

'Belonging' Panel Discussion
20 September 2002, Huntly Hotel

Seona Reid¹

I have to be absolutely honest and say that I knew absolutely nothing about Deveron Arts before I received the invitation. I phoned up people and found out a little bit more about it. I'm extraordinarily impressed. What we have in Huntly is a really quite innovative and non-traditional arts organization which, from the numbers that are here tonight, seems to be extraordinarily successful. In using the town as the venue for a series of really interesting artists in residence then using their work as a basis for debate and discussion.

So we've had - which I hope you were all at - the exhibition by Leena Nammari over in the Library and, I hope you'll agree that it's a very powerful exhibition. We've seen the children's work that she's been involved in in the schools; we have heard John (Claudia not sure of spelling of surname) introducing the theme of "belonging") and now we've heard Paul giving us his interpretation of the theme of belonging through music. Interestingly, when John was talking about 'belonging' being reflected in things like colours and in memories and stories, for me belonging is often reflected through music. Now is the opportunity to take what we've gained from the exhibition, from the children's project, from Paul and John's interpretation of belonging and begin to tease out some of the themes.

I'm going to introduce **Leena Nammari** first of all, who was born in Palestine but has spent the last 13 years in the UK and has spent the last six months in Huntly. Her exhibition is a very powerful and interesting expression of how she's responded to place in terms of belonging and she's going to talk more about that later.

I want to introduce **Nora Radcliffe**, MSP for the area who has stood in at very short notice for Tommy Sheridan. We are very grateful to her and pleased that she is not going to do an impersonation of Tommy Sheridan but speak entirely in her own right.

Kenny Hunter is a Glasgow based artist, currently in residence at Glenfiddich Distillery. He mainly works in sculpture, both in the gallery context and in public art. Two of his best known works recently were *Citizen Firefighter* which he did in residence with the Strathclyde Fire Brigade, and *Man Walking Amongst Us* which was a sculpture of Christ for the Museum of Religious Life in Glasgow. Both really magnificent pieces of work.

On my far right is somebody who I think most people will know already - **Glen Neil** is principal art and design teacher at the Gordon Schools here in Huntly. He is a local arts activist as you know and was involved in many of Leena's school projects.

To my immediate right **Robbie the Pict**, founder of the Scottish Pictish Cultural Society and a constitutional activist. I thought he was probably most famous for his action over the Skye Bridge but he tells me that actually he prosecuted successfully the Queen for the return of the Stone of Destiny and he has also set up an acre in Skye at a place called Pictland, free from Westminster rule. I'm sure he'll tell you more about that.

So, having introduced everybody what I'd like to do is to start the discussion by asking each of them to respond to a question which I'm going to ask and that will also give you some time to think about the questions that you'd like to ask because it's over to you, after this round.

So can I start with Leena. I'm going to ask 'do you feel you belong, and what do you belong to'?

Leena

It's quite a difficult thing, I think that belonging is a very abstract concept and I don't know that I belong in any particular place. I keep on calling home is in Ramallah, home, but physically I don't have a home there. I belong to the culture, I think, but I don't actually belong there at the moment. It's somewhere that I keep on searching for, I think all of us are always searching for somewhere that we belong to, or someone we can belong with but it's something that all of us as human

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beings are always searching for and it could be – to me, it's a very temporary thing. You could belong somewhere at some point, then you could belong somewhere else then again you could go on forever looking for somewhere that you belong, because I actually don't know where I belong. It's a difficult thing. I still call home home even though I don't feel it's home at all. I don't know.

Robbie

I've been thinking about this as well and there seems to be several constituent parts in this. There's the factor of time, how much time have we spent, there seems to be the question of location – where, geographically, have we spent that time, and there seems to be the question of what experiences you had when you were there - did you grow up there, did you get married there, did you meet the person of your life there – so that accumulative experience seems to be a factor. Also I think there are some very basic things like what language were you speaking then, you know, things that we take for granted, you recognize that as soon as you go elsewhere and you hear people speaking another language. Physical characteristics of the people around you become subliminally kent faces and you take that in at a level and you know that's more home than somewhere else. And I think there's another question that hits you without you realizing it and that's the symbols and the colours that are around you. These symbols might be simply the Lion Rampant, the colours might be St. Andrews Cross or things that are on the skyline that just strike you; you know that shape and that place and that mountain and that gives you the sense of belonging. The concept itself is difficult, in that the word has many meanings but it's tested when you say, you don't belong here. So where do you belong? And that's a question that I think might stimulate the people in the audience and I'll leave that to them to meditate on.

Kenny

For me, my relationship with the idea of belonging or my identity is maybe intertwined and I see it like a ripple moving across the water and I have these different zones that I belong to. One being most directly my family, my kin if you like, the town I was born in, and now I've left that town I live in Glasgow so I've got relationships and connections with that city. Then I suppose I'm an urban Scot as well because I feel a difference coming up here, I'm in a different zone now. Also I have a kinship or a relationship to the rest of the Scottish people as well. I suppose you can take that ripple going right into a British identity, which is more problematic for me, and then eventually into Europe. I have connections with other artists in Europe and I feel they share bonds and communications. Eventually I suppose that ripple will end up at the outside, at the edge of the planet. I suppose to some abstract degree I feel part of the world. It's a complex thing and that's about as far as I can go right now.

Nora

When I was told what the question would be, my first reaction to belonging was I felt I did belong because I can remember my parents, both my parents, I still haven't moved very far from where my family roots were, so there's all sorts of things that I keep encountering and coming across that reinforce the fact that I do have roots here, my family go back generations in this general area, the language is familiar. Then I started thinking about not belonging and how awful that must be and how dreadful it must be not to know your parents or have that sort of network that secures you in a place and time geographically and in a family sense. And it reminded me of something that distressed me at the time and still upsets me. This was during the referendum campaign for the Scottish Parliament and we were all campaigning cross party for the yes yes vote and I was manning this stall outside Tesco's in Inverurie and this middle aged/elderly chap came past and I tried to stop him and discuss it with him and he said, "no no, that's for you people". I sort of pressed him a bit further, he was of English background, and he'd moved up here and I said how long have you lived here? When he said 13 years I was appalled that he didn't feel that he had the right to express his opinion, and yet to me he was somebody that lived in Scotland, he was one of the people of Scotland who had the right to say whether or not we had home rule. So I wonder how much belonging is acceptance by other people as much as your own feelings of where you belong? I just offer that.

Seona

Leena, how do you respond to that, having been here for 13 years?

Leena

I actually didn't vote for that because I didn't feel I had the right. It was very much a Scottish question for me. Even though I have got the right to vote in Britain, I did not take the chance to do it because I felt it wasn't my question to ask yes yes or no no, or yes no or whatever, that was a question for people who live here, who actually belong here. And I don't belong here, so therefore I didn't vote in that one. I vote in elections yes, I truly believe in the electoral system, people have to vote, yes, but for the referendum - it wasn't my question.

Glen

I suppose I've been the longest here, 25 years I've been up here, I came here with the intention of staying about 4 years. I come from south of Stonehaven I suppose that makes me a Grey Settler. Paisley's where I come from, I grew up, born and bred there. I hope this doesn't display some kind of arrogance, but I've never felt that I haven't belonged anywhere. Anywhere I've ever been I've always felt that I belonged there. Now I don't know whether that comes from my own background, my mother or whatever, I've always felt that I belonged. When you mentioned your not answering the political question - I spent 4 years of my life in Australia, I'm married to an Australian. While I was out there - this may not mean much to you here - there was a Prime Minister then called Whitlam, a Labour Prime Minister, who was sacked by the Governor General who was the Queen's Representative in Australia. Now I can't imagine a situation where the Queen would sack a government here but the Governor General sacked the Prime Minister of Australia at the time. I certainly voted at that time, and I suppose it's a sort of feeling that - doesn't betray arrogance - I have belonged or felt I belonged anywhere I am. I've tried to fit in. I haven't joined any Caledonian Clubs anywhere I've been - the last people I wanted to meet were exiled Jocks, but I have felt very comfortable, and I suppose when I came here first, this is what made me feel that I could belong here as well. I actually felt very comfortable when I came here and although it was only for four years and I've now been here 25 years I've enjoyed every minute of it.

Seona

It's over to the audience. Although this was set up as a Panel in a Question Time format, I think it would be good if people out there feel that they're as able to make comments and give opinions as people up here. So are there any questions, comments or opinions that anybody in the audience wishes to give us?

Audience

I am Australian and the Governor General may be the Queen's representative but he is also a part of the Australian parliamentary system and the rest of the parliament had cast a vote of no confidence in the prime minister - that's why he was sacked.

Audience

Alistair Allen. I should declare an interest - I'm the SNP candidate here for the next election but I'm not going to talk about that. I was going to ask a question about language. We've got a Palestinian, a Maltese, a Pict here and language is very important to these identities. In Scotland we have a problem in that the two native languages of Scotland are very much divided in some quarters and certainly underfunded in others. I just wondered if the Panel have any views on how Scotland as a country with its own culture could nourish its native languages more fully.

Robbie

Excellent question, language is critical, and you talk about two languages in Scotland. I'm trying to engender respect for the third language, the native language, which is that of the north Britons who were labelled Picts by the Romans simply because they couldn't beat them. Apart from 'painted', also in vulgar Latin it means Jessies, long-haired cissies, handbaggers, and its purely out of resentment for the fact that they couldn't whack them - they got whacked.

The interesting thing about the Pictish language, it's travelled from Asia Minor from just north of Palestine and shares certain elements. Now if you doubt this, there is an inscription at Newton, Newton House in Inch, and that inscription is on a stone, it's the oldest document in Britain, 400 bc and I see 19 Phoenician letters - that's confirmed by Dr. Elias Bitar of Damascus University in Syria. So you're not far away from a broad international spectrum here, sitting in Strathbogie and Strathdon, this was the centre of the universe a long time ago and you should know that Asia is named after AS which is the Sumerian word for red - Asia Minor was the colony of the red-haired people. The hall of the red-haired people you're sitting in right now, as you'll know - all of the Strathdon valley boggin wi redheads, carrot tops, call them what you will. We are the peepel! The language of these folk still survives in most prominent outcrops such as bens: ben is the old Pictish word for head - payah, p e a which gives you peabrain probably - it's shortened in the genitive form to payan - of the top of, and gives you ben everything, in the whole of Scotland. There are many other words of that type, they reappear throughout Turkey, and they survive in Estonia and in Finland. So there is another language, which does need some respect, and discovering that language will hopefully send you on a journey of discovery concerning the historical contribution of this area and its interaction with Palestine Levant.

Leena

That's a tenuous kind of a link there! Fair enough, for example that symbol comes from mainly the Indian sub continent, which is a sign for luck, which is also the Nazi sign, in the other direction, but it's a bit tenuous. Going back to the question about trying to revive the local languages - I think people have to actually speak it, they have to be encouraged to speak a local language. I would forget - even though I've been here for 13 years and I've spoken Arabic all my life, if I don't speak to my family in Arabic there's a lot of words I would forget. It's actually quite funny, speaking to John Baldacchino - there's a lot of words in Maltese that are Arabic, well Arabic-based, and whenever I speak to John about that my mind goes into Arabic mode and I start speaking almost instantly in Arabic because I just feel immediately I want to speak in Arabic. If I don't speak Arabic I will forget it and I think that's the thing with Gaelic and Scots and Doric in Scotland - people have to be encouraged to speak it for it to stay alive or else it's going to be a dead language, only in books.

Seona

I want to ask the rest of the Panel to develop that idea of whether language is part of identity. Is language part of identity, because identity and belonging are not necessarily the same, but is it an important element?

Nora

Yes I think it is and I think that's demonstrated politically because if you have any conquering nation, the first thing they do is suppress the language and insist on their own language. I think that demonstrates the importance of it and we see that in our own language and English, we've got so many double-barrelled words, expressions like 'null and void' for example, where you are getting the old Anglo-Saxon being retained alongside the new Norman French which people were obliged to use. To make your meaning clear you used the one that you were obliged to use by the people who were the political authority but you had to add the one from the native language that made clear what you were getting at. And I think people who speak the same language do have a sense of community. One of the things that was being raised there was how we can maintain our native languages. Now I don't know much about Gaelic, but I get the impression that it's been a written language and a more cohesive language possibly than Scots. We've seen a lot of work going in to Gaelic medium education and the Gaelic College and things like that and people ask why can't we do the same for Scots. Well some of you have already mentioned Doric and Scots, and I think the Scots language or Doric is a much more oral tradition, a much more spoken language, and I think it's maybe more difficult to try and solidify it in a written form. I find very often if you see things written in Scots they're quite difficult to read. To get the sense of it you have to read it aloud, and you think "well why did they bother doing that, could they not just write it in English spelling, and say it in Scots?". Ok, this might provoke some reaction. The other thing is that so much of the Doric was a vocabulary based on a very labour intensive agricultural system

so a lot of the words are archaic or no longer used - a great swatch of the language is obsolescent. But I like to hear it spoken, I mean I'm speaking English now but if I speak to somebody in the street that spoke Doric I would slip into it quite naturally. But I can't turn it on like a tap.

Glen

I was educated at a time when it was certainly not fashionable to speak the local dialect. It was driven out of us deliberately, we had to speak proper English. We may have had an accent but certainly the dialect was not encouraged. I don't have much to say about this except to say that I spend some time down at the Drum Inn at Wartle, and one local farmer who goes in there - you would think he was probably incoherent most of the time but one night he told a wonderful story about how his cart had cowped at the Inveramsay bridge and the bulls had gone down the line and how he managed to stop all of this. When I tell it, it's banal; when he told it - in Doric - it was sheer poetry.

Audience

I just want to ask Leena something, getting back to the visual aspects of her work more than the words that come afterwards, or maybe they come during or maybe she tries to put words to her own images afterwards. I don't know how comfortable you are with words, I've been a visual artist in the past and I struggle to be comfortable with words. I am a visual artist and I struggle to be comfortable with poetry, I like the poetry of images. For me that sense of belonging that people have touched on can be something that is so elusive, it has to be connected to the understanding of what it is to be, never mind to belong. Why certain landscapes, why that Inverurie road the B9001, has the greatest skies in Britain, for me, and why they touch me so greatly I don't really know. Is there something about your experience here over the previous year that has touched you so deeply that you felt in that moment you truly belonged? Even though that experience was fleeting, and maybe it was something visual that you were at one with. Is that something that has happened to you over the previous year in the area?

Leena

Not really, it just confirmed to me that I don't belong here. A few words were written and photocopied upstairs where the drinks were - they explain what I feel about belonging and I actually don't belong here. I feel alien everywhere I go. It's so much easier to know that you don't belong somewhere than it is to belong, I think.

Audience

Are there not moments, a moment in time, absolutely in the present. For me I belong when I'm kind of drawn by beauty anywhere, it can be incredibly elusive, it's very much in the moment when you're drawn to something and there's this kind of conversation between you and something else, which is maybe fairly spiritual, maybe it's actually even behind the visual, and it doesn't really matter where you come from, or even what terrible experiences you might or might not have had in life, there's something else there which then makes you feel that you're alive and therefore you belong. And you could be on your own, you could be without anybody.

Leena

I don't know. I haven't got to that point where I actually feel that comfortable about anywhere so I can't relate to that. I mean I do think the scenery is beautiful, and there are some amazing skies in this area. I was stunned as I arrived and I'm still stunned by the expanse of sky, I think it's the biggest sky I've ever seen and you can't really say the sky is big, the sky's the same size everywhere but it is huge here, bigger than anywhere, and it is stunning. But, I don't belong here. Listen, my Dad was over for a week last month, staying in London and my sister lives in Guildford so we were staying at my sister's, and my brother's in Guildford - it's the one time in the last six months I actually felt comfortable, being a daughter and a sister. And that was just wonderful. But it wasn't the place, I didn't belong there either, I just felt really comfortable. That's the only time I feel comfortable, it's when I'm actually with family. But it's very difficult to get the family, as a daughter and a sister that's part of my identity and my belonging. But I mean Huntly is a beautiful

place and so is the area around here. I don't belong here though.

Seona

Could you explain a bit more Leena, why 'not belonging' was a starting point for your exhibition.

Leena

I don't know! For all creative people, it comes from around here (inside). You don't just have an idea in your head and make it, you make lots of things, and you edit and the exhibited pieces are the bits that I've edited out, work that I've produced and they are the ones I've felt most comfortable with. And the place I actually felt most comfortable in was in that studio space - that's the booby trapped room - and the corridor outside the studio space and the cleaner's cupboard, because the cleaner came in - Hilda, the cleaner, she came in every day to speak to me for five minutes, and her cupboard was amazing. I just thought it was one of the hidden parts of Huntly that nobody sees. Nobody goes to the back of the museum, they go to the front or to visit the Library. It's hidden parts I'm always interested in, the bits that you don't see, and that's what attracted me to the space and the shape and the colour, I always use bright colours that don't fit. The blue and the orange and stuff like that - they're not right for the space, but I actually quite like clashing colours. I don't know if that's explained the question.

Seona

I'm going to ask Kenny as an artist whether he sees a link between a sense of belonging or not belonging and creativity.

Kenny

I think historically artists have been valued for their individuality and they're often very romantically positioned as outsiders within society and this position can, as I say, be elevated as a kind of wise fool to reflect back the world, the realities or the shape of the world that we inhabit. In my experience and that of a lot of artists of my generation we're very engaged with the world and conversely I've found throughout my artistic life up to now I've met a lot of different people through my work: I'm quite socially engaged with the world in fact. A lot of people maybe live and work in the same industry and while I am still, I suppose, in the culture industry, it has put me in touch with a lot of different communities, people who do other jobs - as Seona mentioned, the Fire Brigade. So for one month I could be working with a fashion designer in London, then a fire fighter in Glasgow, then a community group in the Gorbals of Glasgow. So to some degree I think it's probably a good position for an artist to be to some degree autonomous. But I don't want people to imagine that we're somehow removed or romantically floating above the rest of humdrum existence, because in my experience we actually do travel quite far distances in terms of who we get to meet and who we work with. Maybe that's one of the good things about artists, their ability to connect with other people.

Audience

I must say I was very interested in what Robbie the Pict had to say about names and words for example the word 'ben' like Bennachie. Bennachie, when you look at the shape of it you see the breast, it's the nipple on the top. Ben is really..... and that's why you have them right throughout Scotland, just the same as straths, glens, lochs, these are some of the words that are used between both Scots and the Gaelic, they share the language, it's quite a normal thing. I was very interested in what Nora Radcliffe said with regard to Gaelic and things connected with Gaelic. I'm very involved in that particular area and the thing that constantly surprises me is that there's supposed to be one and a half million, two million, four million people in Scotland who speak Scots. They never organize themselves in any way to actually get any funding. I find it quite unbelievable that something like 200 people connected with Gaelic can organize themselves, while at the same time we hear all the time that there's about a million or a million and a half Scots speakers and they seem unable to pressurize the government to do anything. But the question really, in terms of identity in Scotland, is how many identities do we have? and does the identity really stop at saying well, I was born in Scotland, that makes me Scottish? When you ask people what it is that makes them Scottish, the first thing they turn around and say is "I was born

in Scotland". What would have happened if their parents had gone to China, and they were born in China, would they be Chinese? It seems very very odd. The difference in terms of being British and English I find unbelievably difficult to separate, I cannot see a separation at all. I would ask, what's the difference between French and German people what's the difference between the Norwegians and the Italians, nine times out of ten it falls on language. Now the language produces the culture, it produces the history, it produces the part of being part of something else, it produces a belonging, it produces all the artistic culture, the celtic art or whatever. Now I find the situation in Scotland very odd, because of all the countries I go to in Europe, no-one in Scotland seems to know what actually makes their identity, and I think the biggest problem is that we all share the same language, in terms of English.

Audience

I've spent 22 years in the Air Force, which I've enjoyed. Now, that I've actually lived in Scotland and been based in Scotland but not felt as if I belonged in that particular part of the world. And I've spent many years in Germany, we've spent years in Gibraltar, my son was born in Gibraltar – he as far as I'm concerned is still Scottish, even though he was born in Gibraltar, and what the man said is very very true. I've actually sometimes felt more as if I belonged when I've lived in maybe Germany or even in Kuwait, Saudi, even the Falkland Islands I felt as if I belonged there, and yet sometimes when I've stayed in Scotland I've felt as if I haven't belonged there. Its funny. Although saying that, I've only been in Huntly about two months and I feel as if I belong here already. It's a very friendly place. If all the towns in the whole UK were as good as Huntly then we wouldn't have to ask questions about where we belong, everybody would know where they belong.

But the biggest question I want to come out of this is basically what the man said. I'm a proud Scotsman, always have been, I've always been a proud Scotsman. I've studied Scots history, I know my history way back and I've always been a bit perturbed by the fact that Scots have always wanted to pull away from themselves, when the world's trying to get together. The Scots have always been trying to pull away - why can't we be proud to be British, as well as Scottish? I'm very proud to be British, as I say, I've served all over the world with English, Irish and Welsh, and I've got many friends in all nationalities. And I just find it sad that we always have to want to break away. Do you not find that that's sad? I don't know, I mean where do you go, you start off becoming Scottish then you become Midlothian, then you break it down into little counties, then you end up with little towns, how far do you stop it. Where does it stop becoming your own little group? Do you know what I mean, why can't we just be happy that we've got our people and leave it that way and become proud to be British as well as Scottish.

Glen

I'm speaking as a proud internationalist! I agree with the fact that language makes it easier for people to identify, but it also covers up a lot of other things because it's what's inside that matters. When you see on the news things about American foreign policy, America doing this, America doing that, Israel doing this, Israel doing that, the Americans that I know may have spoken the same language which may identify them, but they don't think the same way as the George Bushes of this world, they're not the people I know. I think also if we're being fair, and I certainly do sympathise with Leena's plight, I don't think we can dismiss Israel either. I don't mean Israel in the sense of the nation but certainly the Jews and what they've contributed to everything in the world from every aspect of man's highest achievements. But the Israelis I have known are not the Sharons of this world, so in that sense I think language can disguise this unity and the belonging which I feel part of.

Robbie

The English are the latest arrivals on the Brittanic Islands, they came here in 449AD they then spent 600 years murdering the Britons, and have used their name from thence onwards to cover up for a kind of control over all the tribes that were in the islands. There's no question of race here, we're all of the same race and race is essentially a colour division. But, going back to something I said in the beginning about time and experience and location, if you've done a lot of

things for a long time in one geographical area you have a sense of being in that tribe, at least, and belonging to that. For a long time before the English - who are essentially a tribe from Germany - came here as mercenaries we had accumulated experience, we had fought off Phoenician traders, we had eventually absorbed Phoenician traders, we had dealings with the Romans on two occasions and 400 years of Roman occupation. It's only 50 years after that that the English arrived. And we should always make a distinction between English and British, and give the British their place, they are due their proper place in history - the Britons - and the English should not be hiding behind the respectability that's accredited to the word Briton for some of their misdeeds; we all have misdeeds, but please don't do that wee trick.

Audience

I come from Eastern Germany and I want to ask one question, because you all talk about belonging as something very positive, it might be proud or something, or being happy, but I think belonging is also being responsible for something, and being German, I mean we always have to deal with this history, so I think we should also think about what belonging means in terms of negative parts of your own identity.

Audience

Me too, I want to say the same thing, or a little different but the same. Leena has her story and there is a desire for belonging in her life. But if you take belonging as something negative, I mean in psychology we have to get rid of our parents, otherwise we always belong to them and we always stay children. That's very very important and if you look around at spiritual ways, I mean Eastern philosophy, Zen Buddhism or everywhere - it's about getting rid of this belonging. Nobody spoke about this and I think it's a very important thing.

Seona

That's a very good point, the notion of belonging actually as a negative rather than as a positive. Is that something you'd like to talk about?

Audience

Thinking about the idea of belonging as we're talking about it, particularly it seems that the salient aspect of it has been about 'not belonging'. When my partner and I ventured into the relationship through the traditional route of bidey-in - bidey-in's fine. But there's a big difference between being a bidey-in and getting married, as we did. The big difference for me when we got married is I became part of my wife's family. It didn't change our relationship, but it changed how I belonged in her family, and how she belonged in mine. And it struck me that belonging's that nice kind of muscly word, because it's got two different bits in, its got a bit of give and a bit of take, and the more I think about it I find it hard to imagine how you can belong without being accepted and without accepting. So you have to go towards and you have to accept. And that seems kind of muscly and sensible to me, but I wonder if on the table that there's another take on that. If it's possible in fact to belong where you don't feel accepted, or to accept where you don't belong.

Audience

Why do you need to belong? I mean it's fine if you want to, if you want to spend your life searching for belonging that's fine, but if you don't need it what's the difference? People live very well without it and as you say it has a negative side. Many people would have lived very well without it, I'm sure you would have. You don't need it.

Seona

Can I try and pull those two together, because there is a link and it's not that tenuous. One of the negative sides of belonging and having a sense of identity as you can see in the Balkans is the rise of nationalism; you can see language becoming important when it's in danger but not being important when it's not in danger. Your point about accepting and non-accepting - you can see examples of nationalism that are absolutely based on non-acceptance. It's based on an exclusive definition of what belongs and what doesn't belong. So there is a hugely negative connotation to the notion of belonging I'd like the Panel to concentrate on the negatives, just for a moment.

Nora

Yes I think we're talking belonging and taking responsibility for the group that we belong to, or that we see ourselves belonging to, as extremely important at all sorts of different levels. I mean from parents being responsible for their children, children being responsible for their behaviour, governments being accountable to the electorate and the electorate being responsible for what their government does. You can see these obligations and responsibilities acting in all sorts of directions, and it's part of it that is too easy to ignore. I think the German people have suffered by being the last ones that we could castigate but I think if we talk about a person being without fault before they can criticize, concentration camps were dreadful but they were invented by the British. We have all sorts of genocide in our history. As a colonizing colonial power we try to deny the ex-colonial nationals from coming to Britain because we said no you should stay in your own country, but the connection that they had was that we had gone to their country and exploited it and then we weren't prepared to reciprocate by taking responsibility when they wanted to come here. So there's a lot of negativity in it and also in a very powerful sense that I think we do have to face up to and take responsibility for.

Leena

I think as well, there is a language thing when it comes to belonging. In Arabic there isn't a word for belonging. I am a family member, I am a family member of Nammari, I belong to this family but there isn't the word belonging. So there's probably a problem in translation as well. I'm a Palestinian, that's my identity, belonging is difficult to translate. I speak English as a second language so maybe the title of my show is the wrong one, maybe I shouldn't even be on this Panel! I'm translating Arabic to English, English to Arabic all the time, so I don't know if the word is the right word that I'm looking for. Maybe I'm looking for a new identity, maybe this is a Panel about identity, I don't know. To belong or not to belong - everybody's searching for something maybe it is an identity, maybe it's belonging, maybe it's for something else. Everybody has this in there. So whether you say that belonging or not belonging, not to belong is easier for you, but you're looking for something as well, you're looking for comfort. Comfort is belonging too, you're comfortable where you are so therefore you belong to that place that you feel comfortable in whether it's in here, or actually a physical place. And as for getting rid of our history and stuff like that, we're lumbered with our history. I mean talking about colonialism or whatever - in Islamic history you can trace back family histories to when Islam started: I can trace back my family history fourteen centuries. That's quite a scary sense of belonging as well. There's a lot of things involved in that kind of thing. I don't know. I've confused the issue!

Robbie

I'm going to be a little arty-farty here, because I don't get the chance to do that very often, and take a global view of this. I was a pilot at one point in my life, and I've also sailed a boat down to Ailsa Craig so I realize the fundamentals - I don't belong in the sky, and I don't belong in the water. When I get to the land, I feel I belong here and all else is politics. That's what it boils down to.

I would like to address the question that was raised by the members of our audience who talked about East Germany. I spent a year in Estonia, the first year after it had broken out from the Soviet bloc. I did not belong in Estonia, I could not learn that language, it is, it is really Welsh backwards. But I was there for a considerable period, and I spent my time in the immigration department and I was there so often that I eventually helped them out with their constitutional law because it was something I had a background in and which they were prepared to talk to me about. And it gave me a sense of one just thing that I could do, and that was introduce what I knew about a sense of justice to a place that had been raped, politically, for fifty years. And that's something that we might want to think about on a global scale: that is your responsibility that is something that you must do, all of us. This world is getting smaller and whether we bring art to bear, music to bear, language to bear, our biggest challenge just now, if we want to belong together safely on this planet, is justice. I leave you with that.

Glen

I find it very difficult to be negative actually, I don't know whether that's because I'm a Sagittarian or not, but I agree with everything Nora said about our history, carrying the baggage of a colonial past or whatever. I don't think though that we're all bad, and there are certain aspects of Britain I'm quite proud of. One of them I would say, is that I think possibly, whether by accident or not, we actually had the answer to some sort of peace for the Middle East. The Balfour Plan is probably as good as anybody ever had for the two different states there. Maybe the negative side would be that Churchill actually reckoned that Israel should be based in Ethiopia for the Falasha Jews which would have been good for you Leena but not very good for the Ethiopians I think. There is a sort of negativity that comes out of this. I was seeing my mother in law in the summer (as I said earlier on my wife's from Australia) and we were up in the tropical jungle of northern Queensland. I was on my own in a four-wheel drive going from Cooktown to Cairns. This was a truck with a sort of camper thing in the back and there would be about four or five elderly Australian couples in the back and two lovely girls sitting behind me. They were speaking English now and again but I couldn't figure out where they came from. Eventually I summoned up my courage and in the middle of the jungle I said "where are you from?" and they said "Israel". I said "oh, whereabouts?" and they said "Tel Aviv". I said "oh, I've got a colleague from Ramallah, teaching beside me" and they looked at one another and turned round and said "is she a Christian?" I said "I don't have a clue. This reminds me of being in Paisley - what school did you go to?"

Audience

I have a question directed to Kenny specifically. I'm not from Scotland as you can probably hear from my accent. But don't worry, I really like it here! Kenny, this idea of Scottishness always intrigues me. This being Scottish. In this country everybody needs to tell you this all the time. I'd quite like to know what does being Scottish - as you said in your introduction when you actually distanced yourself from being British - the identity of being Scottish, what importance does that play in your art work. Maybe then Robbie could also say something to that, what's important about being Scottish to you.

Kenny

I'm going to answer that question just as a person rather than as an artist. Personally I was brought up in a family which was very much into Scottish culture; both my parents were nationalists. And I know that's a word that can be seen as having negative connotations, but that wasn't my experience of it. My mother and father taught me about acceptance, taught me about the perils of sexism and racism. They were left wingers, it was a very socialist household as well as being a nationalist household, so my experience of nationalism wasn't an exclusive hateful one at all, it was very inclusive. It was a bit like being proud of where you're from, this is your history, you go out into the world and share with people, bring your bottle to the party kind of thing. I'm not quite so sure as them, I feel artists ought to be agents on their own rather than being aligned to anything, but my Scottishness I suppose is only really valuable if it's what I'm doing now, how I live, how I connect with people. I think the past is really really important; you have to know where you come from in order to know the future, what lies ahead. Where you come from is very important but it's also very important how you relate to people now and how you live now. And I guess the kind of life I share with other people is probably more important to me than knowing all the history. I mean I heard recently – I think maybe the political people will be able to correct me on this if I'm wrong, but – I heard that using the word 'aye' in a Scottish Court is not acceptable. Is that correct? It's true, yes, so I think we still have a problem with our own identity in Scotland, I think we still have a long way to go to be relaxed and not cringe about who we are. And I think it's something that we as people have to make up as we go along, every day.

Seona

Can I ask you whether it does actually influence or inform your work, because I think that was one of the points of the last question.

Kenny

Maybe in a sort of unconscious way. I try to address the world through my work or through more political issues which are not particularly Scottish, much more to do with working within traditional western historical sculpture.

Robbie

Just to clarify one wee matter and that's the question of the use of the word 'aye' in court. The Sheriff in particular who took exception to it was more bothered by being called '*min*'. He just didn't understand the culture. So that was why he pulled the chap up. I'm very sympathetic to saying 'Aye my lord'. I emphasise, 'my lord'.

Right, on the question of being Scottish which I was asked to answer, well it's basic - it's Tunnocks Caramel wafers, it's tomato soup and mince. And what keeps you that way is waking up and having the courage to be a nationalist – a nationalist, not a nationalist, a nationalist – having a sense of bonding with all the other people in this country who are treated as a colony and don't have the right of self-determination. And that is something that binds us and gives us our chip on the shoulder as much as anything. And it's not understood – never, ever believe anyone else who says oh I understand, I hear where you're coming from. Unless you've been denied self-determination you don't understand, and I think Palestine in particular understands that, many occupied territories understand it, Estonia understood it. But I've got the secret of the Palestine, you know the war with Israel, I know how they can solve that. It has to be explained to the Israelis that Jerusalem is Edinburgh. They're in the wrong country. And once that's made clear to them you can say "*wrang country you balloons, oan the buses, get oot. Lothian regional council buses - big mistake - big red face - you're in the wrang country.*" That's it, solved. It's a basic colony there anyway, they're running delicatessens and all that kind of stuff, it's a home from home, give it back to - it's the original Jerusalem, not many people know that.

Nora

This idea that you can't say 'aye' in court reminds me of a story I heard years ago about when we did have our own parliament, 300 years ago, and somebody was raising something to do with water and water rights. He kept talking about watter, and the watter this and the watter that and some very snidey Edinburgh type said to him is that watter spelt with two tts? And he said nah it's got one t but menners has got twa ns.

Audience

I just wanted to say that belonging for me is more of a personal question, it's not a national issue. I was brought up in a city in Somerset, I'm English, and I was moved away with my family when I was 14 years old and I suppose in a way I feel as if I haven't belonged anywhere since. And I just wonder if there's something about being forcibly moved away from where you feel you belong that then makes you unable to accept or be accepted in another place or make that commitment to trying to belong in another place.

Seona

Is there anybody else in the hall who has experienced a forcible displacement?

Audience

Well I was to an extent forcibly removed from my belongings. I'm a German and grew up in Danzig. After the war the Germans in that part were ethnically cleansed and driven out to West Germany when the Poles took over Danzig. So I didn't belong neither to West Germany, nor anywhere else. As for the rest of my family - some of them ended up in East Germany, some in West Germany. So I came to Scotland. And I must say that here in the north east of Scotland the people were very kind and accepted me for what I was. I never found any hostility from anyone. And I married and I felt very happy, I brought up children who have lived here and paid their taxes in Scotland, lead a normal productive life and I think I feel quite well that I belong here.

But belonging also means how other people look at you, and about the time of the beef crisis my husband was standing outside our garden gate talking to some neighbours, and a neighbour from just around the corner came aggressively up to him, marched up, looked at him and said 'do you know what the bloody Germans have done now, they are not buying our beef!' So, after fifty

years here and thinking that I belonged, in the eyes of some people, even my husband was still at fault because he married me and I was a German. And the Germans didn't agree with their beef. Luckily he has a very good sense of humour, it didn't break his heart!

Seona

On that very positive note I'm going to bring this to a close. I think we've had a good discussion, I think it's been amusing and insightful. So thank you for your participation and can I thank everybody on the Panel for their involvement and their engagement and I also want to thank Deveron Arts for creating the opportunity for this event to happen.

Belonging Panel Discussion was held at the occasion of Leena Nammari's opening of the Exhibition BELONGING in the Brander Institute