

MIF Originals

Episode 3: The School of Integration

Tania Bruguera [00:00:05] Originality is a trap that is generated through the event driven culture that will live in where there is no long term commitment. It's more the emotional side of the novelty than the understanding of why you need that.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:34] Hello. My name is Isaiah Hull and this is MIF Originals, a podcast series from Manchester International Festival 2019 about originality. Five artists developing new work for the festival have been given a blank audio canvas to fill; a chance to try something new with the podcast form.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:59] This episode is all about sharing knowledge across cultural divides. When people arrive in a new country they are usually expected to learn the customs and languages of the host culture. But what if the tables were turned? Tania Bruguera's School of Integration gives us the chance to learn from people who have moved to Manchester and made it their home. After primary school for sure, I wasn't a fan of the education system. I wasn't a fan of the society of high school. I wish my schools and my teachers were like this.

Tania Bruguera [00:02:02] Welcome to the School of Integration, where the lessons are given by migrants, immigrants and refugees. I think it's important to talk about integration and understanding that integration is a two way road. It cannot be just one person making the effort and the other person not making any. There is a general concern about how we are living with one another and that we need to start operating in a different way. There is a prejudice towards migrants, immigrants and refugees and stateless people as well, which is thinking that their culture is less important than ours and because they are going through a hardship moment they are less than us. And also the people who are sympathetic, let's say, of immigrants or value immigrants -- many times, start by seeing immigrants as somebody who serve them, or entertain them -- meaning people who have skills, but not knowledge in something we want to address in here is like they have skill as well as knowledge. And sometimes actually we have some lessons where it is clear that the UK took what they're doing now out of the culture of that immigrant. So I think these are moments of recognition they are very important in the School as well.

Tania Bruguera [00:03:33] And now your first lesson. Enjoy.

Pat Mackela [00:03:51] [Drumming sound plays] I am Pat Mackela. I'm a drummer, musician and I'm a community leader and today in the School of Integration we're going to talk about whether marriage is a topic for the 21st century. You just hear the sound of my drumming; I know you love the sound you just hear now! But did you know, as you say in English, it takes two to tango. It takes two hands to give a nice sound. That's the beauty of the sound from the drums you just hear now; that means it takes two people for life.

Pat Mackela [00:04:29] Marriage is a big subject. I have an African view of marriage, and today I have a Western view of marriage. Marriage where I come from is a family business. Marriage where I am now is a personal business. No one else is involved. But where I came from you have to know which family are you gonna go. Which family have you choose to go in connections. Do they have values? Value doesn't mean money. Value means values. You cannot go to marriage, from where I come from, without knowing the other family. It takes time.

Pat Mackela [00:05:23] Okay, can you tell me the first time you saw your wife or your husband? Did you love them, or was it the lust of the flesh? Was it for commitment or was it for pleasure? That's my question to you.

Pat Mackela [00:05:41] The world is changing. Technology, globalisation, today you can marry someone from another side of the world. Today we have a different type of marriage. Same sex marriage. Temporary marriage like in India or the Arabic countries. Is really marriage a commitment for the 21st century?

Pat Mackela [00:06:07] If marriage was an historical thing we should forget about it many years ago, but it stays as the only institution that is standing up to now. Everybody knows how to make babies. Who knows how to make father? Do you know how to be a husband, or do you know how to make babies?

Pat Mackela [00:06:33] Marriage will stay as one of the institutions that will never collapse. Do you believe in it? How do you feel?

Pat Mackela [00:06:45] You will tell me you have an old fashioned view. No. I have the view and the value of the marriage. I'm not imposing on you my rules. But I want to learn from you as well! Tell me about your marriage. Well of course we will go home with one question we're gonna keep, and this question will help you to remember me from the School. What is your 'why' about marriage? Why have you, or, have you not choose that path?

Tania Bruguera [00:07:50] I think what is interesting about this lesson is that it is not so much about marriage itself, but it's about trying to find out and talk together about care for each other.

Tania Bruguera [00:08:07] And now, lesson 2.

Mei Yuk Wong [00:08:13] My name is Mei Yuk Wong. I'm going talk about art that is political. I'm an artist. I originally came from Hong Kong; I live in this country for over 20 years. For me this is my home now, but at the same time I still care about what happened in Hong Kong. And today I want to talk about what happened in 1989.

Mei Yuk Wong [00:08:33] This year is the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen Massacre. At that time, at that year, on the 4th of June actually, I was graduated from university in Hong Kong. But I couldn't celebrate my graduation because they are students in China, in Beijing, and also in other cities as well -- they sacrifice their lives. They asked for the basic things like freedom, democracy, reform in China, but they didn't get anything; instead their lives was sacrificed. And then I'm thinking about if I want to do an exhibition to commemorate this year what should I do? What is my focus?

Mei Yuk Wong [00:09:21] Some people say 'come on, move on, forget about it, is a long time ago and actually is nothing to do with you.' But I thought yes, it's nothing to do directly with me, but there are people that are still suffering. There is a group called Tiananmen Mothers. They don't have their freedom; not even to grieve about their lost and their loved ones. They need to be quiet for their grief. The founder of Tiananmen Mothers, Ding Zilin, initially she was really upset for her 17 year old son's loss, but later on she started to think about other families. What happened to them? I am not the only one! What about all those families? They lost their loved ones. So she started to go one house by another house and

find the families. Basically initially they were just trying to support each other but gradually they wanted to do something a bit more. So they started to collect all the victims names. At the moment they collected 202 names and I thought it's really important that we remember them. They have not just died for nothing. So I make a new piece of artwork to use Chinese calligraphy with rice paper and write their names, two hundred and two, on five panels. And also at the same time, I think this group of Tiananmen Mothers, they should be remembered as well. We should show them they are not struggling on their own. So I make another piece of work using hand stitches to stitch fifty five names. They are members of this group, however because there's already 30 years since, quite a lot of them has already passed away and some of them have died of natural causes. However there are a few of them, sadly they commit suicide because they couldn't bear anymore the restriction given by the government. So I think it's important to put their names in the exhibition. Let more people remember all these people and what they have endured for the last 30 years.

Mei Yuk Wong [00:11:46] So I think for us in a free society we should remember them. And actually every year in Hong Kong there is the candlelight vigil. Hong Kong people still remember them, still doing something. So I hope here we do this exhibition is also dedicated for them.

Mei Yuk Wong [00:12:09] I think one thing I would like to encourage to do is think about your local art gallery and go to see and then inspire yourself to make something -- this could be a very small thing, just a brooch or sign or something -- and be proud to take your art. Go to the streets, carry it with you. I think art is political. We can use art to express our concern. I think this important. We are not just concerned about a small circle what's going on but what happened in the rest of the world is also important to pay attention.

Tania Bruguera [00:13:12] It is very rare to have the opportunity to see a historical event narrated by its witness and by someone who understands the nuances of politics in the place that we may not have access to. So I really value this lesson because at that.

Tania Bruguera [00:13:43] Time to take a break.

Tania Bruguera [00:13:48] Is it important to be original? I don't think so. I think that originality is a trap that is generated through the event driven culture that we live in where there is no long term commitment or there is no understanding that in order for things to be good they have to be done over time. It's more the emotional side of the novelty than the understanding of why you need that, that is kind of carrying our lives today. This project is actually going in the other direction, in the direction of this knowledge that are segmented in a culture. And I do think that originality may have to do with the fact that some time, long time ago, people landed in other shores and they started seeing things that were exciting for them even if they didn't understand or make the effort to understand it. So I think that's kind of this colonialist heritage that we have. That we need to see things that are new, that are different in order to be excited.

Tania Bruguera [00:15:15] Sorry, break time over! Back to class.

Shahireh Sharif [00:15:21] Hello my name is Shahireh Sharif. I am originally from Iran and I'll be talking about Shahnameh. Shahnameh is a poetry book written in Persian over a thousand years ago and is translated as The Book of Kings in English.

Shahireh Sharif [00:15:40] After I lost my father I asked my mother to let me have his book. He had an old Shahnameh in his library and when I got hold of that book, I started looking at the poems because I wanted to see what my father has seen in those; if he's put a tick or cross next to a stanza for example, I was very interested to think or to presume what he has seen in that particular line.

Shahireh Sharif [00:16:14] But after reading it for a while I became interested, to me the book was undersold in a way and it had many many dimensions. And I became very passionate in this book and about eleven years ago I started a group called Friends of Shahnameh and from then I started organising regular weekly and monthly poetry readings for the books and although it was written over a thousand years ago, up to date it holds the record of the longest epic poem written by a single poet. So it's quite vast! There are over fifty thousand rhyming couplets and the stories mostly are about the history of Greater Iran. So quite a lot of wars are described in there but at the same time a lot of love stories. And this is something that Shahnameh is not really known for. While the love stories that are written in there are absolutely beautiful, the importance that women have in those stories -- even if it's a case of women going to their love and ask for the other person to marry them, which might be a little bit forward even for today's society -- although it's written over a thousand years ago, it feels as if it was written yesterday for today. It is very relevant.

Shahireh Sharif [00:17:47] [Reading from Shanameh in Iranian]

Shahireh Sharif [00:18:04] SOHROB came to fight with Iranian and he killed the most important fighter and no one else was brave enough to go on fighting, so he kept saying, you know, 'who is going to come fight with me' and no one was brave enough to go. GORDOF HARID was the girl who decided to fight SOHROB so she put the armour and pretended to be a man and went out to fight with SOHROB.

Shahireh Sharif [00:18:33] [Reading from Shanameh in Iranian]

Shahireh Sharif [00:18:57] GRODOF HARID fights really well with SOHROB but so SOHROB manages to throw her on the ground. GORDOF HARID'S helmet fell down and he realises that she is a girl.

Shahireh Sharif [00:19:13] So he says "what's happening, why have you come to fight me? Isn't it better that we sit down and party together rather than fighting?" She says "look, all our soldiers are seeing us, it's gonna look bad on you if everyone knows that you're fighting a girl like this, isn't it better to sit down and talk?" So they went to the castle and GORDOF HARID went to the castle first and the moment that she went in she closed the door. So SOHROB was left outside and he didn't like the fact that he was tricked, but she was brave enough to go and fight with him when no other man was willing to.

Shahireh Sharif [00:20:16] [Reading from Shanameh in Iranian]

Shahireh Sharif [00:20:17] Whoever you are, you're not that different from the person next to you. And if there are things that you would like to be valued with respect to you and your life, it's the same for everyone else. Shanameh and talking about the stories of Shanameh gives us this opportunity to look at the stories of people from different lands and see how relevant it is to our today society, how war starts and what are the devastations that come out of it. People become a little bit more familiar with other values which is not normally talked about.

Tania Bruguera [00:21:26] Thank you for attending today, The School of Integration: or at least a little sip of it! You are not done quite yet because now we have to assign you some homework. I would like for you to investigate the culture of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in your own town. This could be asking a question to a colleague, talking to a fellow parent at the school gate, or reading a book from your local library by an author from a different culture. I hope the School of Integration has inspired you to be more inquisitive and seek out the worldly knowledge that is right next to you with your neighbours.

Isaiah Hull [00:22:22] I liked listening to this. I enjoyed this. The characters, the marriage, the first bit, was it for commitment or was it for pleasure? Artist is political. It was really touching and it made me think about carrying my own art around with me and being proud and making a statement with my art rather than it just being for me.

Isaiah Hull [00:22:46] Speaking about originality and the colonialist idea we have to see new things to be excited, but those things not being new necessarily, that hit me. I thought maybe I'm wrong. Maybe like there is no such thing as originally. It made me consider myself in context with my colour, why people even look at my own work. So like, I'm glad that I heard it.

Isaiah Hull [00:23:11] The Book of Kings... I'm gonna get my own ordered online. Thank you.

Isaiah Hull [00:23:27] I've always said that if I had a child that would homeschool them. But that's just selfishness because I just want to shelter them. And I know that that's why I shouldn't really be, you know, you can make babies but you can't make fathers, you can make a father out of me.

Isaiah Hull [00:23:43] This poem is about the duality of integration, about pairing, there are compromises on both sides. And it shouldn't be looked at as compromises. It's a two way street. It's a give and a take. It's an ebb and a flow. Yeah. So this poem is about that.

Home schooled all summer
the christmas tree, punished like a dog,
you don't have to do this on your own.

Capsized 'black/white' thrown overboard
wet begets wet
digits of exilian spoil the net
the catch is court martialled of course
marriage is all yours.

the point is trying to make living
out of loving
without losing
one letter
leaves left

like these 'buy me' leaflets outside.

slime: the biggest investment on your holiday

mind: the way out of your malady

by any means it's not afraid.

Over head halo a gold handcuff holds you ransom

Horn adorned the dead why the antlers grow in tandem

Two-two tango true bone protrudes

all in the nude juniper heals

doubly good with the ghouls so you never squeal

something is up I smell

doom in the deal.

Schooled like a dog

the christmas tree punished me summer long

I had to do this on my own.

Sibylle Peters [00:25:24] How could animals not be original? They are all original. They are all individuals not just representatives of their species.

Isaiah Hull [00:25:33] Next week's episode is a podcast for animals of all kinds. Sibylle Peters is the lead artist behind MIF's Animals of Manchester invites you to imagine a city where all animals, including human beings, live together as equals.

Isaiah Hull [00:25:52] Thank you for listening to MIF Originals, and special thanks to Tania Bruguera and to the teachers we've heard: Pat Mackela, Shahireh Sharif and Mei Yuk Wong. There are over 80 lessons happening during the Festival at the School of Integration held at Manchester Art Gallery.

Isaiah Hull [00:26:11] I've been your host, Isaiah Hull. This episode was produced by Rebecca Gaskell and the music was by Vicky Clarke. It's a Reduced Listening and MIF production.

Isaiah Hull [00:26:22] Until next time guys, I will see you with the animals in the forest and jumanji's and all of that stuff. Stay tuned!