A project of the Migration and Asylum Project (M.A.P) in India, ‘Passage to Asylum: The Journey of a Million Refugees’ was an installation exploring the issue of forced migration, refugees and asylum seekers, produced by artist Kalyani Nedungadi and architect Maya Gupta at the India International Centre in New Delhi, 10–15 January 2019

If a sense of belonging is intertwined with home, then uprootedness from home anchors (dis)arrangement of identity, compounded with emotional upheaval. The journey of relocation and resettlement is never far from the feeling of alienation and exclusion. In recent times, we have been witness to the global phenomenon of a refugee crisis: in the wake of conflict, people are fleeing their country of origin in the hope of finding safe haven. Easier said than done, the ordeal starts from the first day of displacement, to the in-between transitional period before reaching a secured spot of asylum – if the refugee is even successfully able to locate it. The short story ‘The Reality and the Record’ by Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim,OURS_1 as its title suggests, reinforces the complication of the refugee narrative that at once encapsulates the reality of lived experience but which, for the official records, remains short of evidential gravitas to prove victimhood.

The practice of glossifying the struggle in the mainstream representation of the refugee is, more often than not, an attempt to evoke feelings of pity and despair. Colonial photographs acted as a microcosmic world of a (non)civilisation that demanded immediate rescue before it fell into an abyss. Irrevocably, the art of documenting a human race that is persistently in need of assistance continues to find resonance in the portraits of the refugee that circulate in the media. Subverting this trend, the exhibition ‘Passage to Asylum: The Journey of a Million Refugees’ at the India

International Centre in New Delhi in January 2019 created an immersive art experience with interactive installations that reflected on ideas of displaced subjectivity and nationless bodies. The exhibition was presented by the Migration and Asylum Project (M.A.P), India’s first refugee law centre, which offers legal support to forced migrants and refugees, mainly women and children. Its programmes focus on four thematic areas: legal empowerment, girls in conflict, research and policy, and advocacy and outreach.

The exhibition, designed by architect Maya Gupta, spread across six rooms, with an installation created by the artist Kalyani Nedungadi. The six rooms acted as a walk-through of the journey of a refugee, marked by six crucial stages: home, conflict, transit, the alien country, the asylum tribunal, and, lastly, asylum. Before walking through the door of the first room or House 808, the viewer had to choose a card from five differently coloured cards. Each card documented the life of a refugee, and for the next fifteen minutes the viewer stepped into the shoes of a refugee. As every viewer moved from one room to another, they collected the card of the same colour from the entrance of each room. Once you entered the fifth room, the fate of your refugee profile was disclosed: asylum is either granted or it is denied. Along with the physical card, headsets enabled the viewer to listen to sound recordings: conversations, gunfire, question and answer sessions between the refugee and authority. Instead of being a mute spectator, this allowed the viewer to participate with the installations and situate her/himself in the physical environment surrounding the refugee at different junctures of his/her adversity. As reported, a third of the 65 million globally displaced people are refugees. The aerially hanging everyday objects and the light and sound projections sharpened the viewer’s attention to the turmoil faced by the refugee. Roshni Shankar, Executive Director of M.A.P, states: ‘When people talk of humanitarian assistance to refugees, they stop at basic necessities, they do not realise how critical legal identity is to asylum seekers. We thought artvocacy is a more effective way, than panel discussions and conferences, to convey how traumatic the experience of asylum seekers is and why lawyers are important.’ The immersive part of the exhibition infiltrated the mind of the viewer in an effort to explore pressing social and political possibilities, urging us all to a greater awareness about the refugee.
Room 1: Home represents all that was left behind: personal belongings, memories, a life, a home. It speaks of a time before conflict, when refugees were just like you and I. They have an identity, a job, children to drop off at school, a gossipy neighbour, a preferred tea shop, and a favourite spot from which to watch TV when the day is done. Photo © Kalyani Nedungadi and the Migration & Asylum Project.

Dilpreet Bhullar: How does your training as an artist shape your understanding of the human crisis that refugees undergo vis-à-vis the journey of moving away from the conflict-inflicted area of the home nation to request the seeking of asylum in a host nation?

Kalyani Nedungadi: My first encounter with artwork that depicts the magnitude of man-made human crisis, and the bleakness of human apathy, was with the paintings of Anselm Kiefer. Bits of lead, dead plant matter and shards of glass are mixed into the paint on his canvas, and everywhere you can see that haunting pair of lines, starting from where you are and vanishing into the distance – the rail tracks that lead to Auschwitz. Incidentally, the crisis that Kiefer depicts – and the mass displacement that followed in the wake of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust – provided the catalyst for the drafting of ‘The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees’, the Convention which still stands as the international standard for refugee protection.

I remember being struck by the fact that there is no human face in Kiefer’s work, no particularly recognisable place, nothing especially overt for my then fifteen-year-old self to latch on to. His work shows none of the violence of Picasso’s Guernica, or so many other works that
document the violence of that era, when warcraft was gleefully evolving to inflict maximum levels of carnage on armies and civilians alike.

There is no such spectacle in Kiefer’s work. The grimness of the era is present in his colours, and the violence is conveyed through texture and brushwork. And then there are the train tracks. Looking at Kiefer’s work, I am not observing a crisis – I am not a second-hand witness to a tragedy. I am standing at one end, and the vanishing point of the train tracks is at the other; I am present in the painting. Here, I take the shoes of either victim or perpetrator. Both are terrifying.

This is how I believe good art teaches you about human crisis. It always feels visceral and uncomfortably personal. As an artist, you are always taught to bring people closer – to use the micro to shine a light on the macro. In Kiefer’s case, the train tracks talk about the Holocaust. In ‘Passage to Asylum’, broken cups show a life shattered by war and persecution.

In retrospect, the influence of artists like Kiefer is pronounced in the way we conceptualised ‘Passage to Asylum’. On the one hand, our exhibition is hopeful and does not find use for the scathing criticism Kiefer employs in his work. It is easy to misunderstand the refugee crisis in today’s political climate and we wanted to prompt people to consider a topic they might not have considered before, not force them to take a stance. On the other hand, ‘Passage to Asylum’ demands that the viewer be present in the moment, within the artwork. It asks viewers to walk in the shoes of a refugee, to listen to the sounds they might have heard, to take on their story. It seeks to evoke not sympathy, which can be passive and distant, but empathy, which is active and not so easily consigned to a thought that could be easily forgotten.

I have used Kiefer to talk about how my art training has shaped both my understanding of and my method of talking about the particular refugee crisis that is unfolding across the world on an unprecedented scale. However, there are many other influences, the most contemporary being Ai Weiwei, who has paved the way for artists to use installation and objects to talk about this refugee crisis. I think the common factor between all of these is the necessity for an artist to conceive of the refugee crisis as neither a mere set of statistics and facts, nor as a bleeding-heart, self-indulgent endeavour. Rather, we are charged with both viewing and presenting it as a fundamentally human experience – one that we have avoided ourselves only through chances of circumstance.

DP: Within the spectrum of terms, the narrative on the refugee is defined by the linguistic expressions, including displacement, resettlement, deportation, mobility and climate change, to name but a few. These find resonance with the critical vocabulary of architectural design. Is architectural intervention inevitable for the sustainable livelihood for refugees?
Maya Gupta: Urban design and architecture play a fundamental role in negotiating space, and are the key components to making cities adaptative to the staggering number of displaced populations worldwide. With the help of policy and organised governmental interventions, architecture has the capacity to provide infrastructure, shelter and institutional services that can give asylum seekers the means to create sustainable livelihoods.

DP: Do you think the art of collaboration between people from different disciplinary training helps to successfully meet common goals? For instance, ‘Passage to Asylum: The Journey of a Million Refugees’ saw the coming together of an architect, an artist and lawyers.

MG: Yes, definitely, the coming together of people from various disciplines does indeed make for a richer, far reaching narrative. Approaching ‘Passage to Asylum’ through the lens of a lawyer or an artist or an architect brought various key elements to the surface, which might have been overlooked by the other. To see the whole team work in unison to create an educational, experiential and emotive journey within the four walls of a gallery was really extraordinary.

Room 2: Conflict or ‘The Exploded Room’ Just as home disintegrates into conflict, Room 1 disintegrates into Room 2. Not all asylum seekers are running from active war zones, but all are fleeing violence. The suspended objects of ‘The Exploded Room’ are symbolic of the great upheaval that wrenches their lives apart, forcing them to brave the terrible unknown in search of safety. Photo © Kalyani Nedungadi and the Migration & Asylum Project.
**KN:** I think that the collaboration of multiple viewpoints on ‘Passage to Asylum’ was imperative to making it a success. Just as we say of refugees integrating into our societies, there is always great strength in diversity. The lawyers provided detail, nuance, and, of course legitimacy and authentic stories to this exhibition, while it was us, the artist and architect, who crafted that detail into something that an uninitiated audience could engage with. In a sense, it was just as important to have ‘outsiders’ create this exhibition as ‘insiders’ (lawyers and others who work in the human rights field), because we needed to provide authenticity while also making sure to reach beyond the echo chamber that tends to develop around such topics these days.

Even between us, a multitude of experiences enhanced this exhibition. The Executive Director of M.A.P, Roshni Shanker’s interest in the arts made the creation of ‘Passage to Asylum’ possible in the first place. I am certain that Deeksha Gujral’s (Legal Consultant at M.A.P) degree in literature helped her craft the profile cards as much as her law degree did. The cards work because she knew what kind of writing would capture people’s attention and help them empathise with the person whose story they were reading. Nayantara Raja’s (Senior Legal Consultant at M.A.P.) passion for technology served us really well when it was time to create the audio. Similarly, I have a background in history, which helped me understand the need to bridge the gap between what we wanted to do aesthetically and what we needed to convey in terms of details about the legal process asylum seekers undergo. Finally, Maya’s grandparents on both sides of her family actually came to Delhi as refugees; her maternal grandmother had one child and was pregnant with her next when they fled. There is no way that this did not have a profound influence on how Maya worked on the exhibition and what details she chose to highlight.

‘Passage to Asylum’ was enriched by the ideas and experiences of everyone who worked on it. This has cemented my belief that there should be a constant crossover between disciplines to reach common goals. None of us live in isolation, and I think that when people from multiple disciplines come together, they are able to create something that transcends the boundaries of what any of us could do alone.
DP: Before entering the six rooms of the exhibition, the audio tracks and five cards (each narrating a story of a refugee from different conflict zones) that were given to the viewers anchored the experiential and immersive aspects of the exhibition. How imperative are these organic connects of human association to fully comprehend the trials and tribulations faced by refugees?

KN: These elements are vital. It was so important to try and lift the viewer out of the space, both in terms of the physical space of the gallery and in terms of the privileged space we all occupy as non-displaced people, and take them closer to what it might feel to be an asylum seeker. For this reason, we used ambient noise as our audio, which was created and edited by Nayantara. Not having any narration or explanation in the tracks eradicated the distance between the viewer and the atmosphere of the artwork. Furthermore, in the audio for Room 5: ‘Asylum Tribunal’, you can hear the voices of the lawyers in our office asking the actual questions that are directed at asylum seekers during their interview where it is determined whether they will gain refugee status. This Room epitomises M.A.P’s area of expertise, and this is where M.A.P primarily functions in the real world. We used our lawyers’ experiences and work
here to better cast the exhibition as a reflection of real life – to show what it might actually be like to be in that room, to be asked to divulge some of the most traumatic parts of your life to a stranger.

Wearing headphones and focusing on the sound also isolated the viewers from each other, mirroring the largely solitary experience of asylum seekers as they try to navigate to safety in a largely hostile world. The cards provided not just nuance to ‘Passage to Asylum’ but also created a sense of investment for the viewer. Deeksha Gujral, who created the content of the cards based on our actual cases, wrote the cards in the first person. The sentences are short, and almost poetic in their fragmentation. This was not only to make them easy to read as the viewer navigated the exhibition, it was also to further push the viewer to consider themselves as the asylum seeker as they walked through the exhibition. For the duration of their time in the exhibition, they could take on that role and become more invested in the outcome of the story.

Many visitors chose to take on a different profile and go through the exhibition a second time, if not a third or fourth. This suggests that both the experience of the exhibition changed for them as their story changed, and that they were motivated to find out what happened to these individuals. Many went through until they got a profile that was granted asylum, only to stumble upon the sobering realisation that even a happy ending for a refugee has its shadows.
DP: For this exhibition, you translated a variety of objects from the chores of a normal day to create the harrowing experience that refugees face in their struggle in finding a safe haven. Could you elaborate on the ideation process of this exhibit?

KN: The exhibition is part of a much larger project that M.A.P is undertaking with the University of York in the UK. Titled ‘Law of Asylum’, the project is a multi-jurisdictional endeavour between Hong Kong, Malaysia, Egypt and India. It focuses on the importance of legal engagement and assistance for asylum seekers. A component of this project focuses on public outreach, and that was where I came in. I was already working on another aspect of the Law of Asylum Project, creating short films – Digital Stories – about refugees’ encounters with the legal process in India. Since I happen to be an artist, we began to discuss whether there was anything art-related that we could do as part of the public outreach component of the Law of Asylum project as well.

Team discussions began in February last year. Our primary goal was clear from the outset: we wanted to connect to an audience beyond other lawyers and academics, one that might not even be familiar with the topic of refugees. As a newcomer (at the time), and one of the only non-lawyers in the organisation, I felt it was the stories of individuals, of meeting them face to face and seeing them as people like anyone else and hearing about their struggles, that helped me understand the importance of M.A.P’s work. We sought to reflect this in the exhibition, to tell a story. Eventually we landed upon the idea of telling the story of a refugee’s journey, of recreating the steps an asylum seeker makes before they apply for refugee status. We wanted two things from this project to serve as its initial goal of reaching out: we wanted to tell a story, and we wanted to make the viewer active in the process of imbibing it. We finally decided to create a series of installations that a person could walk through. If we were going to depict the movement of an asylum seeker, then we would make the audience move too. So we progressed like this, throwing ideas back and forth like tennis balls – adding detail and complexity, and then suggesting ways this could be simplified, or made more engaging for an uninitiated audience.

I have done some installation work before (inspiration for Room 4 was drawn from a series of shadow installations I have been working on for nearly ten years now) but I had never worked on anything to this scale. Now we had a whole gallery to work with, and we had to craft a journey from that space. That is where Maya Gupta came in. Maya is an architect who has worked in Delhi and New York, and on a number of projects across the world. She looked at my concept sketches and notes, and then converted them to architectural drawings. It is Maya’s expertise and experience that made this exhibition a practical possibility. She knew what ideas and materials
were viable and what were not. She also knows Delhi inside out and knew where to source material, carpenters, welders and the plethora of other elements that bring an exhibition to life. Maya and I had multiple meetings to determine what form the exhibition could take. Together, we sourced materials and collaborated on each bit of the installation, one at a time.

The audio seemed a natural addition to this exhibition, but the cards were much more experimental. A number of ‘trendy’ card games had recently come out, and I had been struck by how willing people were to engage with the identity and characteristics given to them on a small piece of paper. The act itself of holding cards seemed like a kind of commitment. The idea of the cards was thus decided upon very early on, but we were workshopping them down to the last minute in order to tailor them both for the audience and to do justice to the refugees whose stories we were telling. Their final iteration was written by Deeksha Gujral, based on the cases of the senior lawyers in the organisation, who drew from their cases both at M.A.P and their previous experiences working at UNHCR.

Room 4: New Country  A thousand alien voices and bodies surround the asylum seeker who manages to make it to a foreign land. Here is a hostile world. Here, it is nearly impossible to understand, to be understood, to seek shelter, to find food, to ask for aid. Here, it seems almost impossible to belong. In this installation, you can work your way through the crowd and still be alone. Photo © Kalyani Nedungadi and the Migration & Asylum Project.
DP: The current issues of migration and the refugee crisis have not garnered as much attention in India as they should have. Do you think an artistic intervention such as ‘Passage to Asylum’ can play a key role in generating public awareness and opening a platform of dialogue and debate?

MG: Although art cannot directly solve world problems, it can certainly shine light on the darker recesses of global issues. When art depicts life, its goal is to expose social, political, economic and cultural issues to a wider audience in an emotive way; this, in turn, inspires civil society, NGOs and other local actors to take action. ‘Passage to Asylum’ is a vehicle for people to expand their awareness about the global refugee crisis, for them to re-examine their own beliefs and roles as citizens of a shrinking world, where asylum issues are ‘glocal’ in nature.

KN: I think they do. One thing I was very concerned about during the creation process of ‘Passage to Asylum’ was that it might become too ‘gimmicky’—that it might seem like a game, or become an entertainment that people excitedly tell their friends to visit because it is new and interesting but then promptly forget the meaning behind the exhibition. Thankfully, because of the way we created the artwork of the installation, and because of its grounding in the real experiences of refugees and our lawyers, I believe we largely avoided this fate. I was surprised by how responsive people were, how much they wanted to have a conversation with us after their experience, how determined they were to find out more. Several people went in multiple times to discover the story of each asylum seeker within the context of each installation. A lot of those repeat visitors were students who had not really thought about refugees before, and sometimes even older people who had previously only heard one side of the story or a sensationalised version of the news. One older gentleman told me, “you have now created a space in my head; now, I will notice more when I hear about this topic”.

To me, this is a sign of the success of the exhibition. Our intention was never to give people a whole new worldview, or approach them from a certain ideological standpoint (although this will always be inevitable) or even radically change their thought process. ‘Passage to Asylum’ was always designed as a conversation starter; a point of reference from which people could dive deeper into the topic. I saw the most accelerated version of this process through our volunteers at the exhibition, who were planning to become legal interns for M.A.P after the exhibition was over. I watched as, over the course of the six days, they used ‘Passage to Asylum’ as a tool with which to better understand the legal work they were about to do for the following month.
Although all of them are in law school, the volunteers were completely new to this line of work and it was amazing to watch them use the details from ‘Passage to Asylum’ to form debates and questions about the laws that govern asylum seekers.

I think the effectiveness of ‘Passage to Asylum’ can be attributed to the immersive, artistic form that it took. That it was interesting to look at and engaging to walk through had a great impact on its ability to gently open the door for debate and critical thinking. Like a lot of art, ‘Passage to Asylum’ did not ask much more of the audience than to think for themselves, and I believe that in this it was successful.

**DP: Sean Anderson, associate curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, New York, has mentioned in one of his articles that ‘architecture has become the litmus test of society’s capacity for holistic and compassionate security’.² How would you respond to this statement?**

**MG:** Architecture can unarguably transform provisional makeshift settlements into safe havens for displaced populations, and provide asylum seekers with basic infrastructure and resources, thereby creating spaces of safety and integration.

**DP:** In Germany and the Netherlands, unoccupied buildings have been put to effective use to offer shelter to refugees. Do you think it is feasible to implement this in other host nations too? What kind of challenges in terms of infrastructural support and policy capability might the Global South face?

**MG:** There needs to be a paradigm shift, particularly in the Global South, of how architecture can be used to provide infrastructure and shelter to resettle asylum seekers. A top-down approach is what is lacking; there is only so much NGOs and civil society groups can achieve from the bottom up without the support of a clearly implemented policy. Most asylum seekers are placed in areas at the fringes of urban or peri-urban areas, where finding an economic livelihood and access to basic necessities like water, sanitation, shelter, and even education, are hard to find.

---

DP: The sensibility of Indian art has been long inclined towards mysticism and spiritualism. Artworks motivated by political upheaval have seldom been in artists’ interests. But in recent years we have witnessed a shift: artists are keen to take up projects that reflect on the contemporary issues grappling societal structures. How much would you agree/disagree with this observation?

KN: Historically, Indian art has inclined towards mysticism, spiritualism, iconography, etc, and largely indicative of the society and context in which it was made. In the west, centuries of artwork have been dedicated to creating scenes from Christian scripture, which act not simply as a reflection of the spirituality of that society but also as an indicator of societal hierarchies and the ways in which people were governed at the time. I think the same goes for Indian art. Therefore, it does not surprise me that there is a shift in the focus of Indian art in recent years – art will always evolve with the times. Perhaps, for Indian art, this change might feel more sudden because we did not have a renaissance in the western sense of the word, nor have we really documented ‘movements’ in Indian art in the mainstream way that has been done for western art. This could be the result of a multitude of things that I do not have the expertise to judge but
can only speculate on. I think Independence and Partition acted as a catalyst for a number of art movements and experimentation in art within India. I also think that, as art breaks out of the hierarchies of master-student relationships, we will see other interesting evolutions. As more emphasis is placed on the individuality of artists and the uniqueness and expressiveness of their styles, I think we will see even more diverse viewpoints being represented within Indian art. The diversity of India will always work in its favour, and I think we can only benefit, as more artists, drawing from different traditions, experiences and values, are given a platform. I think spirituality will always be some part of our narrative, but I also think that as more artists are encouraged and given funding to do interesting work, and as more art becomes accessible to the general public, we will discover more about the unlimited ways in which Indian art can express the complexities of our society. So, in many ways, perhaps this is not a ‘shift’ in Indian art sensibility that we are witnessing, but its natural evolution, as Indian art itself transforms to reflect the times.

DP: With the unprecedented advancements of digital technology, we have seen novel approaches to artistic expression and viewers’ experience of it. Do you think with this that the burden of meaning-making does not solely rest with the artist, but that a viewer equally participates in drawing a sense of awareness and connection?

KN: Once an artist’s work goes out into the world, they have to accept that they no longer have control over it. We can create layers upon layers of meaning in our work, but whether a viewer decides to even peel the first layer of that onion skin… for better or worse, that is not up to us.

For ‘Passage to Asylum’, we provided a brochure that explained a little bit about our intention for this project and the symbolism of each room. Visitors were welcome to come up to us after their experience and chat or ask questions, but beyond that, the experience was their own. The most interesting results of this were when people ascribed meaning to things that I had not thought that closely about. I knew what effect I wanted these elements to have, but I did not realise a visitor would think about it in that particular way. For example, one of our visitors and a former intern at M.A.P., Prabhat Raghavan, was particularly captivated by the audio shift between Room 4 and Room 5. He said that the contrast between the garble of voices talking around him in Room 4 made Room 5’s audio all the more jarring, the voices now being targeted actively at him. We had considered what each audio track should do separately, but I had never considered the precise effect the transition between them might have on a viewer. It was very useful to find out how that particular element was effective.
Several people also seemed most shocked by the mundane items used in Room 2: ‘Conflict’. We had, of course, chosen each item in that room with care, to depict the idea of a normal life upended, but it did surprise me that so many people felt distressed precisely because of the banality of the items. One visitor said, ‘I forgot that I take so much for granted, and I cannot believe that [asylum seekers] must live even without these small things’. We can never tell what exactly will impact an audience, what each individual will find most compelling. The most we can do as artists and architects is put thought, care and intention into every element of our work, and then it is up to the audience to create meaning around it.

Dilpreet Bhullar is a writer based in New Delhi, India. She has an MPhil from the University of Delhi in Comparative Literature, and has been the co-editor of the books Third Eye: Photography and Ways of Seeing (Speaking Tiger, 2019) and Voices and Images (Penguin Random House, 2015). Her essays on visual ethnography, identity politics and partition studies have been published in books, journals and magazines, including Designing (Post) Colonial Knowledge: Imagining South Asia (Routledge), South Asian Popular Culture (Routledge), Violent and Vulnerable Performances: Challenging the Gender Boundaries of Masculinities and Femininities (Inter-Disciplinary Press), Indian Journal of Human Development (Sage Publications), Himal Southasian, Take on Art, and the digital archive on https://www.criticalcollective.in. She is associate editor of a theme-based journal on visual arts, published by India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

Kalyani Nedungadi is an artist and the Creative Consultant for the Migration and Asylum Project. She studied studio art and history at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in the US, where she focused on printmaking and installation. She drew inspiration for this exhibition from the accounts of real refugees as well as a number of artists who deal with the subjects of chaos, upheaval and art as a space, including Cornelia Parker, Ibrahim Mahama, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, and El Anatsui.

Maya Gupta is an architect and interior designer from New Delhi. She studied on a foundation course in architecture and the building arts from The Princes Foundation in the UK, and has an undergraduate degree in architecture from Edinburgh College of Art and the Academy of Art, San Francisco, followed by a Masters in urban development from University College London (UCL). She has worked in New York and New Delhi.