

# EPISODE 10: ASYLUM ARCHIVE

[00:04 Narrator:]

The Law is a White Dog is a podcast series developed for TULCA Festival of Visual Arts 2020. Made during the global pandemic, the series places artists and artworks in dialogue with lawyers, advocates and activists. As a festival of visual art produced in a time of confinement and restriction for many, the podcast series explores unseen dimensions of the artists' work.

[00:40:]

This episode of The Law is a White Dog focuses on Asylum Archive, a multidisciplinary project initiated by Vukašin Nedeljković. Asylum Archive is based in Ireland and is an interactive, documentary online resource, that involves contributions from asylum seekers, artists, academics, civil society activists and immigration lawyers.

The Asylum Archive was initiated in 2007 when Nedeljković was living in a Direct Provision Centre, awaiting the results of his asylum application. These centres are not housed in purpose-built architecture: more commonly they are located in former religious institutions, or in private hotels and B&Bs across the country. The vast majority of centres are managed on a for-profit basis by private contractors. The average length of time people spend in Direct Provision is 2 years, although some people have stayed more than a decade. Such delays have been criticised by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission as "systemic and pernicious." The Asylum Archive project primarily involves a large collection of documentary photography of Direct Provision and Emergency Accommodation Centres, and it also includes recorded audio interviews.. In this episode, we hear from survivors of the Direct Provision system. First, Vukašin describes how and why the Asylum Archive project was initiated.

[02:32 Vukašin:]

I came to this island in 2006, seeking protection. And most of my time, which was three years, I was living in small rural town, in Ballyhaunis. One street town. But then in that town, on the top of the hill, was the old convent where the nuns used to live. And in that old convent on the top of the hill was Direct Provision Centre, where almost 300 people have lived for many, many years. Almost no one or very few people from Ballyhaunis town, which is literally seven minutes walk down the hill and turn left, did they know that we live there? They didn't. We were there behind the trees and the bushes and the gates and we lived our lives. But many people, also the people, locals, they didn't know that we were living there. And they didn't know what Direct Provision is. And they didn't know how much we had to suffer, how much we had to go through, or what we had to go through to be able, eventually, if we're lucky and fortunate, to be recognized by the state of Ireland. That our lives may be in danger, or that we may be prosecuted if we ever return back to our original homes or countries of origin. Most of these centres are located outside of the cities at the periphery of the society. And that decision by the government of Ireland at the time, to reduce and prevent possible integration or even communication between people seeking asylum and the local community. So we have them there in a totally ghettoised environment. That was a big shock to me at the time.

[05:07:]

The first day, or the first week of the first month, is the toughest one. And then once when you get over that, it gets easier. The circumstances are the same, but you just learn how to cope, you learn how to accept what your present reality is. So I was on the second floor in the old convent in Ballyhaunis, in the room 24, where at some point, I realized that I have not only brought my small Olympus five megapixel camera, but that I had have had education or my BA in photography from Belgrade, University of Arts. And then as the days were passing by, and as we were kind of living in this kind of eternal Limbo, endless Limbo, totally racialized by the state of Ireland, I kind of decided that maybe a good idea as a coping mechanism, mainly at the time, to start to document what is in my room, what is in my corridor, what is

outside of the building? What is it there. And I did that. And that moment, when I actually took that camera that my dad made sure that I have in the bag, saying, you don't ever know how it may be helpful or useful to you, my son, I did start taking the photographs. And it was nothing else but a click, and a click, and a click, and a click. And that's how the photographs were recorded on Olympus camera. And I didn't know that at the time. I was doing something that will after completing my Master's in Visual Arts practice in Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art and Technology will become Asylum Archive.

[07:42 Narrator:]

Lucky Khambule is a co-founder of the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland, MASl, which calls for the end of Direct Provision and advocates for freedom, justice and dignity for asylum seekers, and more rights, such as the right to work. Lucky was involved in organising a strike of residents of a Direct Provision centre outside Cork in 2014, protesting the restrictive rules that were enforced around eating times and access to supplies such as toiletries. The strikers took over the centre, locking the staff out for 10 days. The strike was suspended when some of the residents' demands were met. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Khambule highlighted the issue of children in Direct Provision having less access to educational resources, and that they were suffering more restrictive measures than their peers. He was one of those speaking out about the issues regarding social distancing and self-isolating for those living in Direct Provision during the pandemic, and the high level of infection cases amongst residents.

The interview extract we are about to hear was recorded as part of the *Asylum Archive* project.

[08:55 Lucky:]

My name is Lucky Khambule. I been living in Direct Provision from January of 2013. Obviously, following the same process, everybody follows, from where people are processed. And then I was then moved to Cork City just outside the city centre called Kinsale Road Accommodation Centre. Before I just go to the to the protests,

I just want to also mentioned the rationale or the reasons what made us to take that action, which was the kind of treatment that we received in that centre and many other centres, specifically in the Cork Centre, which we received for a couple of years, all right. And we felt as human beings, or as asylum seekers, that we were not taken seriously, we were treated as less human beings. We, whatever that we were used to, in reasonable requests that we would request from management and stuff, we could not get that, because everything is given according to times; toiletries, whatever that is supplied to you. So, is given on toilet papers on certain times, in the month, once a month. And sometimes we're given two bars of soap. And that's supposed to last you for four weeks. Right? We live on 19 euro. When that is finished, if you go and request that at the office, because it's outside the times that *they* have are located, you're not given that, instead, you get a shouting. The one phrase that was tried to us was 'I don't care,' especially from the manager, 'I don't care, Go back to where you come from,' you know, 'You will never get this these things in, in. In Africa.' That's what they thought of us. And the mistreatment, especially to the ladies as well, I remember one case in a pregnant lady that was really shouted by the manager just for requesting an additional bowl of cereal.

[11:45:]

So those are the things that kept building up and building up for the residents. But one day, we just decided as a couple, of few of us, that it's something that we cannot tolerate. It is important that we get together and talk about these things and see what we can do. If you are an asylum seeker, you are automatically a member of MASI. That's why it's called the movement of asylum seekers in Ireland. If you are an asylum seeker, you belong there, it's your home. It's a platform for us to be able to say things that are happening to us, without other people representing us. That's what we wanted people to understand about us. We wanted to start talking on our behalf. Because we have been shut down for many, many, many years people representing us, and misrepresenting us in many cases, and missed the point in the process. Through MASI, we have been able, people have been able to come out and say, I gave birth on such and such time. And I was not even given transport. To move from the hospital, from the hospital to the centre, I had to walk,

carrying a baby, to the centre. Those are the things that, you don't hear them. But if a person comes and tells us all those issues, it's a *voice*. As a person, once you say something, something happens to you psychologically. In many, many cases whereby through MASI, it was, we managed to solve them. Because I remember there was a lady who was deprived of access to the dining for instance, last year, just because he wanted an extra something to eat, breastfeeding.

[13:49:]

But she vented her anger on our group. And her problem was solved. Asylum seekers suffer from deportations. People that claim to support asylum seekers are not there. When people have problems with deportations, they are not there when people are signing for these deportations. Support must be in solidarity in a big way. That's why they always say that help is mad. It's not. It's not the *help* that we need. It's solidarity, when the struggles are intertwined in that, you know, when that is solidarity. If you don't feel my pain, it's not possible that you'll be able to, to be stand with me in solidarity, whether it's raining or it's not raining. So, but MASI. As we carry on now, we're going strong, we're going to centres doing the work that is supposed to be done by professionals, by employed people, who go and inform people on the policies that have changed, which they are not doing... MASI is doing that, to make sure that it reach out, it reaches out to its members and tell the members what is going on.

[15:15 Narrator:]

For *The Law is a White Dog*, Asylum Archive is presented outdoors as a billboard installation for the first time, located in the residential area of the Claddagh in Galway. Instead of a commercial text, the billboard incorporates a poem by Felispeaks, a Nigerian-Irish poet, performer and playwright from Co. Longford. Her work moves between poetry and music, and she explores issues of feminism, social justice and coming-of-age experiences.

The billboard also features a large-scale photograph by Vukašin Nedeljković from the exterior of the Great Western Hotel, Galway. The photograph was taken when

the building was used as a Direct Provision Centre. The image shows a threadbare football in medium close-up, seemingly abandoned in a weeded area.

[16:07 Vukašin:]

I still struggle to put my name forward — although I am the person who have taken over the last 14 years 6000 plus photographs, many, many, many found objects and recorded many, many, many audio interviews — without forgetting one thing: that is the collaborative aspect of the Asylum Archive, where I do invite, and I did invite people who have experienced Direct Provision to share their materials. And stating that this is not *my* archive, and it never will be my archive. This is *our archive*. This is the archive of the survivors of Direct Provision, the survivors of the most appalling, dehumanizing racist system that still exists in Ireland in 2020. And it doesn't get any better. From 2007, when I was there, it actually gets worse. And if you ask me, is this art? I will say maybe it is not art. Is activism? Yes, it is activism. Is it 'artivism'? No, I don't think it's artivism; I don't like that word. What it is really is an artefact. It's a document, that the collaboration or the collaborative aspect of Asylum Archive is crucial. It's a living archive, it's an openended archive. Let other people, let everybody who have experienced this brutal, unforgiving system, take part, let us do it together. And the most important thing is that this is our archive, they do not own the archive. In this, I would like to say the most brilliant and beautiful collaboration between Felispeaks, who's a poet and Asylum Archive, one of my photographs from Great Western House Direct Provision Centre in Galway. It's there in Claddagh, standing still, and it's a testament of what a collaboration can do and what it can mean in terms of...really one sentence, what is the aim and imperative of my work, Asylum Archive for the last 14 years: and that is to abolish Direct Provision and stop all deportations.

[19:01 Felispeaks:]

For the friendships that have choked on cordless calls; end Direct Provision.  
For the pots too small to fit all of home into; end Direct Provision.  
For the minds too fragmented to imagine safety; end Direct Provision.  
For the blanket of bruises loneliness leaves; end Direct Provision.

[19:29 Narrator:]

*The Law is a White Dog* podcast series was commissioned by TULCA Festival of Visual Arts curated in 2020 by Sarah Browne

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Listeners can find further information at [asylumarchive.com](http://asylumarchive.com) and [MASI.ie](http://MASI.ie)