

## 2005 Issue No. 11 — Edges and Centres

### **Drawing on Turner: Liminal engagements between artists, advocates and refugees in regional Western Australia.**

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This paper arises from an ongoing research project investigating the ways in which rural communities interact with "asylum seekers." [1] The geographic focus of the project is the port town and regional centre of Albany (pop. 30, 000), Western Australia, located approximately 400 kms south of the State capital of Perth. Albany, and the surrounding region, contains populations which are a mix of traditional farming communities, alternative lifestyleers, "sea-changers," and small but significant numbers of migrant and refugee communities. Various industries including agriculture, wineries, plantation forestry, and arts and crafts-based activities are important for the region, which is a thriving retail and service centre for the "Great Southern" region of Western Australia (ABS). In recent years the region has also built a significant tourism industry, marketing itself as the "rainbow coast" on account of the cooler conditions which offer a summer respite from Perth's heat. Symptomatic of the changes the region has experienced in the past 30 years is the transformation of the historically important whaling and old-growth forestry industries into eco-tourism ventures based around whale watching and forest-based activities. While possessing many features typical of Australian rural areas, it is less usual in that it has recently become popular with self-identified "sea changers," people who have moved from Perth and elsewhere to "get away from it all," and pursue a more healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Consistent with Burnley and Murphy's study of the "sea change" phenomenon, for many "sea changers" in their late 40's or early 50's, moving to Albany is a form of early retirement, undertaken at an age when they envisage being able to engage in a range of outdoor activities, artistic pursuits, and other "community minded" activities. The region has also attracted many younger people, particularly young families, attracted by the "alternative" agriculture and lifestyle focus represented by the nearby small town of Denmark (pop. 4360) and the region's growing reputation as a centre for artistic development, both of the conventional "country crafts" style, and more alternative approaches. Consequently exhibitions and other artistic and cultural activities are well patronized with a large proportion of those attending being sea-changers rather than long-term residents. For many of the newer residents, part of the appeal of moving to the region is the personal scale of the communities which they have joined. They have become active members of the local community, in the arts scene, but also socially and politically.

### **Uniting with the Hazara**

As has occurred in several other rural areas around Australia, many Albany residents have embraced Hazara refugees from central Afghanistan, who started arriving in Albany in 2000 to work at the local abattoir. With the exception of a small number of families, the majority of these refugees, who numbered around 80 at the commencement of this research, are single men who have a peculiar migration status which accepts that they are genuine refugees, but only grants them temporary protection visas (DIMIA Factsheet 64). This limits their access to government-provided services such as English language classes, health benefits and other welfare services. In

response to the refugees' marginal status, locals, including "sea changers" as well as other members of the community, have been active in assisting the refugees to learn English through a volunteer programme called "Read Write Now." Both as individuals and as members of an activist group known as "Albany Community for Afghan Refugees" (ACFAR), many have extended their help by becoming outspoken advocates for the refugees, petitioning government on their behalf, undertaking media campaigns and organizing community activities such as public forums, festivals, and arts activities. Some are also a part of the growing internet-based networks working for refugee rights which link metropolitan and regional activists (eg. [www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org](http://www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org), <http://www.refugeesaustralia.org>, <http://www.justrefugeeprograms.com.au>). Many support the Hazara refugees on an everyday basis, helping them with shopping, filling in forms, dealing with bureaucracies, and so on. Many are also keen supporters of the "Hazara United" soccer team, one of the burgeoning number of teams in a town whose interest in the game perhaps suggests a more cosmopolitan outlook than typifies many other rural towns of its size.

This phenomenon of extensive support for refugees and activity on their behalf is in contrast to the generally negative perceptions of asylum seekers, and the climate of hostility that surrounds them in relation to Australia's "border protection." Negative representations, particularly in the media and in political and everyday discourse, portray asylum seekers as illegal, illegitimate and threatening outsiders (Saxton; Pickering; Gelber; Manne; Klocher). Such constructions are produced in explicit contrast to the idea of "normality" and what constitutes the "Australian character," rendering asylum seekers "Other" (or "outsider"). In their support for the refugees, Albany residents, many of whom describe the Afghan refugees as friends and even use intimate kin-based or familial terms to refer to them (see Tilbury, Baldock and Harris), actively challenge these constructions, and have undertaken a media campaign to encourage more positive representations (see Tilbury). Our focus on the Albany case as an example of positive interactions between mainstream Australians and refugees on temporary protection visas is designed to balance the predominant academic focus on community antagonism and instances of negative interaction. It also challenges traditional notions of regional Australia as conservative and closed in its relations to others.

Among the activities which have been undertaken by the supporters of the Hazara in Albany are picnics, concerts, open air gatherings. They also organised a series of public forums in which speakers such as Father Frank Brennan and Tony Kevin, author of *A Certain Maritime Incident: the sinking of the SIEV X*, addressed audiences of over 100 people, alongside speakers drawn from the Hazara, local Nyoongar and non-indigenous communities. The Hazara have also hosted a number of community gatherings to celebrate individuals' being granted permanent visas and to thank the community for their support. Some also participated in the "Welcome Mat" exhibition, with several of the Hazara community joining members of the broader community to engage with the theme of asylum, amnesty and belonging. The positive response to this led to a further exhibition and it is this event that is the focus of the current paper.

While the earlier exhibition aimed to problematise the "welcome" or otherwise that migrants and refugees received on arriving in Australia by asking participants to decorate, adorn, or otherwise deconstruct a standard doormat, the later exhibition engaged with the themes of thresholds and arrivals through reference to the concept of liminality. It is to this theme, and its implications for understandings between those traditionally seen as occupying either core or periphery that we now turn. Below, curator Annette Davis describes the development of the *Liminal* exhibition. We consider some specific pieces of artwork which focus on the liminality of the Afghan Hazara refugees before discussing liminality as a theoretical tool for understanding change and transformation. We then expand this discussion to explore the transformative possibilities suggested by liminality as artistic commentary. Our conclusion explores the productive potential of the developing relationship between the Hazara, the arts community and the advocates (some of whose members overlap), and the possibilities for this voice from the regional periphery having an impact on the centre.

## Liminal – "view from an exhibition space"

The *Liminal* art exhibition involved 17 contemporary artists and 4 communities in the Great Southern region of Western Australia. The exhibition theme and title developed in response to an external force—the Perth International Arts Festival (PIAF). PIAF's theme for its 2005 program was *Transformation and Transcendence*, which initiated the concept of the "liminal," which was developed by local curators Shaaron du Bignon and Annette Davis. The former had previously co-ordinated or been involved in a number of contemporary visual art projects presented by *Mix Artists Collective*, a fluid group of contemporary artists in the Great Southern region. For the *Liminal* project, Shaaron du Bignon invited Annette Davis, an experienced art curator, to work with her to develop and organise the exhibition. One of *Mix*'s objectives is to develop projects promoting contemporary art. Linking into the program of a major cultural event like PIAF is a successful strategy for the *Mix* artists. As well as providing the local art exhibition with some high profile publicity, it also provides an opportunity for regionally based artists to engage with a theme which is being explored by national and international artists in PIAF events.

The curators recognised that previous discussions with artists and exhibition audiences included acknowledgement that, in some ways, contemporary artists live in a liminal space—on the edge of the mainstream. This aspect is exacerbated for artists who live in a regional location, without the opportunity to view work by leading contemporary artists or to attend relevant talks and forums, activities which can reaffirm their identity and creative pursuits (See the text box for the opening reflections from Rod Vervest, regional coordinator of PIAF, which illustrates this awareness). For *Liminal*, artists were invited to consider spaces or states that exist betwixt or between—the thresholds or boundaries where change is possible, where the creative act can bring about transformation, and where the capacity for transcendence is ripe.

Artists who had previously been involved in *Mix* projects were sent information in early July 2004 about the proposed *Liminal* exhibition (scheduled for Feb 2005), and invited to attend a meeting. About 12 artists came to the meeting, where there was considerable discussion about the theme and how it related to what they were already pursuing in their work. The artists immediately embraced the concept, recognizing that "Being an artist, I think, you're often sort of a little bit on the periphery." exhibition is both a process and a liminal space, providing an opportunity for the reconsideration of taken-for-granted, standard forms, ideas, and attitudes. It is a temporary space which allows, in fact, encourages, the development of productive creativity, including challenges to the existing order of things through the provision of social critique. It is this sense that the artists were very aware of.

As well as having artists create new work on the theme of liminality, an important aim of the project was to encourage collaboration across artistic disciplines, and with community groups that could connect to the exhibition theme in some way. The Hazara community in Albany was one community group which the curators were keen to involve. One of the curators had worked with the Albany Community for Afghan Refugees (ACFAR) as part of the previous year's *Welcome: Visions of Journey* exhibition, where artists represented their own experiences of "welcome" or otherwise in regional Australia. ACFAR participated in producing artwork on coir welcome mats for the exhibition. *Liminal* presented an opportunity to build on this relationship.

From the curators' point of view, the refugees occupy a liminal space—between their homeland and what might become their home. The experiences of the Afghan Hazara refugees—in leaving their home country, arriving in Australia, being granted Temporary Protection Visas, and waiting for their applications for Permanent Resident Visas to be processed—locate them in a transient space, both physically and emotionally.

ACFAR participated in a workshop organized by the curators to explore the concept of the liminal and discuss possible involvement. At the first workshop, four support group members and two Hazara men discussed their experiences with the curators. The focus for some of the discussion

was the high and low points for the advocacy group and the asylum seekers. ACFAR had experienced a range of emotions over the plight of the Hazara community, with the main themes in the discussion revolving around stress, frustration, and support. The stress of the first round of interviews by the Department of Immigration, Multiculturalism and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), to determine the refugees' legitimacy, affected the Hazara and their friends and supporters. A major high point had been the decision by the City of Albany regional council to support the refugees in their bid to obtain permanent residency in Australia, a decision which was controversial amongst City councillors and parts of the wider community. Another high point had been the celebratory *There is Room at the Inn* gathering at a popular park in Albany, in December 2003, which represented the goodwill in the community to welcome the refugees to Albany. These events had received positive coverage in the local media, helping to promote the Hazara as part of Albany's community. As well as receiving local press coverage, the work of ACFAR and the situation of the Hazaras in Albany received publicity in the daily statewide newspaper *The West Australian*. The high level of support for the Hazara within the Albany community was widely reported. Some of the press was more controversial than positive, particularly articles about the departure of Hazara from Albany, and from their employer Fletchers, once some of them received permanent visas. It was agreed these issues could form the basis of their artistic engagement with the topic.

At a second workshop, participants confirmed the relevance of the Hazaras' experiences to the liminal theme. A number of pieces of artwork were developed for the exhibition by these ACFAR members. Other artists also took up the theme of the liminality of the refugee experience, and combined, their work represented a number of strong messages, which we discuss in more detail below. The exhibition was attended by about 200 members of the "Great Southern" community, including members of the arts community, "sea changers," local Council members, refugees, and others.

### **Representing the liminality of the refugee experience**

A piece of art developed by the ACFAR group collectively and rendered by the curators involved an image of a temporary passport. This included an obscured photograph which left the identity of the holder in doubt, illustrating the ways in which refugees are made liminal in the process of their engagement with the state. The practical function of obscuring their identity was to preserve the passport holder's anonymity, a form of protection necessary given the temporary status of these residents, which precludes them from directly critiquing the government, for fear of negatively influencing the outcomes of their applications for permanent residence. Yet, as those involved in the artwork recognized, the anonymous, ambiguous identity of the TPV holder also draws attention to refugees' compromised ability to be heard.

Another piece was based around newspaper articles, correspondence and other documents which illustrated some of ACFAR's experiences. The curators used this documentation in two panels which conveyed the personal experience and the weight of the bureaucracy which challenged the refugees' attempts to find a future for themselves. Official letters and emails, press clippings, and individuals' hand writing were photocopied and enlarged to create a montage of words and images. The two panels were hung on facing walls in the hallway leading to the exhibition gallery. To add an auditory aspect to the exhibit, a song by a Hazara singer, recorded at the earlier *Room at the Inn* celebration, played on headphones.

In representing the liminal, one image from the exhibition, not directly related to the Hazara experience, captured the sense of being on a threshold, while at the same time representing a core aspect of Albany identity by placing a doorframe mounted on the beach. The title of this exhibit, by Jim Duddles, was "En-Trance," linking the idea of liminality to notions of the subliminal and unconscious (See Image 1). The artist presents the doorway as a portal, which suggests the opportunity for movement through both a physical and mental space. The doorway is an entrance point to another space or time frame, according to the artist. But the beach itself is a liminal space,

being between land and water, and through the doorway one sees the water, also a liminal phenomena in its "not quite solid, not quite air" state. The beach is a fundamental image for the refugees too, most of whom arrived by boat, and it represents that which needs to be crossed in order to be "in" the country, and that which the Australian government seeks to "protect." Of course there is another irony here, since the Hazara are a regional people coming from central Afghanistan and traditionally unfamiliar with the ocean, yet now surrounded by it in a town whose livelihood and recreation tend to revolve around it.

Another part of the exhibition was an evolving community installation of postcards. Visitors to the exhibition and workshop participants were invited to express their experience or perspective of the liminal on semi-transparent postcards. The opaque cards were then hung, as a work in progress, against some large windows, where viewers could look through them to the ocean outside, adding multiple layers to the images, creating a curtain of liminal experiences. Opacity is another representation of liminality, and the postcard size provides a reference back to other travels—short term, temporary movements.

This installation included a number of statements by the ACFAR workshop participants, handwritten in black felt pen, the written aspect (rather than drawing) perhaps a response to the "postcard" reference. These were themed around the refugee experience, and as the exhibition continued, others responded to these words and images. One ([See image 1](#)) had written:

### **REFUGEE**

To leave behind your home & family  
& your human rights  
to be at the mercy of governments  
who decide your fate  
while you wait  
and fill in forms  
and wait some more.

This statement was in a poem format, with most of the words capitalized. The sentiment is obviously from someone aware of the trauma of having little power over the decision of whether one is let stay or told to leave, and the frustration of having to deal with the bureaucratic processes of form filling.

Another had simply glued the word "*TEMPORARY*" from a newspaper onto the postcard sheet ([See image 3](#)), reflecting the impermanence of the status of the refugees.

Another artist had provided a personal reflection on the tensions between the destructive and creative possibilities implicit in liminality ([See image 2](#)).

### *A ZONE OF TENSION*

- change >>
- conflict >> personal and creative
- energy >>

While the title emphasizes the discomfort of the state of being liminal, the reflection acknowledges the positive energy, opportunity for change and personal and creative growth which accompanies the liminal state.

Another four opaque postcards were taken up with the following ([See image 4](#)):

Our immediate response to someone different is to be wary—probably a protective mechanism to detect difference in others as it may signal risk or danger. This is a

subliminal response no longer useful let alone appropriate.

We can learn to disregard the subliminal response. In the case of the people who are different – seeking help and protection, it is well established that they become loyal, responsible, grateful citizens worthy of our assistance.

Temporary Protection Visa's [sic] result in mental torment to people who have already suffered. Some will struggle to survive and stay sane. I am ashamed of this Australian law.

The RSPCA should be involved in the welfare of refugee's [sic]. Then mabe [sic] they would get humane treatment.

This statement comes from one of the refugee advocates who works closely with the Hazara community. Once again there is a linking of the idea of liminality with subliminality, in the argument that negative reactions which see refugees as different and therefore risky or dangerous is unconscious, therefore unwarranted, and should be disregarded. Instead, the artist argues, they should be seen as the same as "us," because they are responsible, loyal and grateful citizens.[2] The second part of the argument is based around the suffering resulting from the Temporary Protection Visa, which leaves people in a liminal space, with uncertain futures—a situation, the artist suggests, which one would not wish on an animal.

A visiting artist who grew up in Albany, but who now lives in outback Queensland, contributed a cartoon to the installation (See image 5). He happened to be visiting his old hometown at the time of the exhibition, and offered this cartoon from his portfolio. This artist reflected upon the issue of homelessness and liminality, humorously associating a number of elements, including the refugees, represented as stock being transported in trucks like sheep (complete with bleating), their place of work, which is the local abattoir (the truck in which they are traveling is a "Fletcher's International" truck), and the ship (the *Cormo*) which at that time was embroiled in an international controversy as its cargo of live sheep bound for the Middle East was turned away from a number of countries due to health concerns (ironically, the port of Albany was the only port which said it would accept the ship if it were to return with its unwanted cargo of diseased sheep). The image equates the refugees with the ship that cannot land, and a cargo that is unwanted. This image of not being allowed to land is a perfect representation of the liminal state. The truck and ship both represent modes of travel, and travel itself is a liminal state, consisting of being between one place and the next. What is interesting about the ship and the truck is that they contain no image of a driver or captain, just the cargo behind bars. There is also mention of the soccer team which the Hazara in Albany have formed. At the top of the picture is a copy of a newspaper clipping, which quotes the Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone emphasizing that "we will decide who comes to Australia and under what circumstances." She concludes by saying that "We're an immigration success story; that's what this country is."

An artwork located in a room adjacent to the hallway reinforced the message of the ACFAR panels. This video work by Albany artist Linda Hadley was entitled *Between Two Worlds* and consisted of a stream of visual images, projected onto a screen, of 100 small origami sampan boats floating on water, launched in a neat line then drifting apart. The artist chose the following words from Edward Said, a well-known academic, himself a Palestinian refugee, for the exhibition catalogue:

Just beyond the frontier between "us" and the "outsiders" is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is to where, in a primitive time, peoples were banished, and where in the modern era, immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons.

These words make an interesting counterpoint to the words of the Immigration Minister, quoted

above. On the same page in the catalogue, in her statement about her work, Linda Hadley wrote: "The journey through life may require a leap into the void. Whilst searching for a safe haven we enter the unknown in hope that we will find a finer place and state of being, no longer belonging to the place of origin and a stranger to the new land." These words became even more pertinent as the visitors moved through this space into the hallway where the local experience of refugees was conveyed.

### **Exploring the *Mix* : the liminal as artistic and anthropological concept**

In adopting the theme of liminality the *Mix* collective demonstrated a keen understanding of an academic term which has moved in and out of fashion over the years. Within anthropology, the concept of liminality was explored most comprehensively by Victor Turner, in the context of rituals and ceremonies in small scale African cultures.

For Turner, liminality is a stage of being between phases—with the term *limin* or *limen* coming from the Latin, and originally meaning the threshold for a door (Oxford Latin Dictionary).[3] From Turner's perspective, the person in the liminal stage is neither a member of the group to which they previously belonged, nor a member of the group they aspire to. Turner suggests that this has implications for identity: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95). They have a "no longer / not yet" status.

Turner's work has been adapted and applied in numerous ways, expanding its relevance to situations outside of the narrow field of "rites of passage" rituals in small scale societies (see for example, St John). Indeed, Turner himself noted that in modern societies there exist what he called "liminoid" phenomena evident in cultural performances such as the leisure genres of art and entertainment, including theatre, concerts, art exhibitions. Thus his application to an understanding of the *Liminalities* exhibition is apposite.

Turner envisaged a positive function for people or societies in a liminal phase, rather than focusing on the discomfort inherent in being "in-between" and neither this nor that. He argued that liminality held the potential for "future developments and societal change" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 45) and that liminality could provide productive potential, specifically the possibility for a rethinking and reorganizing of society. St John suggests that such "organized moments of categorical disarray [offer] intense reflexive potential" (48), an opportunity for observers, as well as participants, to reconsider their situation and identity.

Deflem suggests that for Turner, "The liminoid originates outside the boundaries of the economic, political, and structural process, and its manifestations often challenge the wider social structure by offering social critique on, or even suggestions for, a revolutionary re-ordering of the official social order" (Deflem 11). Thus cultural performances are opportunities for group reflection about moral and legal rules, social structures, roles etc. (*The Ritual Process* 1982). Such performances help people to understand themselves and the group by reflecting and challenging the group's assumptions about itself. These ideas have been taken up by Rob Schechner and others who work in the field of performance studies.

Turner noted that one aspect of rituals in small scale societies which involve liminality is the presentation of familiar cultural objects in distorted ways, which functions to force participants and observers to think about the basic norms and values of their social and cosmological order, and to reflect on the normal structures of society. He saw this as relevant to modern societies, in cultural performances which challenge the "taken-for-granted" values and attitudes of the day-to-day. He also argued there are aspects of anti-structure in the liminoid which produce a sense of *communitas* – the feeling of comradeship and connection which is common among those undergoing a liminal experience together. This involves "the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon

occupying a sequence of social statuses" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 44). Thus *communitas*, resulting from liminality, points to the ultimate possibility of an unstructured, egalitarian world (*The Forest of Symbols*).

Turner, in his essay "Liminality and Communitas," specifically identified artists as being characters which embody this productive potential:

Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, 'edgemen,' who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalised or fixed in structure. (Creative Resistance)

### **Peripheral or liminal? Regional Australia as transformative space**

We have spent some time explicating the anthropological theory of liminality because we feel there are important elements which need "teasing out" in relation to the current examination of a regional artistic endeavour.

First, let us consider the situation of asylum seekers, particularly those on temporary protection visas, who have little certainty about their future. Initially asylum seekers in Australia are placed in detention centres, "liminal" institutions set up as holding compounds for those who have arrived in Australia and claimed refugee status. If they are found to be "genuine refugees," according to the UN convention, they are given temporary protection visas (TPVs) which allow them out of the detention centres, but which provide limited access to the resources and services permanent residents can access. Their cases are reviewed over a period of time, during which their future is uncertain. Their situation is liminal, if nothing else. Like persons in the liminal phase, they are in a state of ambiguity and indeterminacy. They cannot integrate into mainstream Australian society, in the ways they wish, because their ultimate residence status is indeterminate—they may be sent home after their TPVs expire, or they may be allowed to stay in Australia. And yet they cannot return to the state from whence they came because of the factors which drew them out in the first place. They are neither "that," and not yet "this" i.e. "Australians," but also do not know whether they will ever be able to become Australians. The exhibition pieces clearly reflected on this experience, perhaps the most powerful being the simple word "*TEMPORARY*" on one of the opaque postcards.

Threshold persons are outsiders, or exiles. Turner noted that they are often treated as not present by the group, as though they do not exist. Certainly this is the case for the asylum seekers in detention centres, who are "invisible" to the majority of the mainstream population. It is a perfect example of the ways in which liminality is functional for society, helping us to see who we are, by identifying what being "outside" means. Those on TPVs who do live in the Australian community, such as the Hazara in Albany, take care to keep a low profile so as not to draw attention to their presence, yet they also wish to become part of the community, and have participated in many activities to this end, activities which occasionally bring them to the notice of the general public. So by their very indefinite status, refugees, both those within detention centres, and those in the community, are liminal figures. The exhibition piece which dealt with this theme most obviously was the montage of images of bureaucratic paperwork, official documents, press coverage, and so on, which implied the attempted construction of an identity for the refugees, an identity not self-constructed but bestowed by those in power, and negotiated by helpful "insiders."

This transitional, or, as we argue, liminal status can be interrogated further. Turner noted that people in a liminal state are in the process of being "ground down" in order to be refashioned with new and additional powers to deal with their new life situation and station. This applies to refugees in a way, but the difference is that there is no clear end-point or conclusion to this state.



Thus they have been ground down, but what they are to be made into anew, is as yet unclear.

It is at this point that the role of the artists becomes relevant. The exhibition provided an opportunity to envisage and represent the possibility of that "to what," but not just a sense of the state to which the refugees are aspiring, in terms of membership of the community (and all that that entails—a home, work and the opportunity to bring family into Australia), but to which the entire Australian community might aspire. We return to this theme shortly. First let us consider the liminality of artists. This is eloquently expressed in the opening remarks of Rod Vervest, the regional co-ordinator of PIAF, which demonstrate artists' awareness that they hold a liminal position in respect to the rest of society, doubly so as artists working in rural Australia. This is what drew several of the artists to engage with the Hazara's experience in a shared identification with the themes of liminality. Thus several artists discussed seeing themselves as occupying a liminal space in relation to their audience, for whom they interpret and reinterpret the "taken-for-granted" world, to anyone willing to engage with their new interpretations. This illustrates the productive potential Turner identified as inherent in the liminal position, and available to artists specifically—something Vervest focuses on in his speech. The artists also argued that the process of doing art work, and then putting it up for public view puts them in a liminal state—if critical acclaim is a form of "arrival" then the process of putting one's work up for consideration is a prolonged "threshold" kind of existence. The artists who participated in this exhibition also reflected on their own liminal status in relation to the mainstream economy—they felt peripheralised by a system which sees them on the edge of the money economy, and unable to engage with the institutions of that economy as fully as they might wish. This is despite increasing recognition of the role of art as being important for community wellbeing in regional Australia (Mills and Brown). However the artists acknowledged that this was to some extent an active choice on their part. They felt this was another point of connection with the Hazara, who they saw as also marginalized by many of the economic support systems available to other Australians. Ironically however, the artists do obtain government support for some of their activities—the funding of this exhibition. To add to this paradox, the funding ultimately provided a forum for a challenging of government policies about asylum seekers. For many artists, these aspects of their liminality are conducive to the creative process—it is partly what enables their creative potential. For the Hazara, sadly and not by choice, their experience of liminality in regional Australia may be rather less productive.

### **Conclusion: Beyond *Liminal***

In this paper we have suggested that, contrary to popular conceptions of rural and regional Australia as making up the conservative heartland of the nation's political landscape, regional artists and advocates, albeit in small numbers, may offer a significant cultural critique of Commonwealth policy regarding refugees. For the artists of the *Mix* collective, engagements with the Hazara through the arts and associated community building activities offer one opportunity for such critiques. The purpose of this engagement is twofold, providing both expressive and communicative functions—it enables artists to express themselves, eliciting a public response from supporters, as well as offering opportunities for educating a broader public, both within Albany and beyond. The artists' desire to find points of connection with Hazara provided the impetus for this engagement, and as such may demonstrate an aspect of "desire" for the "other" and appropriation of that "others'" experience [4] which could be seen as misinformed and exploitative in its eliding of two very different forms of liminal experience. However, the intention of the artists was to make contact by finding points of similarity, and by expressing empathy by trying to understand and then represent the refugee experience, and encouraging the refugees themselves to have their voices heard.

As can be seen from the art works, and consistent with the statements of advocates, there is a clear challenging of the government and majority position on the appropriate treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. In their daily lives the people of Albany, particularly those involved in the activist group (including the "sea-changers") and some of the artists, attempt to demonstrate other

ways of dealing with "outsiders." This is partly because they see themselves as "outsiders" in some ways. In this art exhibition they have used the opportunity to represent familiar cultural objects in distorted ways, challenging observers to think differently about their assumptions and to reflect on the normal structures of society. There is evidence of Turner's recognition of the productive possibilities of liminality in this. Likewise, at the *Liminal* exhibition and similar public events involving Hazara and others there is evidence of a sense of *communitas* between the artists, the advocates and the refugees themselves—a feeling of comradeship or connection between those who share a sense of liminality, (granted, to different extents, and with different degrees of choice), in relation to the mainstream or core community. This sense of *communitas* is seen by members of each group to have developed in what Turner identified as an environment without social divisions, which "presses always to universality and ever-greater unity" ("The Centre Out There" 202).

The exhibition can be seen as representing three things: a temporary celebration of the achievement of *communitas*; a step in a longer term community-building project; and an opportunity for communication of an alternative vision of an inclusive society. This perspective is consistent with Mills and Brown's findings on the benefits of the arts in building inclusive communities in regional Australia and with their argument that engagement in the arts contributes to active citizenship. As the discourses of the artists and advocates interviewed as part of this study suggest, and as their participation in human rights matters demonstrates, there are clear links here between activity in the arts and activity in social justice and moral issues in regional Australia. Thus the artists and the advocates, from their relatively peripheral position *vis a vis* the administrative core of government, offer an alternative of a more inclusive citizenship than that prescribed by their Canberra-based leaders. In doing so, they see themselves as effectively building a diverse yet inclusive community within their regional settings and across cultural differences. In a similar fashion, Victor Turner, in exploring the theme of liminality and the role of the artist, envisaged the possibilities of moments of *communitas* engendered in the interstices of (post)modernity as potentially producing an unstructured, egalitarian world. While we do not wish to overstate the claims of this small regional art exhibition to remake the world, it is an enticing vision to consider.

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## Endnotes

[1] Our research uses a combination of participant observation and interviewing to explore the positive engagement one rural community has taken in relation to Afghan asylum seekers. The work has been undertaken over 2004-2005. Direct quotes used in this paper come from this research. [\[return\]](#)

[2] See Tilbury for a critique of this line of argument. [\[return\]](#)

[3] Victor Turner, whose work developed out of earlier theorizing by van Gennep, was interested in the various stages through which social dramas, such as rituals, progress—those of breach, crisis, redressive action, reintegration or schism—and explored the characteristics of the middle stages. The crisis stage, Turner argued, has elements of limen, being a threshold between the other phases. The limen is particularly important in rites of passage, that is rites or social rituals which accompany any change of place, state, social position, age, time etc. It is necessary to move *through* liminality in order to reach the next stage. He saw social dramas as evidence of disharmonic process or tension played out in the public sphere (Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*) and argued that the liminal stage is important for the process of regenerative renewal, the reconstitution of the social actor and their reintegration into society. [\[return\]](#)

[4] We wish to acknowledge our colleagues who participate in the Red Ink Collective for their critical reading of this engagement. [\[return\]](#)

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