two students, who were straggling behind the group as it returned to the Boat House through the collections stopped in front of a work by Tal R, which included some striking lines emanating from a central point. They then placed themselves in front of it, so that the lines seemed to surround their heads and asked a third student to take a picture of them. This way of inserting themselves in to the artwork and thereby creating a new work of art illustrated one way of appropriating art in a non-verbal way. Inspired by this, a later art exercise



asked the students to do this more systematically, photographing themselves in and in relation to displayed works.

While art naturally enough focused the work at Louisiana, the students also brought other aesthetics to the museum, many of them drawn from popular culture. The younger student cohort in particular drew extensively on pop cultural figures like Justin Bieber (mostly the girls) and footballers like Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Lionel Messi (mostly the boys). These names were immediately inscribed on the students' logbooks along with the students' own names, suggesting their importance for the students' adolescent identity-work. One key element here was no doubt precisely the connections these figures provided with global youth culture. They opened up an imaginary trajectory away from the students' current conditions.



The students were asked to draw something to bring on a journey. One of the younger students drew this Ibrahimovic kit. Photo: Line Chayder.

For the older students in particular, Facebook was an important platform on which to connect with friends and family, but also to engage with other art forms, especially music. One of the Somali students told me that he had taken a film inside the Kusama installation. Showing it to me on his phone, he said “It looks like I am on the moon.” We watched it for a moment. Then he added, “I will put it on Facebook. They will be surprised in Africa,” he laughed. “They will think I have gone to outer space!” I asked him if most of his friends were on Facebook. “Facebook is the most popular social media in the world,” he said. “Every young person uses it. Some of them almost say Facebook is my father. They like it so much. This is not good, though. I just use it to store my pictures. You know, I took pictures of my whole trip. From Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Italy. All the way to here. So my friends and family could see where I have been.”

Facebook played an important role for these students, both as a link to people left behind, as a conduit of pictures, music and youtube clips, and as the project progressed a Facebook group was established in part as a response to issues arising from the documentation of the project (see section 6.2).

A final aspect of popular culture worth remarking on, particularly for the older students, was their use of music. A number of students regularly had at least one earplug in their ear, allowing them to listen to music from their phones. Teachers would occasionally ask the students to take them out, but a few of the students seemed to be constantly connected to their music. This created a non-geographical space in which the students could withdraw. Though it occasionally distracted them from their place in the project, for the most part it seemed to simply serve as a sort of soundtrack to their daily lives.

## 4. SPACE

The spaces in which the project took place were significant for the project's practice in a number of ways. They framed the project, formed the context of learning, and set limits as well as provided opportunities for various kinds of sociality. In this section, I provide an overview of some of the key spaces for the project at Louisiana alongside considerations of their significance for the project.

Spaces and contexts of learning were all the more important for the language and communication difficulties of the project. Further, as the metaphor of the contact zone suggests, they connect fundamentally to questions of sociality and materiality, which together framed the project. Though the students' understanding of the spaces of Louisiana were of course informed by their experiences of the other spaces they inhabited, including the asylum centers and schools, for the purposes of this report, I have chosen to focus on Louisiana.

The spaces in question are the following:

- The Boat House
- By the sea
- The collections
- The gardens
- The children's house

### The Boat House

This was the key locality for the two courses followed for this report. It framed the course, in the sense that it was where the day started and ended, it was where the majority of the exercises took place, and it was where lunch was eaten.

Set apart and down from the main museum, down by the beach, the Boat House was a beautiful, large, open space, dominated by huge windows and glass doors looking on to the Sound. It had high ceilings with visible wooden beams, wood flooring, and was decorated with art posters celebrating major artists like Hockney and Liechtenstein. Near the entrance were toilets, and the space was slightly narrower, but the majority of the course took place at the opposite end, close to the

panorama windows. Here a number of tables were pushed together to form a single, very large surface, around which all the students and teachers could sit, facing each other. Most days, Line had brought down the materials needed for the day's activities, and had covered the tables as necessary.



The Boat House interior. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

The large space meant that the students had room to move around, as well as the possibility of retreating from the main table. Line regularly used the area by the panorama window for exhibitions of the students' work, asking the students to stand around their works and directing their attention to various aspects of it. This was generally done in English with some Danish sprinkled in.

The single table meant that students mostly had everyone in view, and that they therefore could more easily follow along in the work their peers were doing. While the seating arrangement could occasionally stand in the way of doing presentations (particularly the few times powerpoints or movies were shown), the effect was by and large one of encouraging community. Returning students generally sat if not in the same seats, at least on the same sides of the table as they had done before.

The students generally seemed impressed by the Boat House. When they first arrived, many students stopped up to look around, before gravitating towards the windows to check out the view.

The Boat House's placement underscored the element of privileged access to the museum collections and gardens, since getting to them involved passing through back entrances and underground hallways and often through either the cafeteria or exhibitions open to the public. (See the subsection on the collections below.) On the other hand its placement right next to the museum director's office did not impress the students nearly as much as it did the Red Cross staff and myself. They largely ignored the spacious office with its impressive collection of designer furniture, rather focusing on the view over the water to Sweden and the small pebble beach just below.

The disadvantage of the space for art work was tied to its impressiveness as a venue. Concerns over spills and other damage increased over the second course. In concert with a change in the planned uses of the space, it seems it will no longer be available for the project.

### Collections

The project involved regular visits to the museum collections for various exercises. The students were guided through one of two locked back doors and in to the museum. Line showed the way to the exhibit, she wanted the students to see, and one or both of the teachers hung back to move along any stragglers. The exhibits ranged from classic museum presentations of framed paintings to video installations, stuffed animals, and architectural installations. To get to a given exhibit, the group often passed through others and students regularly stopped to see works that caught their eye.

Most of the students failed to pick up any precise sense of the layout of the overall museum. Following the crowd, they regularly seemed surprised to recognise particular exhibits. However, they learned the commonly taken routes. In particular, one route that took them from the Boat House through the cafeteria through a series of "backstage" passageways and past a rope, signifying no admittance to regular museum visitors. This underscored the unusual access the project gave the

students to the museum. This point was further brought home to the students, as they passed by paying visitors or took up space in the exhibits. As one Afghan student put it with some satisfaction, “We are VIP”. Or as a Somali student joked with his friend, while gesturing around him with his arm, “This is my house.” There were of course limits to this sense of access. Students were regularly reminded not to touch exhibits and to be careful when crowding around them.



Students explore the Arab Contemporary exhibit. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

One of the characteristics of the project was the unique access to the museum afforded the students. This was evident when moving about the museum, where the students followed behind Line who could open doors closed to regular visitors with her swipe card. But it also was evident from the relative luxury of the project’s base of operations at the Boat House. This relative access, even when it was mediated through Line, provided a contrast to life at the asylum center, but in particular to a

broader sense of restricted access to Denmark in general. It also provided a particular mode for engaging with art. As Pink et al. (2010) argue in their discussion of the intersection of walking and arts practice, this way of experiencing art tends to involve more senses than simply sight.

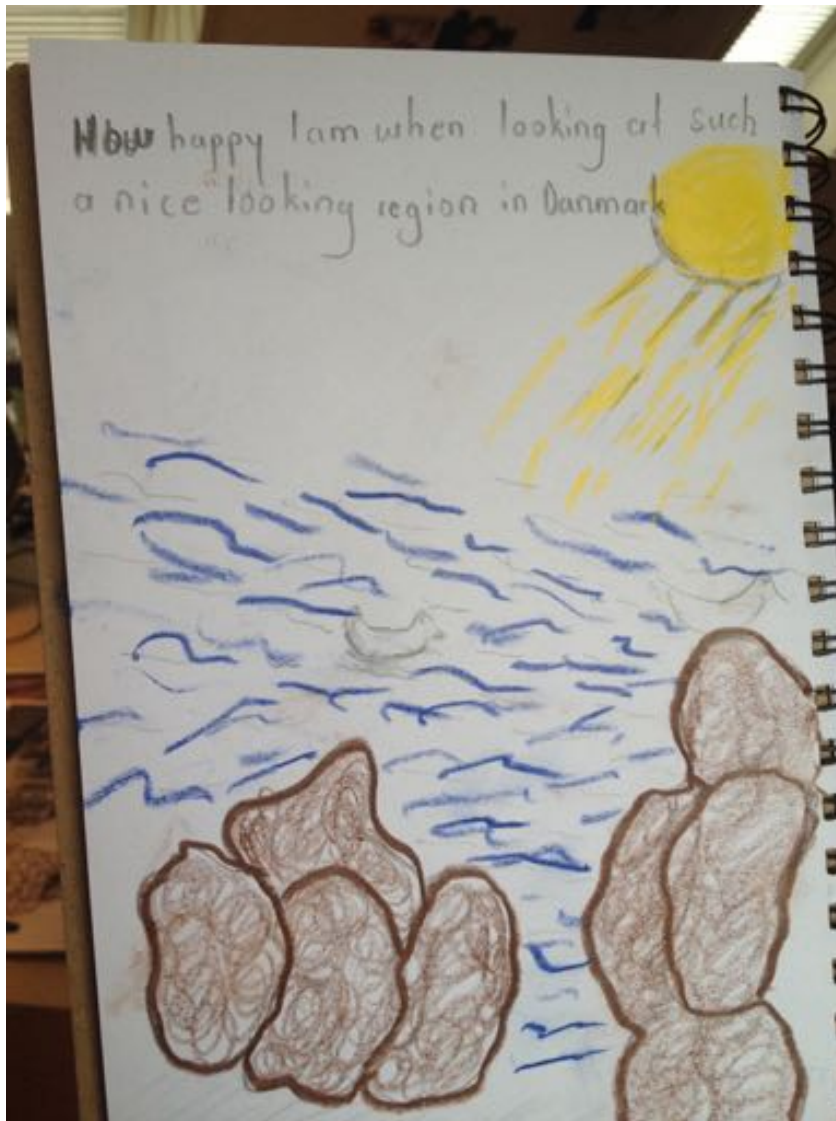
However, the collections were not always the objects of greatest interest for the younger students in particular. On their first meeting with one of the restrooms, the younger students were entranced, returning again and again to wash their hands, start the hand drier, or trigger the automatic doors. As one of the young Albanian-speakers remarked with obvious delight and great smile, as he came out of another restroom, "They have the best toilets here!". This speaks to a wider engagement with the museum spaces, which on the one hand can seem to involve a lesser valuing the art on display, but perhaps should rather be understood as an active appreciation of the design aspects of the museum. That is to say, even if some of the students did not always fully engage with the art exhibits, their interest in the museum could still remain strong.

### Gardens

The museum gardens are often described as a highlight of the museum, and the students were generally very impressed by them. This was the space in which they themselves took the most pictures on their mobile phones, often posing in front of sculptures or in front of the view across the water and letting their friends snap pictures. A number of students were particularly taken with the flowers on display. "This is a very beautiful place," one Somali student told me. When I asked him what he found beautiful about it, he gestured at the flowers and then out towards the water. "This. And this," he said. "It is a good place to be." This understanding of the gardens no doubt in part had to do with the season. It was a bright spring day, and the gardens were lush. But it also speaks to the students' basic understanding of the gardens as sights to see, which again allowed them to momentarily take up a position as visiting tourist, taking snapshots to show friends and family, who were not able to come. When I asked him, who he would show the pictures he was having a friend taking of him, looking steely-eyed across the water, large sculpture in the background, an Afghan student told me that he would send it to his brother



and his friends, so they could see he had ended up in a fine place.



A student's logbook. "How happy I am when looking at such a nice looking region in Denmark". Photo: Zachary Whyte.

Louisiana was generally considered a particularly beautiful place by the students. The gardens in particular were singled out, but the rest of the spaces were also appreciated. Most immediately, this is quite simply a selling point for the project. Students may be interested in attending at least one session, simply because of what they have heard from their peers.

One part of the gardens in particular also invited the students to play: A steep hill with steps along the right side, leading down to an exit from the museum grounds, which led back to the Boat House. Both younger and older students would start running down the hill, gathering speed and occasionally losing their balance. The

other students watched and laughed, daring each other to try, occasionally taking pictures.

### By the sea

Because of the Boat House's placement directly on the waterfront, the small beach in front of it was often used by the students, during breaks and occasionally for art exercises. Here they would walk out on the small pier there, throw or skip stones in the sea, or simply stand or sit around in small groups, either by the water or on the small patio directly in front of the Boat House. The younger students ran around, the boys occasionally chasing or being chased by one or two of the girls. They regularly called for attention from their peers. One young Albanian-speaker stood in a group of his fellow students, who were throwing rocks in the water, shouting "Look at me! Look at me! Look at meeeeeeeee!", as he held up the stone he had chosen to throw. But the older students also stood happily competing at who could skip a stone the most times or could throw one the farthest. This was a social space somewhat removed from the observation of Line and the Red Cross teachers, though they would occasionally join the students there. In this sense, it was a space that the students could take over in a way that they could not elsewhere at Louisiana (barring perhaps some parts of the gardens). They could shout and run and tussle, and the older students could even occasionally smoke a cigarette. It was space that could be appropriated by the students. In one case, I played marbles with two of the younger students, during which we dug holes in the ground, literally shaping Louisiana spaces to the game we were playing.

It was also a space they could literally immerse themselves in. The older students came up with the idea that they wanted to go swimming in the sea. This was quickly agreed with Line and the teachers, and in the following session, the students brought swimming trunks and towels. The photographer, who happened to be present on the day in question, was also a licensed lifeguard. The students swam in the sea, jumping off the pier and splashing each other, all to their massive enjoyment.



Some of the older students take a dip in the sea. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

### Børnehuset

This area of the museum is designed for visiting children to interact with art. Anchored in the museum proper, it extends down a further two floors. It offers a range of materials and space to work with them for children visiting the museum. Many exercises are tied to current exhibitions. The students used it on a few occasions, mainly either when the exercises were particularly messy or when they required large amounts of materials that were stored there. Unlike the Boat House, this space was also in use by other guests. The students thus only use one end of the room, the other remaining available for museum guests, who passed by the students, if they needed to use the restroom. On the one hand, this meant that the students did not have the privacy to work on their projects, on the other it meant that they were in closer contact with normal museum visitors, even if there was little actual social interaction.

It was relatively cramped compared to the spacious areas of the Boat House, and the tables and chairs were made for smaller people. This was less an issue for the younger students, but the older students could seem outsized. A door opened up on to a green area outside with a small body of water, which was not used much in the courses followed, but could become an important space in future versions of the project, where Børnehuset is likely to be one of the key workspaces. While it is not likely to have all the advantages of the Boat House for the students, it is perfectly serviceable.

## **5. SOCIALITY**

Sociality is important all through the learning context: before the exercises, during the exercises, and after the exercises, as well as the free time between exercises. It is shaped and shapes the process of explanation and discussion that often preceded the art exercises. Further, as I have argued, it is experienced together with space and materiality. In this section, I address some issues of sociality among the students as well as relations between the students and the staff.

### **5.1 Sociality among the students**

The interlinkage between sociality and learning are by now well-established, perhaps most explicitly in Lave and Wenger's (2001) notion of "communities of practice", which underlines the ways in which sociality both shapes learning (we learn in communities) and is in turn shaped by it (how we learn is dependent on these communities). This double linkage was also evident in the project, though sociality among the students was of course more thoroughly informed by a range of other factors than the project alone. Nevertheless, the social dimension of learning in the particular context of the project was an important factor in the project's success and is worth attending to in some more detail.

Sociality among the students in the project was structured in part by the same challenges that structured much of the asylum situation, and that were outlined above (2.4 Challenges): communication, flow, uncertainty, and problems. For the purposes of this project, I focus on the first two issues, because they were most directly dealt with in the project.

For the students, it was a basic challenge to find a place for themselves in a very transient social world, like the one provided by the Danish asylum system. As discussed above, the high flow of asylum seekers through the system made all their social relations transient. As a senior Red Cross teacher put it, "It is a dangerous thing [for the students] to form relations. They can be broken in an instant." This could cause feelings of isolation and loneliness, which could compound the effects of the uncertainty of waiting for asylum. On the other hand, the very precariousness

of sociality for the students made it all the more important to them.



An Iranian, an Albanian, and a Chechen girl look over each other's logbooks. They had no language in common.  
Photo: Zachary Whyte.

Communication structured sociality in a number of ways in the project. Students generally grouped themselves by language both while doing exercises and when on break. Somali-speakers generally sat together, just as Dari-speakers or Albanian-speakers did. In these groups, English or Danish proficiency played an important role in the way the students related to each other. One Somali student, who spoke some English and regularly translated for the other Somali students, told me that he had practiced English for five months. He said he had learned a little from his friends, who were in Kenya, Uganda, and England, when talking over the Internet. “It is important to learn,” he told me. “Normally I am shy and don’t like to talk, but in English I try not to be. Otherwise, how can I learn?” He explained that his English

skills meant that the other Somalis came to him for help in understanding and translating things. “They come especially to me and two other boys,” he explained. “So this makes me think I speak some English.” This echoes research findings from other settings, where language proficiency and the ability to broker between young refugee peers and teachers and other authorities is seen as a valuable social asset, earning proficient refugees prestige and social importance (Valencia 2014). These “cultural brokers” were also important to the project, as they enabled increased communication across language barriers. English or Danish proficient students were regularly asked to translate either explanations or instructions to their peers. This could be a vital supplement to the non-verbal modes of communication and instruction outlined above.

Language proficiency could of course equally inhibit communication among different sets of asylum seekers as between students and teachers. The Somali student, I mentioned above, went on to explain that his approach was at any rate superior to “the Eritrean boys”. “They just sit on Facebook all day. They don’t learn and they can’t speak to anyone.” This division between different language groups could be partially bridged in the project, precisely because some portions of it were not dependent on language. Appreciating the work done by peers with whom one did not share a language enabled some forms of social relations, however tenuous, that could be carried over to other social contexts.

This points to a further issue. Sociality for the students is not just about making friends or having someone to talk to, it is also a basic form of self-expression. While the exercises and the teachers often called on the students to express their unique individual identities in their artistic productions, these were also bound up in social relations. Sociality thus both shapes the ways in which the students talk to one another and is made material in the artworks they produce, which often expressed not only a purely individual identity, but also their social identities. Using a friend’s idea or even letting him or her add something to your artwork could both reflect and develop social relations. Similarly, social relations could develop or be maintained around completed art works, as the students looked at each other’s work and expressed admiration. Not all of this social “work” required much in the way of

shared language. Much was communicated with the single word, “Good” and a smile and a thumbs up.

The flow of students was also significant in shaping sociality in the project. To begin with, as the quote at the top of this section underlines, the sudden arrival and departure of students made sociality a precarious affair, at once difficult and vital. Having friends to work and joke with, to show one’s work to, to hang out with in breaks, was a fundamental part of learning.

However, sociality did not always lead to closer relations. Two African girls, who started at the same time and were both very engaged in the project seemed to grow increasingly apart over time. They started out as great friends, always sitting next to each other and working together when they could. However, as time went by they increasingly fell to bickering, “Why are you always disagreeing with me, when the teacher asks a question?”, one of them demanded loudly. They ended up refusing to sit together and wanting to work alone, despite the fact that they shared a room at the asylum centre. Now this change in relationship is not likely to be the result of the project. One of them had been age tested to be 19 and faced removal to Italy, while the other remained on track for receiving asylum in Denmark. Nevertheless, it reflects the ways in which social relations cannot be endlessly remade.

Sociality thus was a key part of learning and participation in the project. It helped students understand and engage in the exercise. This importance of sociality has consequences for the ways in which teaching resources can be used most effectively. Students, who had trouble communicating with the other students, e.g. because there were few or no other students who shared languages with them fluently, could find themselves at a disadvantage. This was clearly something both Line and the teachers focused on, not least for one of the Balkan students in the older cohort. However, it is worth reflecting on explicitly, and bringing in to practice systematically.

## **5.2 Sociality between students and staff**

The project had significance for the relations between staff and students in a number of ways. Including student relations to both the Red Cross teachers and to



Line, this section examines the informality of the staff roles and the place of feedback.

### 5.2.1 Informal roles

The relations between staff and students was generally relatively informal. While many students adopted respectful attitudes, calling both Line and the Red Cross teachers “Teacher,” their relations with them were generally no where near as formalised as their relations to teachers in their homelands. This speaks both to the less formal pedagogics common in Denmark in general, emphasising flatter hierarchical structures, and specifically to the pedagogical practices at the Red Cross schools and at Louisiana. Nevertheless, the different roles of staff and students placed structural limits on the level of informality possible, as discussed in the Introduction.

Line was generally understood to lead the project. She planned the day, had the authority to change those plans, explained the art exercises, and so on. However, she was also very concerned to cultivate an informal role with the students. She used her first name, she drew on personal experiences, and even invited her daughter along to take pictures one day.

While this informality was also a key component in the didactics of the Red Cross teachers, the teachers had a different role at Louisiana, than they did at the school. Unlike at the school, where they taught and thus were constantly engaged, they had more opportunities for adopting other kinds of roles at Louisiana. As Line was in charge of planning and explaining the exercises, the teachers took on a support role, where they made sure that the students understood the exercises, tried to encourage their participation in the exercises and in conversation, and themselves took part in the exercises alongside the students. This allowed them to focus more on specific students, and to respond to the needs of specific students.

But their participation in the exercises alongside the students also allowed them a less authoritative position, since they often also took part in the art exercises. Rather than standing at the whiteboard teaching, they were sitting next to the students working on the same thing as them. This relative spatial shift also opened up for changes in sociality, particularly in the older cohort of students. It allowed the

teachers to regularly adopt a more joking attitude. They often joked and laughed with the students about their own work or things they saw. The spatial arrangements also allowed more physicality. Standing near the students, the teachers could put an arm around their shoulders or touch their arms, and this physical contact underscored the greater informality of their relations.

The teachers explained that the project opened up new perspectives on their students, in part deriving simply from the change of context, which meant that the students expressed sides of themselves less obvious at the school, and in part from the different tasks that the students were set. The teachers all expressed a sense that the students regularly exceeded their expectations at Louisiana, particularly in terms of their ability to concentrate for sustained periods of time. This was repeated for both the younger and the older cohort of students.

While a number of the Red Cross teachers were initially concerned at how “their kids” might behave at Louisiana, these concerns were fairly quickly put away. An example of this is the early concern with theft expressed by some of the Red Cross, who initially repeatedly told the students that there should be “no Ali Baba”, a joking term used by the students to mean no stealing. However, by the third session the admonishments had stopped, and I did not hear the expression used from then on.

### 5.2.2 Feedback

Staff feedback on student art exercises played a significant role in the sociality between staff and students. On the one hand, staff circulated and provided unsolicited feedback, mainly in the form of encouragement. This ranged from general praise, along the lines of “Wow, that looks great” to specific suggestions about the placement of pictures in collages, for example. Feedback was almost uniformly positive, though there were distinctions in the level of enthusiasm. Thus in some cases, for example, in regard to the drawings of the Guston painting mentioned above, the staff offered effusive praise, while in others the praise was more non-committal or simply lacking. I never heard any criticism of the students’ art work from the staff.

Students also commonly solicited feedback from staff. Some students in particular regularly showed their work to staff. This often resulted in fairly formulaic

exchanges, as when one Afghan student showed his logbook drawing of a statue to Line, who looked at it and said, “That looks good”, to which he smilingly answered, “No, it isn’t good.”

## 6. MATERIALITY

The materiality of the objects used in the art exercises and indeed in the art displays mattered a great deal to the students. They often wanted to touch art objects (and were continually told not to), while exercises allowed them access to material sensations beyond their own vision. In museum studies, there is an increasing focus on the possibilities for experiencing objects without textual interpretation or explanation (Dudley 2010, 2012). This is effectively what at least some of the exercises involved, when they replicated the artistic process that resulted in the art objects on display (e.g. Jorn modifications, string and marble paintings) or created their own objects of art (e.g. mini-museums, kites).

Here materiality was effectively being leveraged for learning, allowing the students to literally feel their way towards an understanding of art. This was particularly significant given the issues in verbal communication, I have documented above. Line's typical way of introducing an art exercise, by displaying a premade version of what the students were meant to create and demonstrating the methods involved was thus critical in allowing a fuller participation for all the students and guided the process of trial and error that constituted their work.

This different materialities of the objects used in the art exercises also marked off Louisiana as a distinctive space. The use and sharing of particular kinds of objects (e.g. pastels, large coloured pencils, scissors, glue sticks and guns, steel wire, small wooden boxes, etc) distinguished Louisiana from other spaces, the students engaged with. Further, the lack of familiarity of these objects to the students was significant for their interactions around them. Similarly to Askins and Pain's description of the place of material objects among their informants, "the contact between actors evidenced at the start of our project appeared to stem, instead, from the objects *not* being mundane – the socioeconomic position of the young people meant that these objects were unusual and that access to them was perceived to be valuable: young people had to share materials around the larger group" (2011: 813). The example of the glue guns used in building "Dream houses" cited above (3.2.2) resonates well here.

However, objects more familiar to the students also carried resonance. Kites and marbles, for example, had a different feel for students used to handling them. This was partly skill, they simply had practice manipulating certain objects, but also spoke to the ways in which the feel of certain objects had specific meanings for the different students. This again tied back to their previous experiences. So when an Afghan student confidently tied off the corners of his kite to keep the cloth tight, the feel of the kite was also informed by the previous times that he had built kites, even if the materials were not necessarily the same. Certainly, he smiled broadly, while he did his work, and spoke of doing this as a young boy in Afghanistan. Similarly, when doing a Jorn-inspired exercise that involved dipping marbles in paint and rolling them over a piece of paper in a wooden box, one of the younger, Albanian-speaking students kept taking the marbles up in his hands to feel them, rolling them around in his palm, placing them in the crook of his index finger, his thumb behind it ready to shoot it off. Here the exercise used a familiar material, the marbles, but did so in a way that he had not tried before.

The students were each given logbooks on their first day. These were meant to provide continuity for the individual student by providing a single place to draw and glue in photos and other objects across their time in the project. These were immediately decorated with names, declarations of love for family members and/or pop cultural icons, drawings and so on. However, the students did not seem to develop a particular sense of ownership of their logbooks. In part this was because, they were not necessarily used for every session, so their role as a documenting device for the students was limited. But the large flow of students also meant that logbooks were abandoned part way through and then passed on to newly arrived students. The new owners adapted the logbooks to their own wishes. Some one-line drawings were torn out and thrown away, a dove was carefully drawn opposite the previous owner's words for his little brother. The logbooks thus became something other than an individual account of engagement with the project.

### **Documentation and exhibition**

As part of the project, a great many pictures of the students and their artworks were taken as part of a general documentation process. Louisiana staff, including Line,

student interns, and the official Louisiana photographer documented both the various art projects, visits in the museum, and the artworks, the students produced. In addition, the Red Cross staff also took a number of pictures for their own documentation, as did I, as a researcher, on my cameraphone. The older students also took a number of pictures with their cameraphones, mainly of themselves or their friends, and mostly outside.



A student poses for a photo, while his peers look on. Photo: Zachary Whyte.

Red Cross guidelines require that asylum-seeking children sign releases to permit photography of them, to ensure the students retain control of their images. As a senior Red Cross staffer told me, “Many people are interested in taking pictures of our students. They are very picturesque, after all. But these people all want to use the pictures for their own purposes, and the students may find in later years that they are unhappy to see images of themselves in these situations.” There is thus good reason to require explicit permission from the students (or their parents) before taking their pictures.

However, in practice, this requirement presented a number of difficulties. To begin with the flow of students through the project meant that the Red Cross teachers were constantly having to try to get new students to sign photo permission slips. This was in itself challenging, since it could be difficult to communicate to the students what exactly was being asked of them. Naturally enough, many of the students refused to sign documents that they did not fully understand. This was particularly problematic, because it could prove difficult to track which students had given their permission, and which had not, generating a great deal of extra work in the documentation. While students thus regularly refused to give their permission when faced with the question in the abstract, when they were presented with concrete questions like, “May we post this picture of you to Facebook?”, they invariably agreed.

A number of the students complained to me at the amount of documentation taking place, often asking why so many pictures were necessary. It was unclear to them what all the pictures were for, and many felt that it was intrusive. Indeed two older students independently of each other told me that the reason they did not attend the summer school, which followed on from their course, was the number of photos being taken. “It is too much,” one said. “All the time, they are snapping snapping snapping”. The other told me that it actually caused students to not get on the bus. “We asked them where this bus goes. Louisiana. And then whoooooop,” he made a movement as if spinning around, “we go back away.” This may well exaggerate the resistance among the students to photography. After all, many - including this student in particular - continued to participate all through the normal course. However, the example also speaks to a failure of communication or understanding at the asylum centre, if students only realised they were going to Louisiana once they reached the bus.

This issue was evident in the project period and a number of steps were taken to try to mitigate it. The general approach was to try give the students more ownership of the photos taken of them, to reduce the contrast between the felt intrusiveness of the act of photo documentation and the lack of access to its products. First, more of the pictures of the students were used in the art exercises, allowing them to take some home with them, if they wanted to. This gave the students more literal

ownership of the pictures taken of them. The usefulness of this approach was driven home, when a Somali student only reluctantly used one of the pictures of himself he had been given for the collage, he was meant to do, stowing away the remaining pictures in backpack to bring with him. Second, Line incorporated more of the previous session's pictures in the powerpoint presentations she started doing towards the end of the course. This both served to underscore the continuity of the course, and shared the documentation process with them. It also regularly provoked a good deal of laughter, as the entire group saw themselves projected on to the screen. Third, a Facebook group was established where pictures could be posted both by Louisiana staff, Red Cross Teachers, the students and myself. The principle here was that the students would be able to download the pictures or repost them, as they wished, but that they would also be able to post their own documentation. Further, the group would potentially remain as a forum for students, who had moved on, creating some sort of continuity. The Facebook group was established rather late in the process, and thus did not recruit as many students as one might have hoped. However, it could provide a way forward.

While these steps were only taken some way in to the course, they seemed to address some of the issues the students had.



## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Conclusion

As discussed in section 2.1.1 Project aims, the aims of the project may be grouped in two sets of concerns: One is to do with what the students get out of the project, the other is to do with developing pedagogics for use in arts-based learning.

As will be clear from my description of the project, there was a great deal of variation in what individual students gained from participating in the project. Minimally, the students were all diverted for the time they were at Louisiana, and they all concentrated on their projects for extended periods of time. As I have quoted one of the students as saying, Louisiana was “not boring.” Given the level of boredom often expressed by young asylum seekers, this is an achievement in itself. While it may be argued that there is a strong self-selection present, in so far as the students who found the project boring would simply not go, the high levels of participation suggests that the project was generally well-received by the students.

Further, Red Cross staff reported that the students seemed to gain increased well-being from participating in the project. Center staff reported that the students spoke fondly of the project and seemed happy to go, while teachers were impressed by the increased levels of concentration, the students exhibited. These are no doubt diffuse indicators, but they are nonetheless significant.

As I have argued, using the model of the contact zone, spatial, social, and material dimensions together helped create a potentially transformative space. Here students could form and shape social relations with one another and thereby help navigate their time in the asylum system. As Askins and Pain remark, “The physical and embodied experiences of making art and using art-related materials may prompt or enable new social relations, and these encounters are both remembered reflectively (discursively) *and* reflexively (through the body)” (Askins and Pain 2011: 817; original emphasis). In other words, the “enriching experiences” that the project in fact did provide the students, came as a result of the particular contact zone it created. Combining spatial, social, and material dimensions, the project at once allowed for contact with and around art.

This having been said, I am wary of assuming a fundamental transformation of the students on the basis of their participation in the project. The key to me is that the project, thought of as a contact zone in which students could engage with art as well as each other and the staff, provided a space of *potential* transformation. A great number of other factors, most prominently the result of their asylum application, informed what they in fact ended up drawing from it.

While there are many positive things to say about the project, in terms of specific skills learned, there is more room for questions. It is not clear to me that the students increased their technical drawing skills significantly, for example. If this aim is to be carried forward, then a more concerted effort, involving both practice and instruction, should be implemented. That having been said, the students clearly became more willing to *attempt* drawings, as they engaged with the project. This in part derived from the many different kinds of drawing exercises they engaged with. This increased willingness to experiment, especially without a strong sense of individual ability, is clearly foundational for any improvement.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork with the project and the description and analysis offered above, I offer the following recommendations for future versions of the project.

- More focus on engagements with art outside of the museum visits
  - Develop exercises to use at school, between visits.
  - Integrate project with other teaching (Danish, math, etc). E.g. Write a sentence about this artwork we saw.
  - Use other contexts in art projects. E.g. Draw something in your room from memory. Draw a one-line map of the asylum center, showing where you go.
  
- Ways to work with continuity in a state of flux

- Expand the use of logbooks. This both creates cohesion from previous sessions and gives the students something concrete to take home at the end.
- Use Facebook to try to create a sense of community around the project, which might leave traces after the project is over.
- Leveraging sociality in art learning
  - Build on current exercises to ensure social dimension to art exercises, e.g. through strategic or sequenced groupwork.
  - Use art exercises to build social relations between groups of students (in cooperation with Red Cross staff).
- Leveraging spatiality in art learning
  - Build on current structures of shifting spaces to provide variation to the project.
  - Ensure there are suitable areas with less adult supervision.
  - Visiting the students at school and center, possibly with an art exercise
- Leveraging materiality in art learning
  - Continue the uses of a variety of materials, including some that the students are unfamiliar with (glue guns, scissors) and some that they are not (marbles, kites)
  - Use the materiality of the art exercises to talk about art, rather than relying on words alone.
- Making the project more participatory, while acknowledging the challenges of communication and flow
  - Systematise exercises like kite-building so as to involve more different groups of students

- Better explanations of the importance of documentation; better student access to the documentation (e.g. through Facebook, photo distribution in collage exercises)

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