

Liz Hingley

Theme 2. Technologies & Cultures

keys to home: The role of the SIM card in refugee resettlement

A visual research project, which illuminates the significance of the networked SIM card in fostering trajectories of belonging for refugees.

ABSTRACT

This image rich paper considers how creative research mediated by mobile devices might contribute to narratives around migration in galleries and museums. It draws on emergent discourse in digital migration studies and the photography of migration, which seeks to upend inherited notions of refugee powerlessness and passivity (Alam, K Imran, S. 2015, Chouliaraki & Stolić, T, 2019, Leurs, K. & Smets K. 2018, Loewenthal, D., 2020, Gillespie et al. 2016,).

The presentation showcases the process, context, and preliminary findings, of collaborative engagement with Syrian refugees on a resettlement programme in the UK city of Coventry, as well as ongoing research with the Digital Humanities Department of Kings College London. A commissioned photography project, undertaken in 2019, explored the significance of SIM cards in forging a sense of security, identity and belonging, employing perspectives from the anthropology and sociology of material and visual culture (Ingold, T. 2013, Lupton, D. 2018).

The SIM card acts as a key to unlock regional digital infrastructures, sparking visual connection across time and geographical borders to people, places and personal photographic archives held on the smartphone. This minute object becomes the catalyst in fostering physical and emotional attachment to a new place through the maintenance of Syrian networks of belonging and the independence it affords. Yet, this precious and empowering piece of technology also has its limitations.

A series of SIM sculptures, intricately inscribed with hand drawn messages of participants, which were produced for exhibition will be shared, as well as wearable sculptures in creation for the next chapter of the project incorporating portraits and map coordinates. These contemporary cultural artefacts illustrate the resettlement experiences of recently arrived refugees and aspirations for their future. This process of ‘opening up’ the ‘body’ of the smartphone reveals the urgent need for deeper appreciation of the meaning and materiality of personal digital ecosystems (Blanke, T., & Pybus, J. 2020) for refugees negotiating a sense of home. Thus, this paper invites engagement and dialogue.



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Biography

Liz Hingley applies the analytical lens of anthropology with the expressive medium of photography to illuminate the systems of belonging and belief that shape societies around the world. Her practice is collaborative by nature and seeks to bridge disciplines and cultures through the careful sharing of stories. Liz is an Honorary Research Fellow at The University of Birmingham, and Resident Artist within the department of Digital Humanities at Kings College London. Her projects in Asia and Europe have been published as the books *Under Gods* (2010), *End Of Lines* (2013), *Sacred Shanghai* (2019) and *Shanghai Sacred* (2020).

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