

## Sanctuary – Contemporary Art and Human Rights

*“Sanctuary is an undoubted achievement and Glasgow Museums should be congratulated for the scope of their ambition”* - Moira Jeffrey, *The Herald*, Arts Section, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2003

### Background

*Sanctuary*<sup>1</sup> responded to priorities in Glasgow City Council's (GCC) inclusion strategy following its agreement to take up to 10,000 asylum seekers as part of the government's dispersal programme identified in 2000. The subsequent unrest in the city was well documented in the media and public perception of asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow was very poor. From this context, following pilot work, *Sanctuary* developed as a major programme with two principal aims:

- *Sanctuary: the exhibition* - To use a high profile exhibition to raise awareness of the plight of asylum seekers and refugees worldwide, to redress negative media portrayal and local public perception.
- *Sanctuary: the project* - To offer the new residents access to local (arts) services as afforded to other Glasgow residents, their right as part of the GCC/Central Government dispersal contract.

*Sanctuary* is the first of what will now become a series of biennial programmes, on issues of human rights identified by local and national government agendas<sup>2</sup>. In line with GCC key objectives, this is a significant strategic development for Glasgow Museums and GoMA and represents a policy move that mainstreams social justice issues whilst celebrating the best in contemporary art practice. In developing the service as a vehicle for broad social change and one that creates sustainable communities, it is therefore also about collaborating and integrating resources with other sections of GCC Cultural and Leisure Services<sup>3</sup> - Libraries, Arts Development, Community Action, Sport and Play – all of which are being encouraged to develop programmes of work linked to the biennales.

### Sanctuary: The Exhibition

*“...an intelligent combination of British and international artists with work which swings from the poignant to the chilling”* - Iain Gale, *Scotland in Sunday*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2003

The aim of this exhibition was to engage the power of contemporary art to explore and address issues relating to human rights and the plight of asylum seekers and refugees. Many artists are passionately concerned with human rights and their abuse, and the works selected for this exhibition explored issues such as forced migration, displacement, torture, oppression, identity and concepts of 'home'. There were 28 artists represented and included internationally renowned artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Anthony Gormley and Ross Sinclair exhibiting alongside asylum seeker and refugee artists resident in Britain. The exhibition opened 9<sup>th</sup> April 2003 and ran for 6 months. 1,200 people from Glasgow's diverse cultural community attended the private view (figures not seen at an event like this since GoMA opened in 1996). All information in the exhibition was available in six key languages recognised as the most popular in Glasgow and free, weekly guided tours were offered by the GoMA volunteer guide service.

*Sanctuary* marked a critical change in GoMA's artistic policy, moving from its historical focus to engage with current arts practice, both in Glasgow and internationally. The exhibition included paintings, photographs, mixed media sculptures and new media works of art and led to the overhaul of major display areas, including the foyer where the 600-kilo Gormley sculpture was suspended, visually linking all *Sanctuary* exhibition spaces including the outreach work. It also demonstrated to the public the direction of GoMA's ambitious new acquisitions programme.

Visitor figures for the exhibition exceeded 210,000. Front of House staff recorded visitors from more diverse backgrounds than had previously attended. The high profile exhibition encouraged people to inquire about voluntary positions within GoMA's Volunteer Guides and Education & Access Team. Strong public support for the exhibition and the issues raised were revealed through a survey conducted in the first month and indicated *Sanctuary* had effected positive attitudinal change in visitors (comments enclosed).

In addition to the main exhibition there was a separate selling exhibition in GoMA, which raised funds for Amnesty International and the Scottish Refugee Council. The show was the first of its kind in GoMA and included work from *Sanctuary* artists, local and national established artists and celebrities.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanctuary received funding from Glasgow City Council, The Scottish Arts Council, The Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Hugh Fraser Foundation. The project was supported by Amnesty International and The Scottish Refugee Council.

<sup>2</sup> Future themes to be addressed are Violence Against Women (2005) and Sectarianism (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Glasgow Museums became part of Glasgow City Council's Cultural and Leisure Services (CLS) in 1998.

## Sanctuary: The Project

*"I learned lots of things...saw lots of things...we can draw more things...we wanted [wanted] to come again it was very fun. Thank you."* - Sohrab, participant in outreach workshops, January-March 2003

Whilst *Sanctuary: the exhibition* brought major international works together to highlight the power and relevance of contemporary art in dealing with global political issues, *Sanctuary: the project* used the arts to explore and highlight issues facing international people coming to live in Glasgow (many having fled intolerable situations in their countries). When the project finishes, artists will have run over 120 visual art workshops with 14 projects across the city, which support the 'new Glaswegians'. Advertised through leaflets in 6 key languages and by contacting associated organisations, these workshops have attracted over 300 people aged between 3 and 60+ and from over 20 different countries. Many participants were able to attend a complete block of 6 or 12 workshops and created new work, which was exhibited alongside the major exhibition and across the city. The first exhibition of outreach work opened in GoMA with over 80 people and their families who had participated in the initial workshops attending the private view, which was held jointly with the main exhibition. A website was also created from the projects and can be found at [www.glasgowmuseums.com/sanctuary/](http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/sanctuary/).

The workshops were developed by Glasgow based contemporary visual artists to meet the needs of participants and used accessible venues, local to where people lived. This was an important aspect of the project as participants were unfamiliar with the city and there were a number of issues surrounding travel, childcare and languages – transport costs and interpreters were provided when requested. Some groups, as part of the six-week block of workshops, visited GoMA or another Glasgow Museum and often highlighted this as one of the best things in the project. Glasgow Museums will sustain such access through its Education & Access Teams and GCC's Community Action Teams, enabling staff at GoMA to look to 2005 without leaving behind new audiences. Outreach participants who are now attending subsequent events and exhibitions is a key outcome for the project and GoMA.

Separately, from April - September 2003, *Sanctuary* has presented, or been involved in, over 40 multi-genre arts events across the city. These events were attended by more than 900 people and included music performances, storytelling sessions, dance and performance events, visual art exhibitions and workshops. Monthly leaflets and newsletters, detailing events and project news, were distributed through the Sanctuary mailing list<sup>4</sup> and GoMA. The outreach project has also developed a number of partnerships with external organisations such as Sharmanka Gallery, Cranhill Community Project, Greater Easterhouse Arts Team, the Visual Arts Project, Tramway, The Arches, Artists in Exile and the YMCA, Glasgow.

In another aspect of the project *Sanctuary* has developed an artists initiative with partners - the GCC Arts Development section and The Arches (a city-centre performance venue and theatre company) - and held a conference for asylum seeker and refugee artists of all disciplines. The outcome of this conference has been to develop a network for asylum seeker, refugee, displaced and Glasgow based artists across the city, based in The Arches, to provide an invaluable support and artist opportunities. The conference was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> October and facilitated by London based Artists in Exile, with four facilitators speaking and running workshops. Over 70 people attended the two days and included 15 asylum seeker and refugee artists, a high percentage for such an event. Artists in Exile, Glasgow has continued to meet over the last 18 months and has secured funding for 3 years from the Scottish Arts Council and Glasgow City Council to continue to provide support and opportunities for artists new to the city. For more information please see: <http://aieglasgow.tripod.com/index.html>

In order to give a flavour of the work involved in Sanctuary, a CD-ROM is available which archives the many facets of the project. This has been available in all Glasgow libraries and from GoMA since March 2004. In a project where artist Heather Lynch worked with groups to create a human rights map of the world for the Open Museum, which can be borrowed by community projects and schools.<sup>5</sup> With the artists' network, these two projects form the legacies of the fifteen-month programme. The links generated between artists, communities, organisations and individuals through *Sanctuary* have created access to the extensive range of museums collections and arts resources available in the city and will ensure that the enthusiasm and skills developed through the project are not lost.

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<sup>4</sup> The mailing list was created to hold contact details of groups and individuals involved on the outreach project; interested individuals who had contacted GoMA about the project; and organisations and individuals who disseminated information about the project to the target audiences.

<sup>5</sup> The Open Museum Resource is a resource for community groups and schools to gain access to Glasgow Museum collections and create exhibitions in their communities. The handling boxes are a loans resource of museums objects and projects which are designed to be used by groups to facilitate discussion, reminiscence and access to a museums collection.