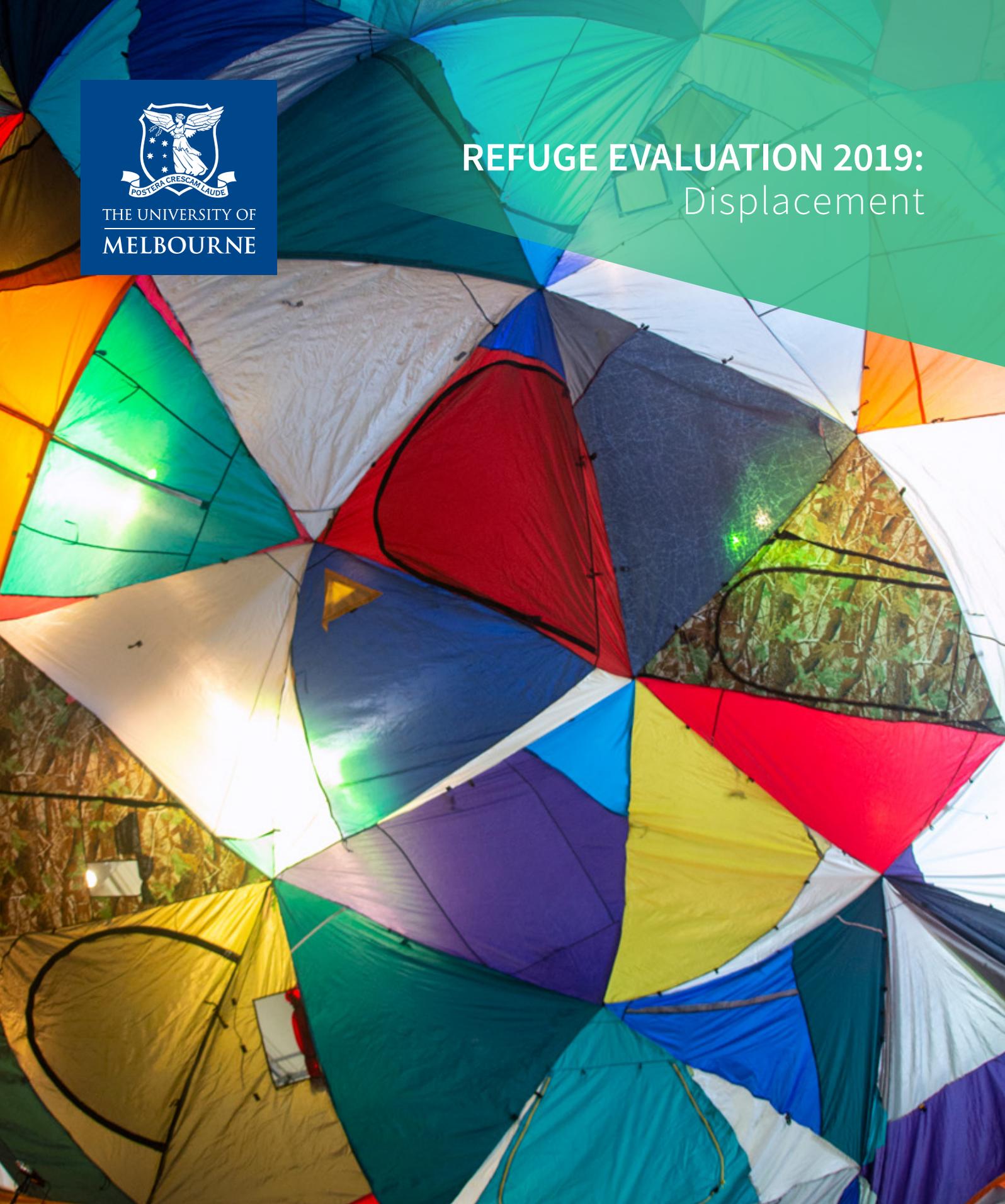




THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

REFUGE EVALUATION 2019: Displacement



In Association



**ARTS
HOUSE**

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Cover image Keg de Souza, North Melbourne School of Displacement(detail), 2019
Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

1. REFUGE INTRODUCTION

There is a prescient paragraph in the book *Rules for Radicals* (1971) in which the author Saul Alinsky summarises a basic premise of his work advocating for community action in overcoming the failings he observed in society:

‘[People] cannot be denied the elementary right to participate fully in the solutions to their own problems. Self-respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises and who are not helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of private or public services. To give people help, while denying them a significant part in the action, contributes nothing to the development of the individual. In the deepest sense it is not giving but taking – taking their dignity.’ (Alinsky, 1971, 123)

While Alinsky was writing with the particular socio-economic concerns of disadvantaged, twentieth-century Americans in mind, the relevance of his ideas extends beyond the sphere of 1970s grassroots activism and into the very anatomy of modern, policy driven societies in the West. If we grant the premise that people need to be active participants in their recuperation or advancement in order to satisfy their roles as social and intelligent beings, we might then ask:

- *To what extent should we all be given the opportunity to aid ourselves in times of crisis and emergency, rather than relying solely on public services?*
- *And can we also be valuable participants in processes of mass, collective recovery?*

These questions are investigated and, to a large extent, answered in the ongoing program of cultural and community-oriented events taking place under the banner of *Refuge* at Arts House in North Melbourne.

With issues of climate change, disaster preparedness and equity at its core, *Refuge* engages contemporary art practice to explore how communities and their diverse members can be effective operatives in their own survival and recovery. The focus on creative practice in the program also foregrounds the ways in which artists can offer unique, imaginative insights into some of the most pressing issues in our contemporary lives; and, in turn, propose potential solutions. In 2016 and 2017, the public program of *Refuge* centred on 24-hour relief centre simulations encompassing art installations – alongside community and emergency services displays and presentations – designed to involve members of the public in proscribed disaster scenarios. In 2016, the scenario was a major urban flood and, in 2017, a catastrophic heatwave. In 2018, the format of *Refuge* was redesigned to incorporate a series of creative events held across three days, with the proscribed theme being ‘Pandemic’. In 2019, this multi-day format was again utilised to explore the theme of ‘Displacement’.

The annual cycle of *Refuge* is multipart with an emphasis on knowledge exchange at various levels and through many avenues, including: the LAB, a preparatory workshop involving artists and stakeholders held some months before the public events, with the aim of facilitating a critical exchange of ideas on questions related to the conceptual underpinnings and format of the year’s emergency scenario;



Seini Taumoepeau and guests, *Words Nourish Neighbours*, 2019
Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

the public events of *Refuge*, which welcome local community and city-wide attendees to participate in art, cultural displays and emergency services demonstrations based around the designated emergency scenario; and the Learning and Evaluation Day, where artists and stakeholders are invited to make presentations on their experiences and learnings from the current year and consider, between themselves, what they hope to achieve from the project in the future.

Refuge, which began in 2016 and will continue until 2021, is supported by state and local institutions, public sector representatives and community leaders, brought together in this project through a shared recognition of the need for alternative models for managing public crises. This collective drive for change signals a contemporary shift away from established systems of top-down, centralised disaster management towards other models which shift power to Community to make decisions and solutions for not only alleviating systemic crises like climate change, but also managing sudden emergencies in their neighbourhoods, such as floods and heatwaves. Partner organisations in the program are City of Melbourne, Emergency Management Victoria, State Emergency Services, Resilient Melbourne and Red Cross Australia, among others.

As part of its involvement in *Refuge*, the University of Melbourne has been tasked with undertaking annual evaluations of the events in the five-year program, with the goal of contextualising findings within the broader perspective of arts and humanities scholarship. *Refuge 2019 Evaluation: Displacement* draws on evidence gathered through observation during key events and attending the *Refuge Learning and Evaluation* day. A primary aim in the evaluation process is to track critical areas of change

and growth in the program across each of its annual iterations. The evaluation is also designed to assess whether changes to the framework of *Refuge* which occur between the program's yearly cycles deliver outcomes that are beneficial to the requirements and experiences of both project stakeholders and public participants. It is hoped that, at the conclusion of the five-year program, the suite of *Refuge Evaluations* produced by the University of Melbourne will provide evidence of the wide-ranging experimentations and investigations undertaken by the team at Arts House across the program and the ready involvement of emergency service institutions, artists and the North Melbourne community. Moreover the evaluations may serve as vital resources for other communities and cities, both national and international, who might wish to institute similar, arts-driven investigations in their public programming in the pursuit of greater, collective resilience.

This report begins by offering an introduction to *Refuge: Displacement*, followed by an executive summary of the 2018 findings and an overview of the purpose and design of the current evaluation. It then discusses key themes foregrounded in the evaluation using methodologies and recent scholarship in the fields of the arts and humanities. Where applicable, this report will highlight areas of change in the format of *Refuge* between the inaugural cycle in 2016 and the following years' iterations. It will conclude by proposing select recommendations that might be trialed in the final year, while linking these recommendations to the specified targets and growing accumulation of learnings produced by the program's stakeholders and participants across the ongoing *Refuge* program.



2. DISPLACEMENT INTRODUCTION

The history of human migration tells us that around 100,000 years ago Homo sapiens left the African continent on a grand migration that would span thousands of years, first to Asia, Europe, Australia, and eventually the Americas.¹ Yet the precise environmental or social conditions that motivated our ancestors to leave Africa and eventually colonise every corner of the Earth's surface have long been a source of contention.

In a seminal 2016 paleoclimate study published in *Nature*,² researchers Axel Timmermann and Tobias Friedrich constructed a model that theorised human migration occurred not as a random, single event but was instead prompted by climatic fluctuations which created favourable environmental conditions for overland travel. These shifts in climate triggered four main periodic waves of migration beginning just over 100,000 years ago. Timmermann and Friedrich's theoretical model demonstrates how dramatic changes in global climate have played a key role in the earliest migrations of human populations.

The past 100,000 years have seen remarkable stability in the Earth's climate that has enabled human civilisation to flourish. With the rise of industrial capitalism beginning in the mid nineteenth-century however, the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane have, and continue to, increase global average temperatures.³ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report in 2018 indicated that while global temperatures have already risen approximately 1.0°C above pre-industrial levels, by the mid twenty-first century global temperatures are likely to rise even further. While dependent on the rate of future emissions and feedback loops, in a moderate scenario we can expect a further 1.7 °C rise, and in an extreme scenario, as much as 2.6 to 4.8 °C.⁴

The impact of such global temperature increases will again have immense effect on human migration as it did some 100,000 years ago - this time however in the form of forced displacement as opposed to voluntary relocation. Unlike our ancient ancestors, Homo sapiens today exists within a complex and often delicately balanced societal-political paradigm of nation states and finite natural resources. During this century, the scale of climate migration will be unprecedented in the history of our species, most likely dwarfing not only the first global migration out of Africa, but all forced and voluntary migrations throughout history.

The direct impacts of climate change upon human populations are numerous and varying. From threatening already limited natural resources such as drinking water and arable land, to flooding, drought, fires, heatwaves, disease outbreaks and violent conflict. Those living in vulnerable regions, particularly near the equator or low lying areas, will likely be most impacted.⁵ Forced migration from these regions, together with the socio-political instability that results from forced migration, will likely only serve to further undermine already delicate states of stability. This is why climate change might be considered a threat multiplier.

During the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in September 2019, the UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet warned that, "The economies of all nations, the institutional, political, social and cultural fabric of every state, and the rights of all your people, and future generations, will be impacted."⁶ Bachelet cited a UN Environment report finding that 40% of all civil wars over the past 60 years can be linked to natural resource exploitation and scarcity.⁷

Displacement and forced migration has only recently been at the forefront of the climate debate. More than a decade ago in 2006 the British economist Nicholas Stern warned in the *Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change* that one of the biggest dangers of climate change would be mass migration.⁸

'Climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world – access to water, food production, health, and the environment. Hundreds of millions of people could suffer hunger, water shortages and coastal flooding as the world warms.'

Stern continues, stating, 'All countries will be affected. The most vulnerable – the poorest countries and populations – will suffer earliest and most, even though they have contributed least to the causes of climate change. The costs of extreme weather, including floods, droughts and storms, are already rising, including for rich countries.'

According to the UN, migration today is already at an all time high with some 70 million forcibly displaced people wandering the planet right now.⁹ One of the most immediate threats to human habitation is sea level rise. While many coastal areas have large populations that are still growing, rising seas pose a direct risk from flooding due to storm surges, tsunamis and king tides. The largest populations at risk are countries that have both densely populated coastal areas and low lying geography such as Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Pacific islands.¹⁰

Meanwhile average sea levels are already rising. Between 1900 and 2016 seas have risen by 16–21 cm, with eight of those centimeters in just the last 25 years.¹¹ Flooding in low-lying coastal areas is already displacing communities by forcing them to higher ground. During the last decade some 700,000 Bangladeshis were displaced on average each year by natural disasters,¹² while the number of Bangladeshis displaced by the impacts of climate change could reach 13.3 million by 2050.¹³

In the West we generally consider displacement to be an issue that will only affect those living in isolated or low lying areas, yet even within Australia there is a pressing threat from prolonged and severe drought, which if it continues will render a great number of rural towns across the continent uninhabitable.¹⁴ A number of communities within Australia are currently presented with a ‘day-zero’ threat from the country’s own climate, one which has been increasingly featured in scientific studies and government reports in recent years. ‘Day zero’ in Australia is the day that country towns and the populations who inhabit them will run out of water, forcing a vast swathe of the nation to be displaced; barring drastic change in current climate patterns, day zero is imminent.¹⁵

A recent report by The Institute for Economics and Peace recently estimated that nearly 1 billion people currently live in regions rated to have “very high” or “high” climate exposure.¹⁶ In the same report it is noted that in 2017 alone, 18 million people were forcibly displaced due to natural disasters. While predictions vary, most agree that those numbers are going to rapidly increase.

It is of great concern that those who are displaced by climate change related events are not yet officially recognised as ‘refugees’. Under the current 1951 Refugee Convention, the definition of ‘refugee’ means that climate migrants are excluded as they have not experienced some degree of political or cultural persecution in the form of ‘generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order.’¹⁷ Even though the definition has been expanded since 1951, ‘climate refugees’ are not offered the same legal protection.

As humanity faces a future of increasing climate change related natural disasters which, in the coming decades will force greater numbers of people from their homes, we urgently need as individuals, communities and nations to reconsider mass migration as not only necessary, but as an opportunity to reconsider our current social-political paradigm.

*Seini Taumoepeau and guests, Words Nourish Neighbours, 2019
Photo: Harjono Djayobisono*



From Thomas Hobbes to Hollywood disaster films, the ‘nature’ of humankind, unrestrained by the social contract, has been depicted as dangerous and chaotic. Yet, as Rebecca Solnit writes in *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, what arises is in fact a different kind of anarchy, where, in the absence of political order, individuals form new communities that rise above the disaster. Solnit argues that in the wake of such disasters exists the potential not only to dissolve traditional neoliberal values of individualism and competition, but also the possibility to discover new forms of solidarity, resilience, creativity and compassion.

Solnit asserts that, ‘human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do.’ Continuing later in the book that, ‘Disaster doesn’t sort us out by preferences; it drags us into emergencies that require we act, and act altruistically, bravely, and with initiative in order to survive or save the neighbors, no matter how we vote or what we do for a living.’¹⁸



Lorna Hannan, Ruth Crow Corner Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony, 2019
Photo: Bryony Jackson

3.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The theme of ‘Displacement’, the fourth and penultimate theme in the *Refuge* series, necessitated greater sensitivity in part due to the nature of the subject as an immediately relevant and primarily humanitarian issue, in contrast to earlier *Refuge* iterations which focused on climatic or scientifically-informed scenarios such as catastrophic heatwave and the outbreak of disease. A number of the students from the North Melbourne Language and Learning - who were key participants in *Refuge* 2019 - have been displaced from their homeland due to political conflict and religious persecution. This further highlights the scope of the subject as not only a serious byproduct of climate change, but also the result of a number of social, cultural and political upheavals that are only more likely to be exacerbated by climate change.

For that reason, the approach taken by Arts House in 2019 in conceiving its public facing program and community-oriented workshops required a high degree of sensitivity and new strategies for engaging the public. The organisers and creative contributors collectively navigated this through an emphasis on group discussion and cultural knowledge exchange in the events associated with *Refuge: Displacement* as well as lead up excursions and friendship building.

Refuge: Displacement program took place across 10 days, involving 9 new commissions involving 85 collaborators/ participants and over 1700 audience participants.

The public facing events of 2019 centred on a weekend of activities based at Arts House on 31st August and 1st September, as well as a schedule of workshops held from 24th August to 7th September. The findings presented in this Evaluation were drawn primarily from the firsthand experiences of University of Melbourne staff members, as well as interviews conducted with community members, Arts House staff and volunteers. Conversations and presentations during the 2019 *Refuge* Evaluation Day also fed into the learnings and recommendations of the Evaluation. This year’s participants in *Refuge* included artists, First Nations writers, students from the North Melbourne Language and Learning Centre, local residents from around North Melbourne, volunteers from the SES and Red Cross, representatives from the City of Melbourne and the University of Melbourne, and a team of people tasked with running events and undertaking creative works as part of the *Refuge: Displacement* program.

The consensus of those interviewed, regarding their participation and experiences of the year’s events, was highly favourable. For instance, several of those interviewed who took part in Jen Rae’s raft building workshops *Portage* described the skills they developed during the exercise as not only valuable if faced with a potential disaster situation, but also beneficial for having enriched their group relationships and community networks, at times bridging cultural differences and overcoming language barriers. As Mittul Vahanvati, an architect and designer from the company Giant Grass, who co- led the raft building workshop, noted, “these processes help in forming community... social capital is going to be the biggest asset in a disaster”. While superficially the workshop enabled the teaching of practical skills to participants, the greater value came in the various organically formed collaborations between community participants and emergency service personnel such as paramedics and police, which were necessary in order to complete the particular tasks.

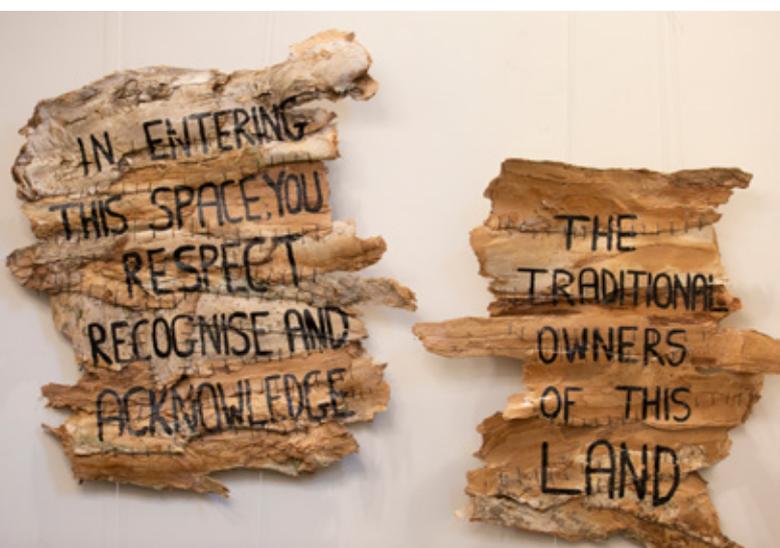
In response to this year’s theme the discussions and events around the 2019 iteration saw a foregrounding of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in relation to the historical and future threat faced by displaced populations. This was incorporated across the program in a number of ways, such as the opening weekend of commissioned performances by Yorta Yorta musician and activist Allara Briggs Pattison and soundscape by Bundjalung sound artist Theo McMahon, and in a number of group discussions featured in the *North Melbourne School of Displacement* by Keg de Souza in collaboration with Wirlomin Noongar writer Claire G. Coleman. This year also saw the launch of a new writers’ residency associated with *Refuge* titled *First Nations in the House*, ‘honouring and sharing local stories of resilience, survival, loss and the future’;¹⁹ led by Nyikina and Jabbirr Jabbirr Producer Kalinda Palmer.



After collating evaluators' and participants' reflections from *Refuge: Displacement*, this Evaluation found a number of areas for critical consideration in advance of the final year of *Refuge* which has been rescheduled to take place in 2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic. These will be noted in the relevant sections of the Evaluation. Among these considerations is the challenge around communicating, in a clear and consistent manner, the underpinning objectives of the *Refuge* series across the myriad of events associated with this arts program. While the diversity of events and discussions in *Refuge: Displacement* 2019 meant that the overarching narrative of the program - as it pertains to climate change and catastrophe - was at times muddled, this is perhaps a necessary byproduct of a progressive shift in the series away from macro investigations into climate change and disaster resilience and towards individual perspectives on historic and future disaster, as well as the lived experiences of ongoing cultural marginalisation.



As this Evaluation will demonstrate, *Refuge: Displacement* highlights the need for cross cultural discussion in developing societal resilience. According to Curator and Educator Genevieve Grieve who was involved in facilitating aspects of Refuge Lab and Refuge Evaluation "Intercultural spaces can be really difficult. You have to let go of things, you have to let go of power and you have to allow your usual practices to be shifted which has been happening a lot through this process of Refuge." Interviewed during the activities of *Refuge* 2019, Faye Bendrups from SES noted, "Conversation is critical. People need to feel like they belong to the issue. They need to feel like they have agency in a crisis."



Latai Taumoepeau, *Refuge INASI First Harvest*, 2019
Photo: Bryony Jackson

Lorna Hannan, *Ruth Crow Corner*, 2019

Pictured: Uncle Larry Walsh Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

Edwina Green and Moorina Bonini, *Blak Order(detail)*, 2019

Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

4. EVALUATION PURPOSE AND DESIGN

As with its primary subject matter, the University of Melbourne's series of *Refuge* Evaluations has evolved over the course of the last four years; subtly shifting in intention, methodology and outcomes with each iteration of *Refuge*. This can be accounted for in part through a changing team of evaluators at the University (just as there was a changing team of producers at Arts House from Tara Prowse in 2016-18 to Sarah Rowbottom in 2019-21) and in part as a result of considered reflection on previous years' oversights and successes.

In-keeping with the shift of *Refuge* away from a macro investigation of climate and resilience and towards individual perspectives on the humanitarian issue of 'displacement', the 2019 evaluation undertaken by the University of Melbourne utilised observation and participation over quantitative measurements and data collection as the primary approach to establishing the learnings of this year's program.

The methodological approach of 'participant observation' has proven to be a valuable research strategy across the series of Evaluations, firstly because the researcher is required to be embedded in small group conversations and participatory arts practice in order to experience and record the events of *Refuge*,

which renders remote objectivity untenable, and secondly because the nature of *Refuge* as an evolving series of arts events based on conversation and response means that the sorts of prediction and planning required to undertake rigorous quantitative research is also infeasible. Acquiring informed consent from Evaluation participants has continued from 2016 to 2019, but the interview style evolved in the present year to suit the requirements of both the program and the Evaluation. For example, participants were no longer asked an established and general series of questions, but were instead asked some initial, targeted questions related to their individual role in *Refuge* which then led into a dialogical interview format.

When undertaking the 2019 *Refuge* Evaluation, a degree of objectivity was able to be maintained as the researchers set themselves aside to take note of the big picture of what was happening at any given point in an event or conversation, and how that event or conversation might then fit into the larger picture of the year's program. Moreover, using background knowledge and training in critical theory and contemporary arts scholarship, the researchers were necessarily interpreting the events as they progressed, rather than accepting the outcomes as clear or indeed extant in the moment of observation. As Van Maanen notes in *Qualitative Methodology* (1983), the role of the participant observer is "part spy, part voyeur, part fan, part member."²⁰

Arts House hosted a learnings and evaluation day on Friday 11th October to capture the different spheres of knowledge shared under these key outcomes: contribution to creative practice, urban preparedness and resilience, equity and justice, and policy enhancement. Over 33 key stakeholders attended this discussion including artists, partners, community members and emergency services.

Some of the key discussion points from this evaluation included:

- Further investigation into targeting key advocacy groups, policy makers and city planners who are difficult to gain traction with, to attend *Refuge*, including other City of Melbourne departments who have agency and power to create change;
- Continued understanding of the cultural protocols required when incorporating and drawing from First Nation knowledge's and discourses, and ensuring cultural integrity and governance – for all artists, partners and Arts House;
- How emergency services can apply and draw from learnt insights discovered through *Refuge* into the future;



Kate Sulan and Red Cross, In Case of... RediPlan Workshop, 2019
Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

5.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CREATIVE PRACTICE

Refuge is part of a historic tapestry of exhibitions and creative performances involving artists in discursive environmental investigations. While visual artists have been engaging with the environment in their work since the earliest human representations, what we have come to recognise as the modern environmental art movement coincided with the emergent ecological movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In America, the accelerating post-war economy raised public concerns over the adverse environmental impact of progress. An increased demand for a cleaner and safer environment which could not be realised by the free market meant that environmentalists turned toward direct political action and new forms of creative initiatives as a means to raise public consciousness in order to protect the earth. Land Art expanded the boundaries of contemporary art through its unconventional use of materials and location of the works. Rocks, soil, wind, water and vegetation often found on-site became the materials with which artists sculpted the earth, often forming monumental landscape projects which existed far from urban centres and the commercial art market. Today, a similar artistic transformation is taking place; a growing number of artists are working to catalyse the cultural shift by taking a greater interest in the intersection of nature and modernity. In the way that land artists of the 1960s helped alter public perception of the environmental and ecological crisis, a number of artists are today working towards similar goals.

For a myriad of reasons, displacement presents an unwieldy topic to engage with, in art as in politics; it is an issue characterised by existing hierarchies, inequalities and historic prejudices that are only intensified by the effects of climate change. Moreover, with a recognition of imminent forced displacement caused by environmental conditions such as rising sea levels and drought, climate change presents us with immediate and sometimes irreparable challenges which any degree of investigation and activism might not be able to counteract.

The works and activities comprising this year's iteration of *Refuge* consisted of installations, participatory workshops, dinners and thematic group discussions, which aimed to engage members of the community in conversations about inclusivity, sustainability and identity related to the concept of climate-related displacement. Keg de Souza and Claire G. Coleman programmed a series of six discussions as part of **North Melbourne School of Displacement**. Jen Rae together with architects Mittul Vahanvati and Munir Vahanvati of Giant Grass created **Portage**, a series of raft making and weaving workshops, installations and walks. Also included this year was **Blak Order**, an installation by Moorina Bonini and Edwina

Green, the **Ruth Crow Corner** by Lorna Hannan, **Street Plan: The Big Brainstorm** run by Faye Bendrups and the State Emergency Service, and **In Case of... RediPlan Workshop** run by the Red Cross and artist Kate Sulan. The program concluded with **Words Nourish Neighbours**, a food and story sharing event with community members from Colombia, Iran, Somalia, Ethiopia, Tibet and beyond hosted by artist and radio presenter Seini Taumoepeau.

While the public program of *Refuge: Displacement* stretched across two weeks, the main events took place on the weekend of Saturday 31st of August and Sunday 1st of September at Arts House in North Melbourne. Each day opened with a Welcome to Country – on Saturday by Boon Wurrung Elder Parbin-ata Carolyn Briggs and on Sunday with Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Dave Wandin, followed by a commissioned performance by Allara Briggs Pattison and a scheduled program of activities and installations.

Installed in the main hall of Arts House was **North Melbourne School of Displacement** by artist Keg de Souza, in collaboration with Claire G. Coleman. The installation consisted of a large dome structure composed of salvaged, nylon tents. The work was previously exhibited in Redfern at the 20th Biennale of Sydney under the title 'Redfern School of Displacement', the idea of which came initially from the artist's observations of both tent encampments around Central Station in Sydney and a temporarily staged Indigenous Tent Embassy in Redfern. These local examples of temporary architectural structures also drew parallels for de Souza with international news images of forced migration and tent cities; the tent thus becoming a symbol of displacement, clearly aligning the work with the theme of *Refuge* 2019. "By restaging the work in North Melbourne," de Souza stated, "I wanted to work with someone who was locally-based, such as Claire ... and also to prioritise Indigenous knowledge systems and more marginalised voices, to be relevant to the conversation [at *Refuge*]."

The associations of 'school' with a heavily didactic learning structure is circumvented by de Souza in her work 'North Melbourne School of Displacement', as she intentionally embraces a conversational, democratic and at times playful approach to pedagogy. Across the six days of the installation at Arts House, the work played host to curated discussions around the theme of displacement which members of the public could attend and participate in while seated inside the tent structure; invited speakers included linguists, artists, climate activists, emergency services and educators. One discussion was titled 'A billycan, a crowbar and an axe:



Ked de Souza, *North Melbourne School of Displacement (detail)*, 2019
 Photo: Byrony Jackson

Indigenous survival techniques for the apocalypse', led by Uncle Dave Wandin and Claire G Coleman, which considered the value of Indigenous knowledge in a future of climate crisis. The discussion during 'In a strange land: How does culture survive when you can't go home' addressed the critical concerns of survival and resilience following displacement, 'offering guidance to newly arrived communities who are navigating the challenge of preserving and practicing culture in an unfamiliar landscape'

The first activity to take place at *Refuge* in 2019 was **Portage**, a multiplatform project by Jen Rae collaborating with architects Mittul Vahanvati and Munir Vahanvati of Giant Grass, together with five master weavers: Vicki Kinai, Bronwyn Razem, Dr Vicki Couzens, Abshiro Hussein, and Muhubo Sulieman.

The **Portage** program developed for *Refuge: Displacement* consisted of workshops, installations and walks with participants largely comprising of students from the North Melbourne Language and Learning Centre, The Venny, Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre and Kensington Neighbourhood House. According to the artist, the title of the project - 'Portage' - describes the 'act of carrying a boat and its cargo over land between navigable waters ... Portage is a call to mobilise, collaborate and arrive at purpose.' The collaborative effort required to shift a vessel from one body of water to another in order to reach one's destination acts here as a metaphor. **Portage** is thus a performative illustration of how individual members of a community can work together to achieve a common goal.

The construction of two large-scale rafts made from bamboo - the material with which Giant Grass primarily works - began on Saturday 24th of August and ran over the following five days. Participants were separated into small groups and instructed on how to undertake the various tasks needed to build the rafts such as cutting, weaving and tying knots. According to Munir, the rafts were hybrid designs developed by Giant Grass and Jen Rae, embodying various elements of traditional Pacific Islander construction together with contemporary additions.

Participants were instructed to separate into teams and undertake the tasks with which they felt most comfortable, and at first the teams organically separated along cultural and gender divides. Yet before long the focus of the tasks eroded any divide within the group and an atmosphere of goal-oriented collaboration emerged in its place, with individuals learning new skills while forming unexpected and beneficial working relationships.

Following the completion of the two rafts, artist Jen Rae transformed Studio 2 at Arts House into *Flotilla*, an immersive light and binaural sound installation in collaboration with sound designer Marco Cher-Gibard, which was open to the public across nine days of *Refuge* activities. After audience members were led into the darkened room and invited to sit on the rafts, the doors were closed and the audience experienced, according to the artist, 'what it feels like to be in close proximity with strangers, adrift in a small vessel in darkness, with only the horizon as their guide.' Flashing lights and bellowing sirens simulated an emergency situation, while also, the artist notes, illustrating the allegorical 'sirens and warnings from the global science community [that] have gone unanswered.'

The two other activities associated with **Portage** were 'Shelter - Weavers Walk' and 'Shelter - Weaving Workshop', led by master weavers Vicki Kinai, Bronwyn Razem, Dr Vicki Couzens, Abshiro Hussein, and Muhubo Sulieman.

The **Weavers Walk** saw a group of participants led by the weavers and City of Melbourne Park Rangers around a section of native flora in the south-east area of Royal Park in Parkville. Participants were introduced to a variety of native and non-native grass plants, known for their medicinal and utilitarian uses. Several of the weavers, such as Dr Vicki Couzens and Vicki Kinai, described the historical uses of the plants to the communities of the respective Indigenous nations. Using one particular reed, Vicki Kinai demonstrated a number of weaving techniques used for the production of baskets and fans in Papua New Guinea.



Jen Rae and Giant Grass, Portage: Shelter - Weaving Workshop, 2019
Photo: Bryony Jackson

An outcome of the **Weavers Walk** was the contributions made by Muhubo Sulieman and Abshiro Hussein. After explaining that a similar reed grows native in Somalia, they proceeded to enact an impressive and impromptu display of weaving using a technique developed to construct thatched roofs. The Somali weavers further explained that this skill was essential to survival as they themselves had been forcibly displaced due to political conflict and needed to build temporary emergency shelters while migrating in search of refuge. The **Weaving Workshop** which took place at Art House focused on the range of skills of each of the master weavers concerning the functions and uses of each technique. Participants were then invited to take from the materials available and try weaving with the guidance and supervision of the weavers. Many conversations took place between the public participants and weavers regarding not only the practical aspects of the task at hand, but also their own personal stories and histories. The **Weaving Workshop**, much like the raft building workshop, illustrated how working towards a practical goal may act as a pretext for establishing and strengthening intercommunity relationships, which could prove essential in a disaster situation. The larger project of **Portage** aimed to demonstrate how we might draw on First Nations knowledge in times of crisis, not only to survive a given scenario, but perhaps more importantly to generate social capital.

Leading on from 'Portage' were two projects associated with public service infrastructure, **Street Plan: The Big Brainstorm** run by Faye Bendrups from the State Emergency Service and **In Case of... RediPlan Workshop** run by the Red Cross and artist Kate Sulan.

Street Plan: The Big Brainstorm was attended by a handful of participants from a range of backgrounds including governmental, academic and professional. After an extensive introduction into the workings of the SES, each participant was invited to consider how they might respond to various emergency situations, with consideration to both the particularities of the suburb in which each participant lived and

also their community, with special consideration to its most vulnerable members such as the elderly and disabled. Each participant was prompted to consider a variety of emergency scenarios and asked to respond to questions such as: Who are those in your neighbourhood that may need assistance in an emergency? How might you overcome cultural barriers such as language? What practical skills and resources do you have that may be valuable to others? How can community relationships be fostered prior to an emergency?

One noted side effect of urban living in the twenty-first century is the breakdown of strong community bonds, meaning we often have little or no interaction with those who live closest to us. Perhaps the greatest value of **Street Plan** was to encourage the participants to first consider and then reach out to those who live around them, especially those most at risk. Technology may offer one solution to building better community interaction with phone apps such as Nextdoor which enables users to chat with other users in their neighbourhood. Such technology however is often only accessible to those who are tech savvy, and therefore will likely still exclude those most at risk. In **Street Plan**, the theme of displacement was discussed not in conceptual terms, as a future condition exacerbated by climate change, but in very practical terms related to the slow and rapid emergencies affecting us now.

In a similar vein, **In Case of... RediPlan** workshop saw **Damien Maloney** and **Susan McDougall** from the Red Cross collaborate with artist **Kate Sulan** to consider the practical and emotional wellbeing steps in preparing for a disaster.

Whilst Red Cross asked participants to consider a range of emergency situations - not only environmental, such as flooding or bushfires, but also industrial such as a toxic spill or chemical fire, Kate Sulan integrated creative preparedness approaches to addressing the emotional and psychological wellbeing of those in a disaster situation.



Faye Bendrups and SES, *Street Plan: The Big Brainstorm*, 2019
Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

The Red Cross's Rediplan covers contingency measures from developing an individual emergency plan, to downloading the 'Get Prepared' smartphone app and creating a survival kit checklist. *In Case of...* looks at what we need in times of adversity, who we can rely on and the skills we have already available.

Originally developed in 2018 with students from St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre in North Melbourne, this project involved collectively designing and crafting a kit that explored preparedness, care, survival and resilience. The project emphasizes the micro-planning, preparedness and stamina that vulnerable young people need on a daily level; and the societal planning we need for uncertain futures, disaster scenarios and urban resilience.

As quoted in Writer Timmah Ball's essay for First Nations in the House "The [In Case of...] RediPlan workshop seemed to fuse what I long for, a point where creative pleasure blends with the technical frameworks we are expected to adhere to. Listening to music and other forms of creative engagement are so important to who we are but are acts that are considered a luxury and quickly dismissed. RediPlan shifted these binaries and showed me how art and emergency processes can work together. Creating new and unexpected relationships, which are needed to address the challenges, we face."²¹

Australia is on the frontline of the climate crisis. With the increasing frequency of extreme weather events - some slow such as prolonged drought while others rapid such as bushfires and hurricanes - the importance of preparedness is more urgent than ever. Since the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009 which killed 173 people, destroyed 2,100 homes and displaced 7,562 people, there has been an increased effort towards upgrading a number of regional and national policy measures related to community planning, preparedness and response. The high mortality rate of the Black Saturday bushfires has highlighted a number of critical issues. These include a general lack of emergency preparedness, a tendency for residents to evacuate at the last moment, attempts by residents to defend their properties despite being unprepared to do so, and a failure to consider how or where they would evacuate. The aim of programs such as **Street Plan** and **In Case of... RediPlan** is to cultivate a mindset of emergency preparedness, especially but not exclusively for those currently living in high-risk areas. Greater emergency preparedness will be essential to mitigating the loss of human lives as the intensity and frequency of climate related disasters continues to impact an ever greater number of people, both in Australia and globally.



Keg de Souza and Claire G. Coleman, North Melbourne School of Displacement, 2019 Pictured: Uncle Dave Wandin Photo: Bryony Jackson

In 2019 local historical Lorna Hannan once again hosted the **Ruth Crow Corner** ‘drop-in space’ where participants were invited to gather in a quiet nook of Arts House for reflection and conversation. The structure of Ruth Crow Corner in 2019 centered on an Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony, in contrast to previous years’ focus on tea-drinking as a customary practice for the facilitation of chat. The space hosted a number of events this year: The ‘Ruth Crow Table Talks’ with Uncle Larry Walsh, Rob Youl, Callum Fairnie, Lorraine Siska and David Sornig considered ‘our lost water history’ and the different ways communities could work together to rescue and restore neglected waterways. Dr Omid Tofighian discussed the importance of translation work to open up worlds and share important stories like *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing From Manus* written by the refugee and journalist Behrouz Boochani who, until recently, was imprisoned on Manus Island.

Ruth Crow Corner also included a giant globe situated in the main hall at Arts House which participants could look at, touch and interact with as they passed through the activities and discussions of Ruth Crow Corner; the globe served as a symbol for the visualisation of earth’s immensity and a way in which participants could evoke distant places in their discussions around ‘displacement’. Reflecting on the arrangement of Ruth Crow Corner in 2019, Lorna Hannan noted that a vital motivation in her design of the programmed activities was the concept of ‘welcoming’. “Welcoming is so important but sometimes people don’t find it – this year we introduced the Ethiopian coffee ceremony, where people could feel welcome and could discuss the process of welcoming.” Hosted by Letina, Mitselal and Kidan and their families, the Ethiopian coffee ceremony is an important cultural ritual passed between generations and a sign of welcoming and friendship for many. Taking place across the main Refuge weekend, this space fostered new connections using rituals of food and family.

6. EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Since the inception of *Refuge* in 2016, the organisers of the series at Arts House have prioritized the need for greater equity in the sphere of participatory arts, eschewing traditional art world elitism and hierarchies of practice, particularly in their own program of arts-led investigations into societal resilience and climate change. As former Arts House Artistic Director Angharad Wynn-Jones, who originally conceived *Refuge* alongside others stated in 2017,

“[T]hat’s both the challenge and the opportunity with this project. To work more with community members who aren’t as visible or not as easy to reach by white institutions and white paradigms. I think, in a situation like *Refuge*, it becomes very evident.”

This continued emphasis on equity and accessibility in the activities of *Refuge* is evident both in the commissioned creative works of the series and in public outreach undertaken by Arts House leading up to the events. One public participant at *Refuge: Displacement*, who ordinarily had difficulty attending paid events in Melbourne and noted that she often found arts events elitist and intimidating, stated, “Arts House is a very open and welcoming environment ... they always make an effort to help me attend.”²²

A key aim of *Refuge* 2019 was facilitating conversations about decolonisation through the activities, projects and infrastructure of the program. While this has been a continuing focus since the first year of *Refuge*, the penultimate year of the series witnessed a concerted foregrounding of decolonisation not only as a prescient term in discussions of ‘displacement’, but also as an ongoing process that everyone in Australia is advised to participate in. Referring to the collapse of imperial networks and the process of rejecting social and racial hierarchies enforced by former colonial powers, ‘decolonisation’ acts to shift emphasis from the coloniser’s perspective and approaches

to First Nations’ perspectives and approaches. In featuring Indigenous leaders (such as Parbin-ata Carolyn Briggs, Uncle Larry Walsh, Uncle Dave Wandin, Dr Vicki Couzens, and Claire G. Coleman) in prominent positions across the events of *Refuge* 2019, the organisers centred non-Western knowledge systems in discussions of survival and the humanitarian crisis of displacement. The great value of bringing Indigenous wisdom into discussions of resilience was highlighted by a participant during the 2019 Evaluation Day Elders such as Uncle Dave Wandin and Auntie Bronwyn shared testimony and personal reflections on displacement. According to Genevieve Grieves, “hearing their voice and stories is deeply decolonizing”.

In addition to striving for increased equity through the provision of public platforms for voicing and sharing suppressed cultural knowledge, *Displacement* foregrounded a range of marginalised voices in the events of the program; for example, the first session of **North Melbourne School of Displacement** was opened by Jason Russell, an Aboriginal volunteer with Saint Mark’s Community Centre and a public advocate for an end to homelessness with Council to Homeless Persons, who spoke powerfully about his own experiences of homelessness and the experiences of people in his community. In telling stories that highlight the fragility, dangers and inequalities experienced by homeless people in our society, Jason advocated for the wellbeing of people not in the room during *Refuge: Displacement*, “I speak for the homeless people who don’t have a voice [in these conversations].”

The majority of this year’s events were both Auslan interpreted and wheelchair accessible, thus allowing for broad attendance capability. These accessibility aspects were clearly indicated in the promotional materials for the individual events.

Jen Rae and Giant Grass, *Portage: Shelter - Weaving Workshop*, 2019
Pictured: Master weaver Vicki Kinai Photo: Bryony Jackson



6.

CONCLUSION: LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHALLENGING THEME

In several respects *Refuge: Displacement* presented a number of challenges for the production team at Arts House that had not been present in previous iterations. Generally, displacement focused on humanitarian themes over environmental and scientific concerns which made it a sensitive and challenging topic when deciding whose voices to include and which personal narratives to foreground, especially given the fact that displaced persons were involved in the projects of *Refuge*. Due to the political and social complexities of displacement and the ambiguous legal status of ‘climate refugees’, both internationally and in Australia, Arts House and its creative contributors in 2019 were faced with a topic that required a cautious approach in order to allow for constructive discussion sensitive to the political, cultural and historical realities.

GROUP DISCUSSION AS METHODOLOGY

The overarching methodological approach of *Refuge* in 2019 centered on group discussion as a platform to allow for open and non-hierarchical sharing of ideas and knowledge. These discussions were themed around certain prompts related to culture and displacement and were led by assigned speakers, offering a space for open dialogue between specialists, public participants, artists and producers. While discussions frequently deviated from the intended theme towards broader topics associated with social marginalisation and cultural resilience, the participants were noted to have found the discussions engaging and insightful. Dr Omid Tofighian, who spoke as part of the ‘North Melbourne School of Displacement’, reflected on the valuable role of personal narratives in unpacking the continuing inequalities evident in our society: “I think what was extremely valuable today was the role of people like Uncle Larry; he opened up a really important conversations about knowledge systems, about suppressed knowledges, about his own history, and about the role of colonialism, particularly in relation to displacement.”

Across the group discussions programmed into *Refuge 2019*, conversation moved between thinking about displacement in relation to climate change to thinking about displacement in relation to the aftereffects of nineteenth-century colonialism. However, as climate displacement is a relatively new phenomenon, the experiences of those who have survived displacement due to systems of colonial power may offer useful lessons in how we might survive an era of climate change. Voluntary exchange of cultural knowledge between individuals and communities was also represented at *Refuge* as part of a group discussion methodology and demonstrated the benefit of gaining knowledge through the sharing of other people’s experiences and learned wisdom.

EMPHASIS ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

In 2019 Arts House instituted a writers’ residency alongside the visual and performative creative works commissioned for the program of *Refuge*; titled ‘First Nations in the House’. The residency was designed with the aim, ‘to share and respond to the matter of displacement, honouring and respecting local stories of resilience, survival, loss and the future.’ Commissioned writers in 2019 are all First Nations identifying, comprising Claire G. Coleman, Cassie Lynch, Lanuyuk, Monica Karo, Rosie Kalina and Timmah Ball. The expansion of the program to include a writers’ residency demonstrates the growing ambition of *Refuge* to include a spectrum of creative outputs beyond temporary installations and events. It also demonstrates a concerted effort on the part of the producers to give a prominent and enduring platform for the sharing of Indigenous stories as part of the primary objectives of *Refuge*; all the pieces of writing commissioned as part of ‘First Nations in the House’ are available on the Arts House website and will serve as a compendium of Indigenous stories across 2019 and 2021.

As quoted in Claire G. Coleman’s essay ‘Indigenous Wisdom’ for First Nations in the House,

*“Non-Indigenous Australia should consider the possibility that the best chance the people of Australia have at surviving the coming climate apocalypse is for white people to learn from Indigenous cultures; from people who live as one with nature, who lived in the Australian environment for tens of thousands of years without destroying it. Indigenous Australians are among the world’s greatest survivors.”*²³

In this commissioned essay, Claire reflects on the role of Indigenous wisdom in imagining new ways for the community to prepare.

LEADERSHIP

In 2018 Tongan/Australian artist Latai Taumoepeau was invited by Arts House to undertake leadership role for *Refuge: Displacement*. Her creative practice exploring the effects of climate change in the Pacific and the imminent reality of dispossession. As lead artist - Taumoepeau who has been part of *Refuge* since its inception in 2016 - offered the *Refuge* artists and stakeholders a Tongan proverb as a guiding principle and inspirational framework to manifest ideas that explore displacement from an indigenous perspective. The program for *Refuge* in 2019 that would intimately incorporate the immediate challenges and concerns faced by Pacific Island communities from rising sea levels and the threat of displacement.

Due to unexpected illness, the leadership of *Refuge* 2019 shifted part way through, with Latai unable to continue to participate in the 2019 program. While Latai's influence was still present in the 2019 program of events and discussions, absence of her practice and research was noticeable in a conceptual fragmentation across the program, and precisely how climate change leads to widespread displacement. In order to honour the integrity of the work Latai had done, including her own project MASS MOVEMENT - a large portion of the proposed 2019 program was rescheduled. As Arts House producers noted, 'the 2019 program adapted to explore displacement through a local lens, with a focus on North Melbourne and First Nations Australian narratives including an expanded writers program'.

FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND ACCEPTANCE

The ongoing engagement of Arts House with the local residents of North Melbourne has once again this year proved highly valuable. In 2019 Arts House worked closely with 85 participants as artists, speakers and hosts, with 50% of these participants from First Nations, migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Refuge has been an important vehicle for establishing Arts House as a hub for cross cultural exchange and community building which has been achieved through a team of engaged programmers and their commendable efforts to reach out to community groups, including those ordinarily marginalised from elitist cultural spaces. This sentiment was reflected in the feedback of a number of participants who noted the value of Arts House in providing an accessible and accepting space.

This year's program saw the continued partnership with North Melbourne Language and Learning and a deepening of friendships and connections with their staff and students by embedding multiple offers and access points for community members to take part in the program including:

- Contributions within the program such as an Ethiopian coffee ceremony hosted by Letina, Mitselal, Kidan and their families;
- Creating space for community advocacy leaders such as Dr Omid Tofighian to connect with local migrant communities and firefighters from Forrest Fire Management;
- Changing food service providers for all events to local caterers from North Melbourne Language and Learning;
- Connecting with the 'Pathways for Employment' program and offering paid positions within Arts House creative and front of house team to work as assistants on 'Portage: Flotilla'
- Offering paid workshop and speaking opportunities through 'Words Nourish Neighbour' event hosted by Seini Taumoepeau;
- **Participation in 'Portage' Raft building workshops and other events in the program**

THE URGENCY OF 'DISPLACEMENT'

As the escalating effects of climate change pose an existential threat to the stability of humanity the necessity to contend with the political, social and cultural complexities of forced migration and displacement will likely shift the issue to the forefront of the climate debate. By taking the initiative in considering the spectrum of realities of not only those who have been displaced, but how in the future displacement will come to affect, in some form or another, every person alive, we may hope to move forward with greater preparedness and resilience not as individuals, but as a community.

7. ENDNOTES

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