

## Open Call for Applications for Funding from the University of Warwick & Coventry University

### **'New Midlanders': Self-reflective Photo-Artworks with Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

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*Images from 'New Midlanders' Phase One Project 2018*

*"We are all travelling to a new identity at some point in life..."*  
*('New Midlanders' phase one project participant, 2018)*

**Proposal:** Further development of our Open Call 1 Project and working again with our consortium of partner organisations: Coventry Peace House, Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group (CARAG), Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre, Hope Into Action Black Country and Uprising to Surviving, Birmingham.

**What we are doing:** Expansion of Self Reflective Photo Workshops and creation of audio-visual narratives/artworks that involve image sequencing, language, writing and story telling with Coventry/West Midland based asylum seeker and refugee participants. Expanding on the testimonies of people from communities around the world who have arrived in Coventry and the West Midlands (often graphically illustrating the complexity of asylum as it is experienced), our proposal involves further development of our ongoing work with a community that continues to be socially challenged, under-represented and often invisible because of marginalisation, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Our application builds on our positively received initial phase (Jan-July 2018), the research and development of small-scale works (collaborative photography and video work) that lays important groundwork for a potentially larger project for the UK City of Culture 2021, Coventry.

Race and migration are amongst the most contentious issues today. In contrast to negative tabloid headlines, the project will continue to explore how cities like Coventry (and others in the wider West Midlands region) can be transformed for the better by their migrant populations. It proposes racial equality with an assertion of why mixed communities are a possible way forward for 21st century inclusive communities, and why migrants are central to both prosperity and culture. During phase one of our work, we strove to build relationships within delicate situations, where peoples' lives were in a constant state of flux (with many being destitute, having no recourse to public funds) and where the issue of trust was key. For many who find themselves here, it often feels that there is little effort by the wider indigenous community to try and understand the back-stories of migrants and refugees; often involving people fleeing violence, conflict, war and persecution (from countries including Sudan and Darfur, Eritrea, Syria, Iran and Kuwait). Moving forward we want to respond to this (as one way of challenging society's often blanket assumptions), firstly, by rethinking negative and stereotypical perceptions of 'refugees and asylum seekers'...aiming instead to renegotiate these labels by referring to 'people'...as 'us', rather than 'them'. Exclusion and discrimination exist within society and therefore it is increasingly important that refugees and asylum seekers - people - are able to 'tell their own stories'. The commonality is that the majority of those who arrive are of course seeking asylum, but clearly also have the desire to build friendly and positive relationships - to be *connected* and to *contribute* - to the communities they find themselves in. To become active 'New Midlander' citizens.

**Outputs:** Socially engaged practice: exploring issues of 'self representation', cultural difference, identity (all investigating connections between diversity and migration); people feeling that they and their stories (their hopes and fears) are valued and are important, does we believe help in creating a sense of community and collective togetherness - and importantly - inclusion. Our recent experience has shown that creative expression can aid in lifting depression, alleviate emotional and psychological distress, build confidence and empower people as part of their 'recovery journey'. In a wider sense, it could also help inform what might be described as the making of a modern Midlands. The proposed final body of work (for the next phase of our ongoing project), will reflect a combination of personal ideas and content: photo, sound and video works reflecting aesthetic traditions from domestic images; shrines, light boxes, postcards, personal letters and ephemera - some of which is recalled in our previous workshops, through stories of migration and the hopeful *"journey to a new identity"*...thus *"giving a voice to the voiceless"*.

Workshops typically use Polaroid-type instant cameras and film, digital and 35mm analogue film stills, digital sound and video. We will evaluate and measure this resulting next phase collaborative work, with community stake holders, partner organisations and most importantly of course, with our workshop participants themselves. Finally, via the public sharing of outcomes, including exhibition, online and print publications.