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Image theatre: transforming perspectives through embodied responses to refugee drawings in *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* at the 2017 Venice Biennale

Henry Bell^a and Bryan McCormack^b

^aDepartment of Humanities, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK; ^bIndependent Artist

ABSTRACT

This paper documents the drawings, installations, video works, and performances that were produced as part of Bryan McCormack's *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* conceptual work at the 2017 Venice Biennale in collaboration with Henry Bell and undergraduate students at Sheffield Hallam University. It also includes two videos: the first of which was part of McCormack's installation, and illustrates the application of performance methods inspired by Augusto Boal's Image Theatre techniques. The second video gives a brief impression of how these methods functioned in a live performance in Venice in May 2017.

KEYWORDS

Image theatre; Bryan McCormack; *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow*; migrant crisis; interactive

Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)

This is a conceptual work on the current migrant phenomenon by Bryan McCormack. At its core is the visualisation of the European refugee 'crisis': a project to collect, preserve and interpret this visual data, aimed at amplifying refugees' own, independent voices. Since McCormack believes that only the refugees themselves can visualise this humanitarian disaster from within, this work was created with the aim of being by them: each refugee receives three sheets of paper and coloured pens and is invited to draw three sketches, one of their life before (*Yesterday*), one of their current life (*Today*) and one of their life imagined in the future (*Tomorrow*). These drawings are a visual language and, like most languages, they have three main tenses: the past (*the drawing of yesterday*), the present (*the drawing of today*) and the future (*the drawing of tomorrow*) (Figure 1).

Coming off refugee boats at the 'hotspot' camps in Greece to the refugee centres in the North of England, the artist, Bryan McCormack, has spent two years working with a thousand refugees in centres, camps, squats and shelters across Europe. McCormack believes that, in creating these drawings, the refugees are leaving their own *trace*, creating their own contemporary culture and voice whilst simultaneously losing all traceability of their *inherited* culture. Traceability is credibility and without it, people disappear. Each refugee drawing counts. Each refugee drawing is a voice. Every voice counts (Figures 2–13).

CONTACT Henry Bell  h.bell@shu.ac.uk

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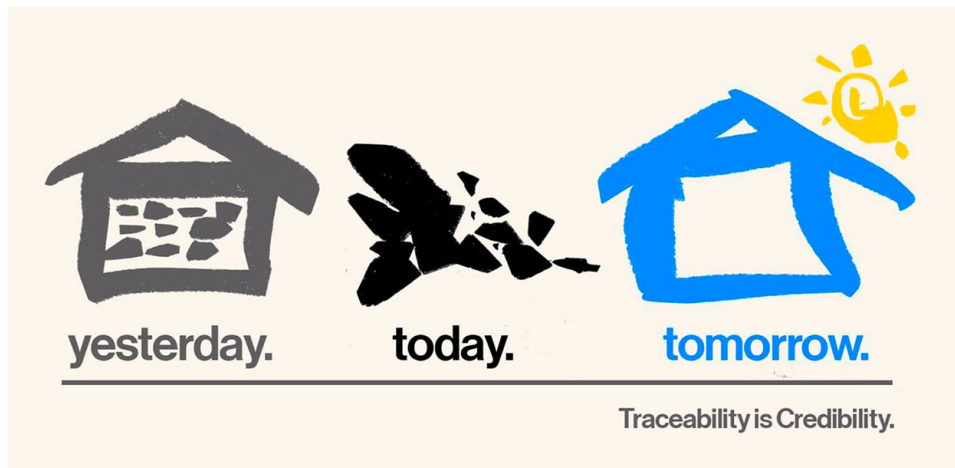


Figure 1. *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* logo. ©Nicolas Merault.

The installation

For the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), the installation (created in-situ) opened on the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. Promoted by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and supported by Sheffield Hallam University and l'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, it was made mainly from the drawings of refugees. Over 600 drawings (600 individual voices) were the visual blocks at the centrepiece of the hanging-sculpture which was separated into three sections: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (Figures 14–22).



Figure 2. Refugee drawing title: Yesterday. By a 28-year-old Syrian woman. Currently living in Estia Refugee Shelter, Athens, Greece.



Figure 3. Refugee Drawing Title: Yesterday. By a 44-year-old Afghan man. Currently living in Skaramagas Refugee Camp, Athens, Greece.



Figure 4. Refugee Drawing Title: Yesterday. By a 44-year-old Afghan woman. Currently living in Estia Refugee Shelter, Athens, Greece.

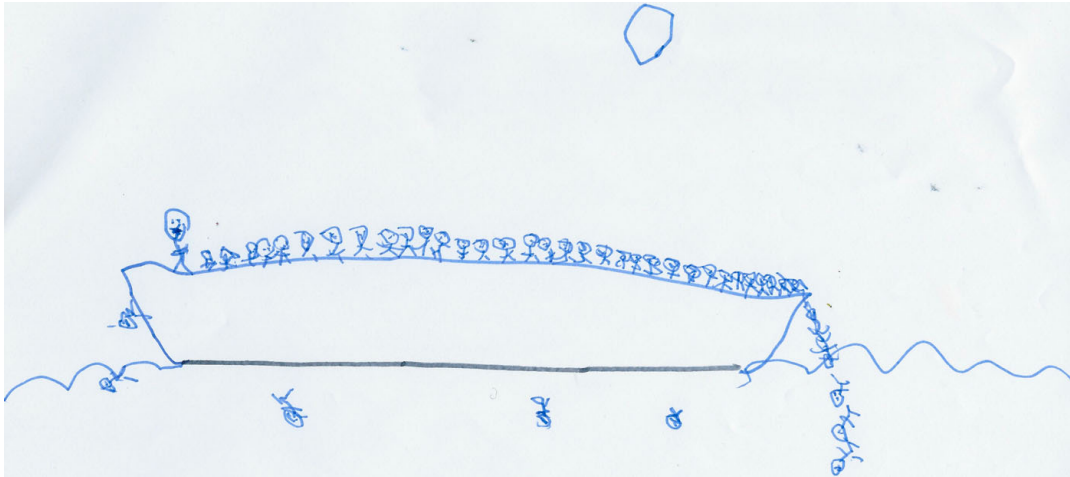


Figure 5. Refugee Drawing Title: Yesterday. By an 18-year-old Syrian man. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.

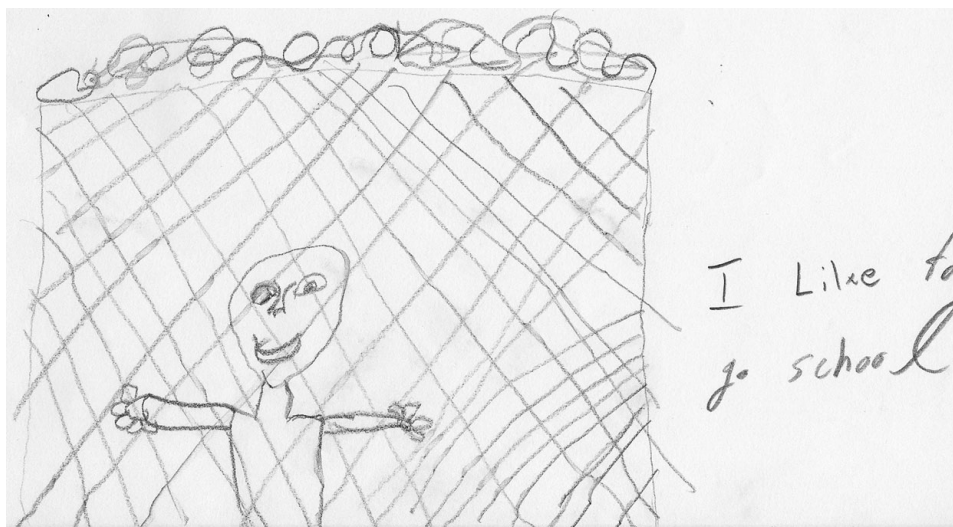


Figure 6. Refugee Drawing Title: Today. By a 9-year-old Afghan boy. Currently living in Samos Refugee Camp, Samos, Greece.

Photo documentation

Surrounding the hanging-sculpture was a series of 18 photo-paper panels, with over 500 black and white photos. All photos were taken by Bryan Mc Cormack and/or Stratis Vouyoucas and were presented as documentation of the dozens of refugee centres, camps, squats and shelters across Europe, where the artist visited to collect the drawings (Figures 23–25).

Video performance studies

As part of the installation, there were multi-screen video works which were another traceable element of the desire to collect, preserve and interpret the visual data of the drawings. The video works, created over a period of nine months were conducted by the artist, Dr Henry Bell and more than 40 undergraduate students from Sheffield Hallam



Figure 7. Refugee Drawing Title: Today. By a 7-year-old Syrian boy. Currently living in the Fifth School Squat, Athens, Greece.

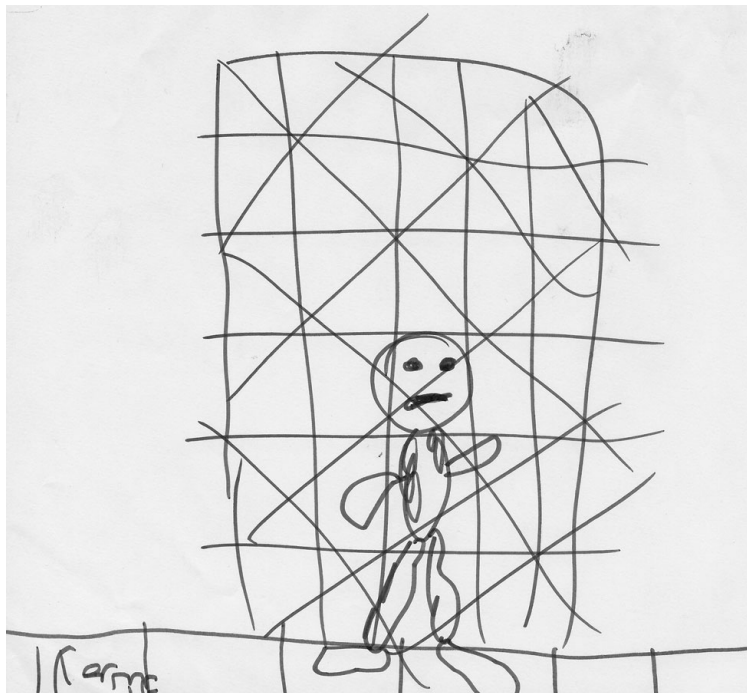


Figure 8. Refugee Drawing Title: Today. By a 13-year-old Iraqi-Kurdish boy. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.



Figure 9. Refugee Drawing Title: Today. By an 8-year-old Syrian girl. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.

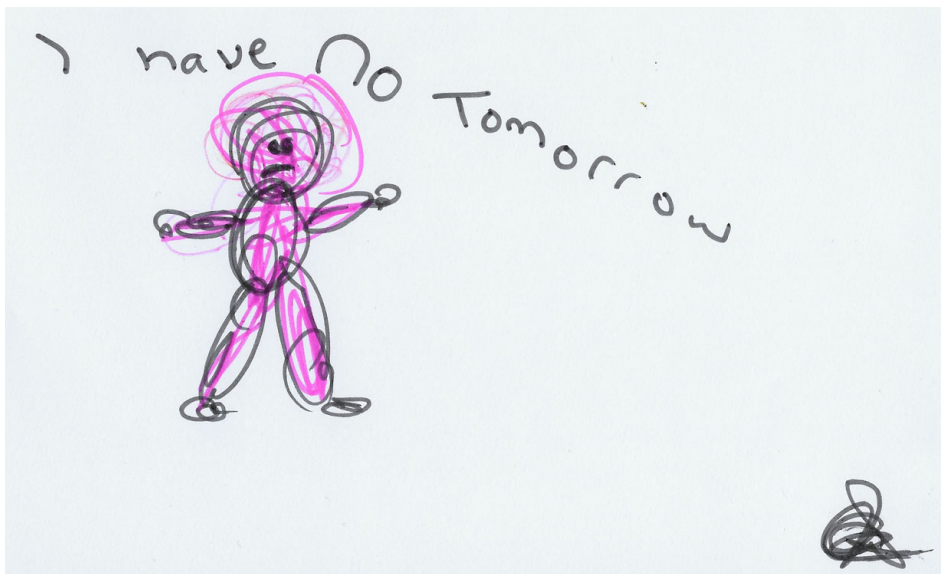


Figure 10. Refugee Drawing Title: Tomorrow. By a 16-year-old Iraqi girl. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.

University. These videos illustrated how the students interacted with the components of the installation in a way which created another traceable element of this humanitarian disaster. Integrated into these video works were some images taken from *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* performance workshops conducted by Thalia Protonotariou at Skaramagas Refugee Camp, in Athens, Greece. All these video works were filmed and edited by Antonette Collins (Figure 26).



Figure 11. Refugee Drawing Title: Tomorrow. By a 15-year-old Afghan boy. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.

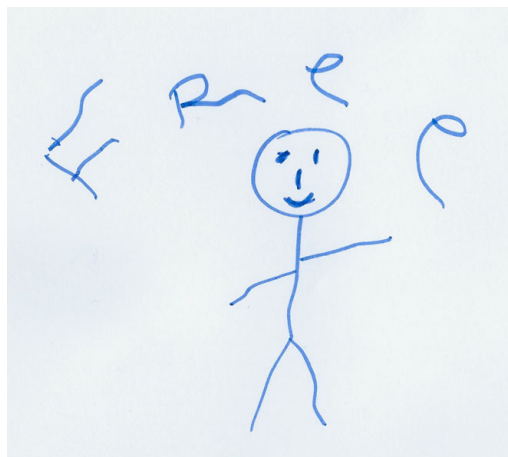


Figure 12. Refugee Drawing Title: Tomorrow. By a 9-year-old Iraqi-Kurdish boy. Currently living in Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, Lesvos, Greece.

The performance

In May 2017, A 70-minute live performance of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* was staged on the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, curated by Bryan McCormack and Dr Henry Bell featuring more than 40 students from Sheffield Hallam University. By using these drawings as a starting point for the live performance, in the style of Augusto Boal's Image Theatre, the performers worked with audience members to create human tableaux in response to the drawings. By working in this way, the focus moved toward how the experience and aspiration of the audience met the experience and aspiration of the refugees. The performance was an active way of meditating upon the experience of the creators of the drawings, rather than a voyeuristic opportunity to observe the experience of the people at the centre of this humanitarian crisis. By participating in



Figure 13. Refugee Drawing Title: Tomorrow. By a 15-year-old Syrian boy. Currently living in Samos Refugee Camp, Samos, Greece.



Figure 14. *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.



Figure 15. Detail of hanging refugee drawings part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.

another traceable component of their lives, the aim was to enable their voices to be heard with dignity.

See supplementary material Video 1 and Video 2 online, which documents Image Theatre work, led by Henry Bell, and performed by Sheffield Hallam undergraduate students as part of the *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation at the 57th Biennale di Venezia and a short montage of these techniques in action during a live performance at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in May 2017. Filmed and edited by Antonette Collins (Figures 27–34).



Figure 16. Detail of hanging refugee drawings next to photo documentation of the sites where they were collected, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.

Social media voice

Three social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) were created and refugee drawings are posted every day. Using these platforms amplifies participants' voices while also informing people of the individual experience of the people at the centre of this crisis. Follow on:

Facebook : [yesterdaytodaytomorrowyesterdaytodaytomorrow/](https://www.facebook.com/yesterdaytodaytomorrowyesterdaytodaytomorrow/)

Twitter : [Yester_Today_T](https://twitter.com/Yester_Today_T)

Instagram : [yesterday__today_tomorrow/](https://www.instagram.com/yesterday__today_tomorrow/)

Currently, volunteers are running independent *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* performance workshops as well as drawing workshops inside several refugee camps and squats across Europe.



Figure 17. Detail of hanging refugee drawings part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.

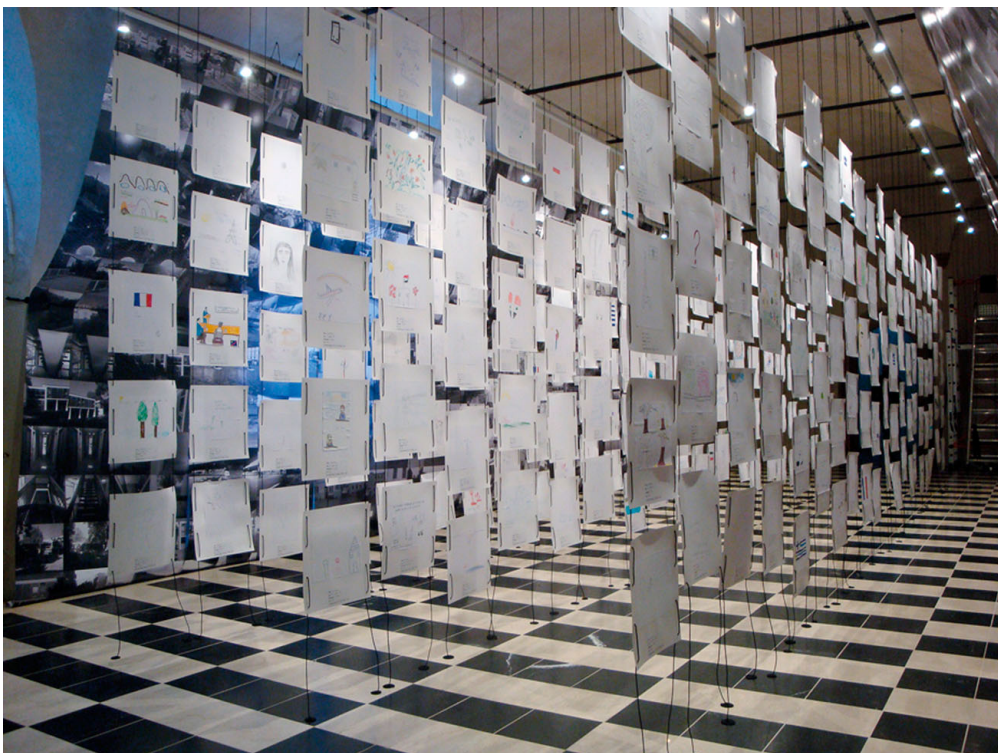


Figure 18. Detail of hanging refugee drawings part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.



Figure 19. Detail of hanging refugee drawings next to photo documentation of the sites where they were collected, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.

Public debate

For this project, dealing with this subject matter, public debate becomes another discipline as part of the overall project, where McCormack recounts his experiences of working with refugees. Current debates have taken place at: Villa Médicis, Rome, Italy; The Moral Rights of Authors in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism, convened by Dr Gavin Keeney at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in collaboration with the School of Law, Birkbeck, University of London; Venice Art Night at la Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, Italy and TEDx Prague, 2017 (to an audience of 1400 people).



Figure 20. Detail of hanging refugee drawings next to photo documentation of the sites where they were collected, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.

Current situation

In the coming months, the students who performed in the live performance of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* for the 57th Biennale di Venezia, will go out to schools across the north of England to perform and show the refugee drawings to school children (between 12 and 16 years of age) with the objective of working with hundreds of children.

Also as part of the project to collect, preserve and interpret the visual data of the drawings, *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* is creating a research study group in collaboration with leading specialists in the fields of child-psychology and clinicians involved in the assessment and treatment of trauma victims. This research will also be documented and become part of future installations.



Figure 21. Detail of hanging refugee drawings part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.

Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)—both the installation and the performance—will be touring Europe over the next three to five years as it evolves. Most recently a video installation of the drawings was staged at the Sheffield Institute of Arts



Figure 22. Detail of hanging refugee drawings part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.

between December 2017-February 2018; and in December 2017 and January 2018, a series of performances were delivered at the Brownstone Foundation, Paris which developed further both the aesthetic and participative nature of the project.



Figure 23. Photography of the drawing collection sites, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.



Figure 24. Photography of the drawing collection sites, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.



Figure 25. Photography of the drawing collection sites, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Stratis Vouyoucas & Bryan McCormack.

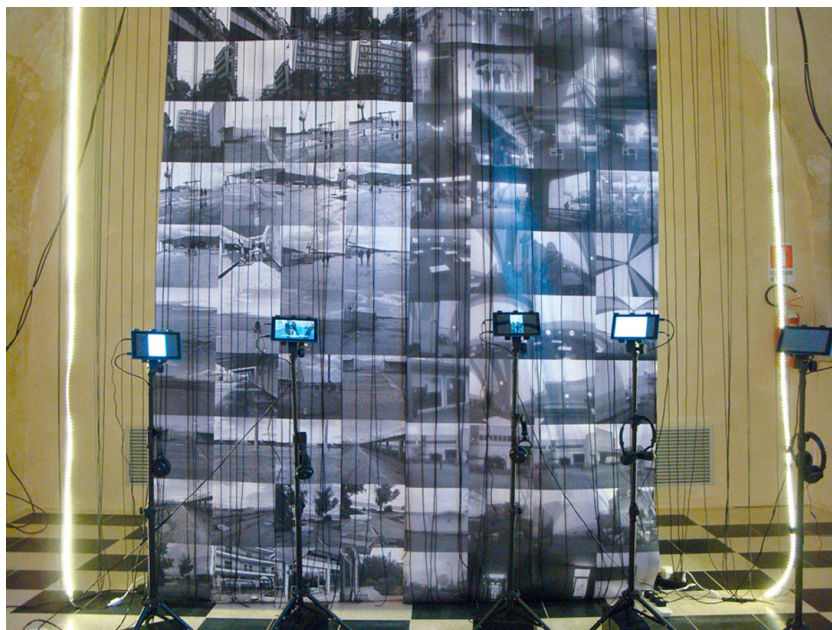


Figure 26. Digital Tablets illustrating performance work by Sheffield Hallam Performance Students, directed by Henry Bell, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* installation by Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Bryan McCormack.



Figure 27. A large scale example of Image Theatre, 'sculpted' by Bryan McCormack, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 28. Detail of a large scale example of Image Theatre, 'sculpted' by Bryan McCormack, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 29. Detail of a large scale example of Image Theatre, 'sculpted' by Bryan McCormack, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 30. Members of the public participating in Image Theatre, part of *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 31. Sheffield Hallam Performance students participating in *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* Performance directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 32. *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility)* Performance directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 33. *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.



Figure 34. *Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow (Traceability is Credibility) Performance* directed by Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack for the 57th Biennale di Venezia (2017), Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Elizabeth Pennington.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Henry Bell has been a Lecturer of Performance Studies at Sheffield Hallam University since September 2016. Previous to this, as a professional theatre director and applied theatre practitioner, he held the post of Associate Director at the Stephen Joseph Theatre and Community, Education and Literary Director at the Orange Tree Theatre.

Bryan McCormack creates works dealing with specifically social and political subject matters. He has participated in the 57th Biennale di Venezia and has had solo and group shows in venues such as the Centre Pompidou and UNESCO, Paris, the Empire Gallery, London, and the Museo Chopin, Valldemossa. One of his monumental public works is permanently installed in the park of Saint-Cloud, Paris.