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## **The Nomadic Village: Communal Creativity and Political Subversion in a temporary settlement.**

Sharon Wilson and Pau Obrador

### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with nomadic artistic practices and the transformative and creative qualities of tourism. We are interested in how diasporic artists find meaning and context in which to produce art in temporary settlements outside the traditional gallery environment, and by doing so how these diasporic figures oscillate between the figures of homelessness, estrangement and belonging. This chapter looks at the interplay of travel, tourism and art by examining the *Nomadic Village*, an Arts Council funded project that took place in May 2012 in County Durham, United Kingdom. The site of enquiry consisted of an assembly of mobile living spaces within the rural village of Wolsingham. It was occupied by 30 artists from countries including the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Austria, France, the Netherlands and Australia who used the natural setting as a space to live, work and play. This chapter, thus, seeks to comprehend these itinerant hypermobile bodies who engage in a performance of expressive individualism born out of shared values of autonomy, experimentation and political resistance.

This section raises three critical issues concerning the interplay of travel and art. Firstly, there is the issue of creative nomadism. The case of the *Nomadic Village* brings to the fore how the human compulsion to produce art leads to the formation of ‘transnational migrant circuits’ (Rouse, 1988: 26). Diasporic artists have a lot in common with traditional forms of nomadism (Weissleder, 1978: 15), moving from place to place rather than settling in one location. However

artistic nomadic practices are not borne out of a necessity, but are a lifestyle, the product of a learned appreciation. D'Andrea (2007) has introduced the concept of Neo-nomadism to examine these global circuits of counter cultural practices that unfolds expressive forms of individualism. By understanding ways in which these elements converge, insights will be offered into how art based roving lifestyles can articulate the social and cultural practices of tourism today.

The second issue is the association of travel and creativity. The case of the *Nomadic Village* draws attention to artistic dimension of tourism itself (Obrador and Carter, 2010). In the project, travelling was an object of artistic endeavour as well as a way of looking around, a lens artists use to produce new intensities. Insights will be offered about how art is produced in response to mobility and communality. By linking creativity and tourism, the case of the *Nomadic Village* gives credence to the idea of 'Exile as the vocational imperative' (Levin, 1966: 38). Such idea is central to contemporary culture. Modernist and post-modernist tropes have recurrently emphasized the aesthetic and intellectual benefits of exile and detachment (Kaplan, 1996, p. 38). Absolved from the material conditions and power relations that make it possible, tourism is presented as a space of intellectual work and creativity. However creative forms of nomadism are not socially neutral, but only available to the fortunate few. According to Kaplan (1996) exile places upwardly mobile travellers in a position of 'exclusivity'. This chapter seeks to find out whether power relations between the voyeur and their subjects were reinforced due to the 'extraterritorial' nature of the global nomads.

The final issue the *Nomadic Village* project raises is political. Historically many of these communities have been perceived as 'vagrants' and have often been subjected to persecution in the guise of containment, control, assimilation and dispersal (Okely, 1983). In contrast the creative nomads of this chapter were welcome. They benefited from public funding grant and a formal invite to stay in Wolsingham for 10 days, although not without initial reservations by the local council. This situation raises questions around local resistance as well the performance of hosting and

gusting. It also draws attention to dichotomy between political-economic institutions defining contexts of constraint and deterritorialization, and expressive tourists subverting dominant uses and definition of space. In so doing, the *Nomadic Village* echoes the ideas and practices of the situationalist avant-garde (Pinder, 2005) who called attention to the potential of art to disrupt the geographies of the everyday, advocating for the transformation of spectators into creative actors. Social space in turn can be socially, culturally and politically reconfigured as a new social order

Whilst this discussion uses a theoretical underpinning to look at issues around artists being away from their birthplace, seeking to find social freedoms whilst engaging in creativity, this chapter is informed by the fieldwork data collected in a ‘nomadic ethnography’ (D’Andrea, 2007). Our methodological approach was empirical. In order to collect the data, one of the researchers taking an immersive approach lived alongside the respondents and participating in community activities a 1972 VW Campervan. Using the vehicle as a an interview space, the core material was collected using a semi-structured interview technique. 25 audio recordings were taken and then transcribed and coded. In addition, a research diary was kept for observational work, photographic evidence and the note taking of informal conversations. Because one of the researchers was also a visual artist, they further integrated into nomadic life by helping other artists with their work. According to Lett, (1990: 131) ‘the insider can learn to analyse like the outsider’ thus the final etic account can have an emic origin. Living in the village as an artist on the one hand meant that we had to be mindful of subjectivities, whilst a powerful position also according to (Rabe, 2003, pp. 158) that objectivist approaches can be blurred by researchers studying their ‘own’.

The main questions asked sought to confirm social backgrounds, propensity to travel to make art, personal interpretations of the *Nomadic Village* and finally to explore the connections or disconnections between artistic nomads and the host village of Wolsingham. The resultant discussions aimed to address the key themes within tourism theory used as a literature review, whilst grounding the discussion with the qualitative empirical data produced.

## Neo-Nomadic Practices

Photographer and self confessed artistic activist Klaus Mahering, like many other contemporary nomads was brought up in a middle class background. In 2007 he left the advertising industry with a view to obtaining a more tranquil lifestyle by converting a Steyr-Ikarus bus into an atelier- office- and gallery-space for the purposes of living a nomadic existence (see figure 1). Despite owning an apartment in Austria he decided to take to the road, live on limited resources and to produce work not for deadlines, but only when he was inspired to do so. Moving forward, Klaus began to place more emphasis on combining his professional interest in creative practices with his travel aspiration and the spirit of communality by inviting friends and colleagues to join him in building an outdoor workplace where multi-media installations and happenings could develop. Having been involved in other travel based arts initiatives before he developed his first *Nomadic Village* in Bulgaria in 2009 (On -The -Road –Productions, ATRP). In 2012 he organised a second edition of the *Nomadic Village* this time in County Durham, United Kingdom. Being on the road meant being somewhere else, in between things that hadn't been pigeonholed yet. In the second edition a greater number of invited artists stepped out of the sedentarism of everyday life to create artifacts about their experience of dislocation. They brought their own housings such as buses, vans or caravans, which became the structure of the temporary village. Many of the participants have been involved in similar projects before, and some even live a squatting lifestyle.

*Fig. 1 Klaus Mahering, the captain of the Nomadic Village*

The *Nomadic Village* was a temporary community of artists not borne out of an economic necessity, but it is the result of conferring a special creative meaning to travelling. It is a paradigmatic example of a hyper mobile fluid culture in which spatial displacement is intertwined with new forms of identity and subjectivity. Anthropological studies of nomadism provide a conceptual foundation for understanding such contemporary hypermobile cultures (D'Andrea, 2007) The *Nomadic Village* is more than a simple expression of cosmopolitanism, networking or globalisation.

Like in the case of pastoral tribesmen, it is a cultural formation that establishes a deterritorialized relation with space, thus defying a sedentary logic of art. It is a community in which there is an evasion of dominant sedentary apparatuses and travelling is a source of learning. However there are also important differences. Classical nomadic cultures such as the Massai and the Turkana have formulated nomadic living patterns out of a critical need for survival. It is crucial for them to travel together to pool resources and to maintain a degree of social harmony. However in the case of the *Nomadic Village*, nomadism has nothing to do with survival but it is ultimately a lifestyle choice. The travelling artists like other expressive expatriates were not driven by financial rewards; instead they were looking to share their ideas of freedom and creativity with others with similar ideals and backgrounds. The travelling arts deploy the tactic of being on the move with a creative purpose, thus blurring the classical distinctions between art and leisure.

The *Nomadic Village* is a project that combines mobility with self-imposed marginalisation. This is a group that to some degree abandon the safety of home to co-inhabit the fringes of modernity and society by reconnecting with a commune. An anti-establishment theme was evident throughout the project. Michael from the Philippines described life at the *Nomadic Village* as an alternative community where everyone is caring, compassionate with one another.

‘We start as strangers but when we come together to eat it changes I think. There are no boundaries between people, it’s just one establishment.’

For Michael there was a sharp contrast with mainstream society where he described modern life as, ‘People having to act like robots’. Whilst conversely he felt inside the village was different. For example everyone ate together at the same time which was something that he felt happened less and less except for in prisons and hospitals.

Contemporary nomadism is a counter cultural lifestyle that rejects a utilitarian view of modernity in the name of freedom and creativity. Spatial displacement here is a means of escaping the sedentary

logic of the arts. Marginalisation is a fundamental principal of contemporary hypermobile cultures according to D'Andrea (2007). Exile is supposed to provide aesthetic and intellectual gains, opening a field of creativity that is not available under the conditions of hegemonic praxis. Whilst creative nomads may have rejected the sedentary logic of the state by being mobile (Briadotti, 1994), a utopian idealism was difficult to sustain, only possible by artists going from one funded arts project to the next.

The idea of the village appeared subject to mixed appropriation by the different stakeholders such as funders, project managers, visitors and participants. The *Nomadic Village* was interpreted as everything from a social laboratory, a corporate networking opportunity, a passive political demonstration, an art school, and a working holiday and as a place of leisure where nature and communality seemed to be enjoyed. Sometimes conflicting ideas about what attending the event could offer was expressed by artists. Some used the opportunity to career build as one might network at an International conference, informally exploiting 'opportunistic' pathways of social mobility. Others responded to the idea of living together with un-familiars to build professional friendships leading towards creative partnerships that they had not yet imagined. Katie from London commented that the facilities were better than her house; whereas Boris from the Netherlands - the only designer in the camp- was surprised that all human needs were catered for. In his view a greater reliance on each other and sense of direction would have grown more profoundly from the experience of living as traditional nomads. That said Michael from the Philippines explained that the just having the *Nomadic Village* as a place to make art in another country was valuable in itself.

'I could not take photographs of the English countryside without being in it, thus living here has provided inspiration to give birth to art, not otherwise possible.' Michael

While emphasising marginalisation, the *Nomadic Village* was a highly selective community of nomads. The choice of artists was not accidental but socially engineered. Participants were selected

according to a set of curatorial paradigms to facilitate artistic creativity, social cohesion, encourage global networking and knowledge transfer. The International cohort of participants came from places such as France, New Zealand, Austria, the Philippines and Germany with the remaining third from the UK. Some participants had not met before, whilst half had completed the first *Nomadic Village* project thus familiar with Klaus. Social bonding of the community relied on a belief that meaningful activity arranged around creative labour was conducive with a feeling of freedom and self-actualisation. Michael described being a nomad as ‘living the dream’ also echoed this sentiment. He said that sitting in Klaus’s bus with other artists felt like family forming. However not everyone agreed on the idea that art had the power to hold people together. Stevie a local artist from Northumberland for example pointed out that even the most visionary plan of social engineering might not induce the expected results. He didn’t think that an application process would always lead to good outcome, believing that it was often down to good luck how people socialised. A strong functioning community he maintained was still quite fragile.

‘It would only take one person to be very critical of other people to upset things. I have participated in residencies before with a clash of personalities which rendered them unworkable.’ Stevie.

The community of artists that was assembled in Wolsingham corresponds with Maffesoli (1996) and his description of neo-tribalism. This was a fleeting community of strangers bound together not so much by an ideology or a political apparatuses as by a lifestyle or an emotion, in particular the need for a more expressive life. Like in the case of Maffesoli’s neo tribes what matters here is the being together as well as the creation for its own sake. Giddens (1991) suggests that these new social networks define a ‘post-traditional order’ in which diversity finds some organisation although is highly disjunctive and lacks anchorage. Such postmodern forms of sociality challenge the distinctions between pleasurable work and a proactive vacation, breaking with a clear-cut division between work and leisure, home and away. In contrast to modernized cultures of industrialisation where normative working practices are often regimented, time-based and venue-related, the



*Nomadic Village* promoted a lifestyle that brought work and leisure together. Unlike regular employment there was no enforcement for nomadic artists to produce particular outcomes or to socialise in specific ways. For example there were no ‘icebreaker’ workshops, team briefings and no working structure outlined ISIS Arts management, just informal gatherings that no one was obliged to turn up to. So whilst the *Nomadic Village* was a workplace which accommodated office desks, laptops, photography labs and mobile cinema spaces, if people engaged in leisure instead pursuing activities, no value judgements were made about the them not ‘working’ in the traditional sense. In fact Margaret an installation artist did plan to start making videos as soon as she arrived, yet was surprised to discover that having conversations, eating together and spending leisure time with others also felt like productive time and for some of the dwellers suffice to say, it often took precedent.

The *Nomadic Village* was event architecture that was positioned in a public picnic area in the village of Wolsingham. As with the choice of artists, the physical design of the village was also not accidental. From the arrival of the nomads onsite, Klaus began to organise how the village would look, encouraging the vehicles to form as a circular shape to form a space where communality would be easier. With vehicle exit doors facing inwards, all the residents could face each other. This aesthetic arrangement however also created a wall boundary between the artists and the public, defining an enclavic space with a potential psychic boundary. None of the artist’s thought that the fence made of mobile homes was a conscious plan, but one which seemed to happen naturally as the vehicles arrived. In other words they did not think that Klaus was being strategic about how the design would work as social construct, but instead surmised that as he was an artist he needed to create a sense of aesthetic order. The large open central area was used for communal yoga, ball games, performance and some social gatherings. Artists tended to congregate in the communal marquee placed at the end of the village next to the project management area. This hub was set up so participants could access wifi and create ad-hoc social events. Its main function however to use it

as a dining area, a ritual that was signified three times a day by the sound of someone tapping a pan with a stick.

## **Nomadic Art Practices**

The *Nomadic Village* offered a creative platform for 30 nomadic artists from around the world, taking up residence transforming the itinerant enclave and surrounding woodland of Wolsingham from a tabula rasa, devoid of ‘art’ into an open air showcase of a diverse contemporary artistic practices. By exploring the nature of nomadic art thus, this section will provide an overview of the work produced as a way of exploring in this context, the inextricable ties between art and travel. The geographical displacement of their creators had made possible a multi-disciplinary exposé of drawings, poetry, performance, film, documentary photography and various conceptual artworks contrived from objects collected by the nomads whilst in transit.

A significant part of the art produced at Wolsingham was made as a response to being mobile. Travelling was an artistic endeavour as well as a lens, which artists used to create new intensities in different places. The work of Caitlin and Andrew Webb-Ellis was one of the many artistic practices that speaks directly about travelling and dislocation. They brought a 16mm film about the cultures of ‘Extreme Running’, which they intended to show at the Cannes film festival. Their interest in human mobility was a good fit with the residency for two reasons. Firstly the artists had travelled to Norway and Slovenia as well as a number of UK locations to follow the subject of their documentary. Secondly their theme human movement embodied the consequences of travel.

Margaret, an American performance artist living in Wales, also mediated links between travel and art via her low fidelity video work. She brought a film called ‘Britain in a Day’, which expressed her interest in how people consumed places as tourists. Margaret as self-styled quirky narrator, posed as an ‘alternative’ tour guide at the seaside town of Penzance. As the central character in this tragic comedy travelogue, the viewer is taken sightseeing on location and subjected to the daytrip

going wrong. Mobility was also reflected in the work of local artist Stevie Ronnie who arrived in a converted transit van, onboard a mobile art library. He unpacked his collection of handmade art books and installed them on temporary tables outside the vehicle. The visiting public were then invited to produce their own masterpieces which would later be shown in other locations.

One of the best examples of nomadic art in the village was the work of Alison from Yorkshire. She had been living a mobile lifestyle for the previous 18 months, choosing to leave a prestigious art gallery job. Her work illustrated how she travelled with her family in a campervan. It was the consequence of the fluidity of experiences generated by living in a continuous state of flux. Using her taxidermy skills she made what she described as shamanic art from dead animals found on the road. Most of the things she created went hand in hand with a self-imposed exile. Due to basic living standards in the van for example, having no electricity meant that much of her work had a 'make-do-and mend' aesthetic quality. In other words 'limitations' on lifestyle due to non-fixity determined how things were done and thus her artworks were an expression of her mobility. To her mind one couldn't get closer to travel and art than picking something up that's been killed on the road, eating it and making something beautiful with its skin. Other works included herself and her partner performing the eating her preserved placenta. They had brought it to the village with the intention of ritualising the special moment by sharing her birth processes with the nomadic tribe. The placenta skin was dried in the sun and made into a shamanistic drum afterwards. This intervention was followed by Alison taking the remaining blood, mixing it with black food coloring and applying it like ink to paper. Purposefully using non-sophisticated craft equipment, she tried to emulate the simplistic approaches to creativity used by ancient tribes, as a way to symbolically detach from the rationalized production values associated with modernity. To do this she repeatedly painted a stylized self-portrait based on a Sheela-Na-Gig, an archetypal pre-Christian image of fertility. She also liked the idea of leaving traces of herself behind before

moving on from the residency. Alice's work did not only speak of travelling, it also emphasised a creative need for self-marginalization.

*Fig 2. Rabbit Skinning Workshop at the Nomadic Village*

Many of the artists at the *Nomadic Village* sought alternative lifestyles in order to be creative. Take for example the case of Katie. On her way to the residency she had picked up debris such as old wood, broken doors, and discarded junk from the roadside and planned to sculpt with them. Because her artwork would be dismantled the day after it was complete, that determined how it was made. Thus the art produced due to its nomadic disposition was both the materiality of travel and destroyed by it. Katie pointed out that her work echoed her current lifestyle of squatting in London and felt it had a more sublime quality because it was temporary. Like Alison, Katie use self-marginalisation as a way to be creative. Many of the artists who enjoyed alternative ways of living could be perhaps described as opportunistic 'lifestyle entrepreneurs' (Peters, Frehse, & Buhalis, 2009). Despite the idealistic attitude some of the artists exerted, most used the *Nomadic Village* as a career development opportunity. Most artists seemed reflexive and able to change direction quickly or compromise to some extent to exploit the situation. For example when Katie was asked if it was feasible to build her installation in an art gallery elsewhere, she explained that re-contextualisation of the artwork would be an option if she was financially reimbursed.

The *Nomadic Village* was as much about cooperation and community engagement as it was about nomadism. This is a community that chose to commute and collaborate which led to an eclectic mix of art produced. That said artists used the opportunity in different ways. Some artists saw it as a place to relax, where they could be creative should they feel inspired. It was an opportunity to be away from home in the company of likeminded others. Other artists saw value in collaboration for its own sake and seized the opportunity to establish new cooperative forms of work. This was the case of poet Stevie who whilst his main concern was his mobile library, in the spirit of making transnational connections, he collaborated in a performance with a Quinn the dancer from Australia.

In contrast some artists were less interested in public engagement and preferred to work alone. Boris an environmental designer from the Netherlands for example, because of the communal aspect of the project, felt obliged to share his work with the passing public. He minimised engagement by allowing visitors to inside his mobile living space to look around. At a 'show and tell' event however, Boris had no problem sharing with nomadic peers how his Silo pods were made or how he transformed old car tyres into modernistic furniture, but he rejected the use of corporate etiquette in favour of an informal chat about his work over a few beers.

While community orientated artists saw the process of making art with people with no art training as part of their practice, others whom normally made work on a solo mission required payment to engage creatively with the Wolsingham community. As Lippard (1999) points out artists are 'caught like prostitutes between a rock and a hard place' finding themselves compromising their practice to earn a living. That said we are not suggesting that all artists saw the idea of social engagement as an inconvenience, instead for some it was their strength. Maartje from Holland for example usually made her own films, but due to the incentive of payment was prepared to help teenagers from a nearby secondary school make a video. The macabre comedy re-enactment was set in a local graveyard and was played out by the young people as a spoof horror film. The work didn't have high production values, but instead was much more about educating children on basic film skills and encouraging their interest in local history. By providing the opportunity work with an artist from another country, hosts and guests were brought together by the *Nomadic Village* so networks between travel, tourism and art could be formed.

There were many connections and crossovers between leisure, tourism and creativity in the *Nomadic Village*. The most touristic project of all was Alan and Andrew's installation. They installed a pre-built Caravan Hotel onsite so that artists not chosen in the selection process could book in as visitors and stay for one night. Because the caravan interior was designed beforehand, the two artists felt no obligation to do anything during the residency other than greet the guests

when they arrived. Allen took an interest in the foreign artists and interviewed some of them, in between socialising and networking, however the main work for them had already been done. This meant that the rest of their time could be spent as they said ‘chilling out’.

Stevie’s mobile Library was another example of crossover between creativity and tourism. Passers-by were offered the chance to join in with a ‘make your own art book’ workshop and were encouraged by Stevie to produce small works that would be exhibited in other places when bus went on tour. The main point here is that books were made by people who were not artists, yet their contributions in this context were seen as just as valid by the artists and curators as those produced professionally. Perhaps the quality of the objects were not the main concern, but because they were due to be displayed in other places, it galvanized them with cultural capital. Stevie had also brought suitcases with him which Klaus suggested be given to the artists so they could make work to put inside them. Artists customised suitcases by filling them with objects found on location. The researcher also made a clay model of the *Nomadic Village* and added an MP3 player which produced an audio recording of the natural sounds, whilst others included photo archives and selections of artworks that artists had with them already. Klaus wanted to have a travelling exhibition of to take with him when he finally went home to Austria. His *Galerie Nowhere* idea was a caravan towed on the back of his bus which would travel from UK to Cuges les Pins in France and then through to his hometown in Graz. During this journey the suitcase artworks would be exhibited randomly wherever Klaus decided to stop.

Due to the variety social and creative relationships artists had with each other and the public, different currencies of art were produced. Creator of the project Klaus Mahring believed that artistic ‘activism’ was at the heart of the project. The reactionary element he imagined would manifest naturally due to opportunities being contrived for artists to live alternative lifestyles. He believed that providing a place for artists to make work outside the gallery system, in tandem with offering them the chance to meet local people and to share the mutual experience of ‘othering’, was as close

to freedom as one could get in that situation. Also just because Klaus had a vision for the *Nomadic Village* did not mean either that artworks had to adhere to a particular set of standards. For whilst there were no official guidelines about working practises, Klaus chose artists who seemed to subscribe to an unspoken law that collaboration was virtuous and an anti-establishmentarian ethos was attitudinal. In other words the *Nomadic Village* became a platform upon which an eclectic mix of aesthetic hierarchies were able to be explored because the project, despite its restrictions due to funding obligations had no specific expectations. That meant interpretations of space were multifarious. Yet all things produced were viewed with equal measure, whether nomads did nothing other than having conversations during their stay or created things to a very high standard.

That said in terms of social inclusion, the idea of work made by or with the help of the native community, arguably does not always make 'good' art. Beyond the boundaries of the *Nomadic Village* wall in which equality and democracy resides, a potentially a lofty debate about 'high' and 'low' art values is omnipresent. Arguably diverse approaches to creativity meant that a mixed economy of works led to different hierarchical levels in terms of how they could be commoditised. This creative eclecticism would be likely to be questioned by art critics, who may devalue it to the ranks of 'project' art, folk art or 'outsider' art which whilst there are exceptions to the rule, these aesthetic canons are often rated as having a lesser 'value' in terms of credibility and commercial potential due to them operating on the peripherals of the art establishment, thus not controllable. As the work at the *Nomadic Village* was produced in buses, caravans and ateliers with a focus on expressing lived human experiences within a nomadic construct, the art produced was essentially about nomadic life and interpretation through artistic inter-subjectivities, which because of its ephemeral nature was not that collectable.

The artistic ambition of the project however raises the question as to whether the *Nomadic Village* installation could itself be considered an art form. If the artists have produced an artistic space through its occupation, perhaps a group of artists camping may be considered a curated object. The

principle of transforming travelling into art resonates with the Situationist movement for whom leisure was “the real revolutionary question” (Sadler, 1998: 151). While a paradigmatic example of the “society of spectacle” that reduces human creativity, the language and practices are at the very heart of the Situationist project. In the spirit of Foucault who questioned the idea, “Could everyone’s life become a work of art?” (D’Andrea 2007, 19), in this instance ignited the debate about whether just being a creative nomad could be in essence, enough to imbue them with status. Quinn suggested that creative conviviality had the potential to transform the currency of people. She felt that the village was like a museum, calling it living art inside a structure that was constantly evolving. She added that even a conversation could be an artwork if quantified as such. When other artists were questioned as to whether they thought the *Nomadic Village* was a campsite which accommodated artists or an art installation which looked like a campsite, there was a mixed feeling response, albeit positively inclined towards the former. Fabienne a visual artist from Leon, did think that the place seemed like a peepshow or a visitor attraction to the passers-by. Some of the other artists added that it wasn’t ideal to be thought of as travelling circus, but conceded that being a public spectacle meant that they could give something back to the indigenous population, who had inadvertently invested in a government funded project.

### **Political Subversion or a Corporate Event?**

There was a fundamental tension at the heart of the *Nomadic Village*. This was a radical project that breaks with the established artistic conventions, in particular the art gallery setting. Yet it benefited from a generous grant from the Arts Council, the endorsement of the local council as well as the onsite ‘backseat’ management by public funded organisation ISIS Arts. While the first *Nomadic Village* in Bulgaria in 2009 evolved into an ad-hoc series of comings and goings by artists, friends and locals, the Wolsingham version was not particularly organic in its inception, instead the offspring of a strategic arts development plan. Some scheduling of arrival, departure, mealtimes, project meetings and adherence to contractual obligations was part of the structure with hospitality



for the nomads as part of the deal. Provision such as access to wif-fi, film screening and presentation facilities and the ongoing support from the ISIS whose role onsite was to troubleshoot any infrastructural problems and to deal with public health and safety. So whilst the group that maintained an 'alternative' lifestyle as well as a critical stance towards the idea of being part of the system, they conversely enjoyed some of basic 'glamping' luxuries afforded by state sponsorship. Paradoxically whilst *Nomadic Village* offered all of the accoutrements associated with a mobile corporate event, it did so under the banner of facilitating a utopian condition for freedom seeking artists.

Nomadism here is arguably an act of political subversion as well as a lifestyle and creative tactic. Referring back to the counter cultural movement Situationism, where a radical view of art has some allegiance, the conservative ideology of the West is perhaps subverted here by the creation of "situations" where humans interact together as people, not mediated by commodities (Sadler, 1998). Like other radical movements, the *Nomadic Village* aimed to create situations that defy economic rationale. Hannerz, (1996, p.106) draws the analogy that people who can afford to be open to new experiences and choose to work when they want are comparable with the archetypal writers and painters of Paris between the wars. Cosmopolitans thus he suggests can immerse themselves in other cultures by being backstage participants, not front stage passive tourists. The difference at the *Nomadic Village* was that the project embodied a discrete cosmopolitanism, whereby definitions of particular social and political positions were blurred as hosts and guests conversed at different proximities.

The argument that establishing a transnational nomadic community as a powerful critique of hegemonic ideological regimes, has much in common with expressive expatriates in Ibiza and Goa that D'Andrea analyses (2007). These hedonistic movements are based on ideas of exile and travel and which actively seek position of marginality from society. Such a connection with other expressive expatriates is not casual. Before the *Nomadic Village* was conceived, Klaus Mahering

had been involved with the expressive street party scene of techno nomads, DJ (Sound System) and New Age travellers who would gather by word-of-mouth in often ‘unsolicited’ spaces. The focus of the *Nomadic Village* residency however was less about hedonism, but more about hybridity. It had evolved as a synergy between neo-nomadic travel as a form of transnational hyper-mobility, creative communal play, yet paradoxically it also had a work ethic akin to professional development associated with any monetarist career motivated pursuit.

The nomadic character of the project was not always in tune with the sedentary logic of art practice and the state. While an opportunity for creativity and subversion, the artists had to comply with regulations and physical boundaries set out by the project. Many of the artists we spoke with noted that due to the way things were set-up, certain freedoms had been compromised. Boris reiterated that whilst he acknowledged that there had to be some rules, walking around with hard hats in nature he thought it was a bit much. Whilst he was being ironic, one of the other artists Marek who were tasked with a health and safety officer role onsite was observed to step out of character to perform a comic stereotype of an officious person wearing protective clothing and carrying a clipboard. Boris also agreed that as with any other workplace important regulations had to be adhered to, but remained critical of sanctions on campfires and the heavy-duty risk assessments on tools and equipment due to the health and safety restrictions within the area. Underpinning many of these comments is the wider question of whether nomadic life in the modern world is even possible as a sustainable lifestyle.

‘Real nomads are like gypsies’ Boris explained, ‘People just hate them and they are not allowed to stay anywhere as a matter of their own free will. Because the government want your taxes, people are usually compelled to live somewhere. Nomads cannot exist anymore.’

The *Nomadic Village* was made possible because of the hospitality of Wolsingham Parish Council, who sanctioned the project to be sited on their land. As Sharon Bailey, co -director ISIS Arts

pointed out, the local council was very keen to improve tourism within the area so having an International focus was attractive feature of the plan. The idea of hosting the reality of the *Nomadic Village* in a place not normally used to house event infrastructure raised many questions about the articulation of the local and global as well as the practices of hosting and guesting. The artists were welcome by the parish council to settle in the village but their hospitality was not unconditional. There was an explicit commitment to give something back to the community in return for being allowed to stay in Wolsingham. As already mentioned, educational projects in local schools and colleges, alongside artists joining in with any social events with the stakeholders, as well as all involved having to embrace the idea of having something to show as a plenary event appeared critical. Artists shared the view that whatever they were doing in Wolsingham, which was by all accounts a fairly conservative rural village, they were adding something potentially ‘exotic’ to the social fabric of the place. The locals were unaccustomed to being exposed to such cultural diversity inherent in this mobile collective at such close proximity. Whilst it was not tested, their hospitality was perhaps limited in time. If the nomads had decided post-project to overstay their welcome, the tolerance of the residents may have been challenged and the artists once seen as unsolicited visitors may have dealt with as a nuisance by just being there. The artists in this case however felt that 10 days was the correct timescale for social harmony to be maintained between them and to be able to financially uphold their lives elsewhere before returning to their homelands.

*Fig. 3 Nomads ‘Meet and greet buffet’ with Wolsingham Parish Council and friends. (Photo: Peter Westman)*

A clear difference was established between the nomadic artists who were assigned the role of cultural ambassadors and other traveling subcultures such as new age travelers or gypsies, generally perceived as freeloaders. Only appropriate types that gave something back to the community were welcomed in a rural landscape. Indeed the language of art provided respectability to the artistic nomads. The prospect of agreeing to something which had potential caveats, was made more

tenable to local officialdom by using the ‘ruse’ of art. It was a currency for which tourism found valuable and could be used for the education of local communities. It was crucial for the *Nomadic Village* not to be associated with antisocial behavior. Because the Demense picnic area had never been used officially for camping purposes, the local authorities had to be careful about granting access to projects which by their nature could have been misconstrued. Normally the space in question was as a thoroughfare for local dog walkers and day trippers so for the permission for the arrival of a number of nomadic vans, tents and ateliers, this had the potential to aggravate any unsuspecting local communities who did not attend the consultation meetings or had not seen the publicity about it coming to town. With normative space disrupted, the public could have interpreted nomads in different ways, everything from hostile aliens to intriguing others.

*Fig. 4 Boundaries between indigenous people and nomads*

Local engagement with the *Nomadic Village* outside of the pre-booked educational activities was mixed. The majority of people who normally used the picnic area chose to ignore the project and got on with their daily lives as though it was not there. Locals located themselves close to its perimeter of the *Nomadic Village* and spent hours enjoying the local river, making barbecues, entertaining their children and drinking alcohol without interacting with artists. Some people did enter the nomadic enclave to find out more and did share in the hospitality of food and drink. Other interactions included local men attempting to form relationships by flirting with nomadic women. Whilst there was no intension on behalf of the artists to be culturally elite, on the event open day only a handful of locals attended. The main audience consisted of primary stakeholders, friends of the artists and the wider artistic community who traveled to Wolsingham for the day to see the final show. As a final caveat, community relations were not without its tensions. In trying to embrace a utopian ideal, artists unusually trustworthy to others. Laptops and projectors were left unattended and open vans were a constant security risk. Being permissive and perhaps vulnerable was part of the expression that freedom could be enacted. Reciprocity with outsiders it was thought would

happen automatically due to an ethical code of peace and goodwill and because it was an open invitation to anyone to find out about the *Nomadic Village*, its open nature meant that equipment was stolen and furniture broken; although it was difficult to establish who were the villains. At one stage a meeting was held by Klaus who seemed uncomfortable with leadership on that occasion and found himself managing a situation he thought residents would have policed themselves. In his speech, he was concerned about gatecrashers who partook in the social events too often, that meant that running out of food and the number of times the chemical toilets could be cleaned due to budget restrictions would be compromised. He suggested cutting the number of visitors down regardless of whether they were friends of the artists or local people drifting in. Also realizing potential hazards of the place, he reminded everyone that they had to be vigilant about their possessions as we were not on as he put it, on a desert island.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we have looked at an example of a counter cultural artistic practice that brings together travel and art. Unlike traditional nomadic communities, the nomadism of this temporary group is not a survival tactic but another manifestation of expressive individualism. Project funding enabled the artistic elite to be brought together for a working holiday, perhaps paradigmatically not dissimilar to ‘ethical’ tourists who seek meaningful connections with people and place as part of their travel experience. Whilst conceived as a subversive artistic practice by its creator Klaus, most artists volunteered to be part of the *Nomadic Village* to acquire cultural capital, indeed a volatile currency that is open to multiple interpretations. There is therefore coherence between a volatile system of values that comes and goes and an ephemeral project. For this group travelling was not about bringing people together but it traverses its way of life as well as its art. It was a lens for art produced both as a consequence as well as an expression of transnational movement.

Because of its temporal and spatial fluidity, social formations of this kind are often considered subversive. They are hard to pin down as they are constantly on-the-move. In this instance however

it was government sponsorship that made it possible. Politically the nomads were placed in a contradictory position of seeking an alternative lifestyle, whilst complying with an agreed plan of work as well as the rules and regulations associated with occupancy of the campsite. It focussed its attention on the potential of art to disrupt established conventions, but they were happy to participate in established artistic networks. In light of these discussions therefore we conclude with a paradox, for whilst freedom may be contested in this context, attempts to articulate an aesthetic ideal through the fabrication of a social utopia can perhaps be harmonised between the limited goodwill of travellers in search of the 'goodlife', Chyutin, M, Chyutin, B, (2007) p.1, and the financial handouts of a nanny state.

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## **Illustrations**

1. Klaus Mahering, the captain of the Nomadic Village
2. Rabbit Skinning Workshop at the Nomadic Village
3. Nomads 'Meet and greet buffet' with Wolsingham Parish Council and friends. (Photo:Peter Westman)
4. Boundaries between indigenous people and nomads