



## Faiza Ahmad Khan & Hanna Rullmann

### Hearing from Artists

*Faiza Ahmad Khan is a documentary filmmaker and Hanna Rullmann is a researcher and graphic designer. Faiza is based in Mumbai while Hanna lives in London. They share interests in the rights of migrants, the legacies of colonialism and ecological inequalities. Together they made Habitat 2190 which was shown at MIMA in 2019 as part of the exhibition Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust and which has entered the Middlesbrough Collection. Here they are in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in July 2020.*

**EM: You come from different disciplines and professional backgrounds and obviously have a lot of shared interests. What drew you to working together?**

FAK: Hanna is a graphic designer from the Netherlands and I am a documentary filmmaker from India. We met at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, London, where we were both doing our MAS. As part of a project in the department on global logistics, we found ourselves looking at archives of the Dutch East India Company and collaborated on a short video. We were both keen on working with archival material and reinterpreting it in the context of the port of Rotterdam that we had visited. We were also interested in the afterlife of colonial processes and how they manifest in the



Portrait of the artists, courtesy of artists.

present. Our project in Calais in some ways felt like an extension of that enquiry.

**EM: What is the video *Habitat 2190* about?**

HR & FAK: The video follows the construction of a nature reserve at the site of former migrant settlement 'The Jungle', in Calais, France, after it was destroyed in Autumn 2016. Through interviews with a conservationist and site manager involved in its construction, and investigations of environmental and archival documents, the work looks at how the site's habitats and species are implemented as border security measures, aimed at preventing new settlement by migrants. One of those species in particular, the fen orchid (*Liparis loeselii*), highly endangered in Europe, was observed at the site around 15 years ago. The video interrogates what it means to instate the protection of an endangered orchid species in a border zone where racialised migrants are expelled by means of fences, surveillance and violent evictions. It looks at how the orchid becomes an extension of border enforcement strategies.

**EM: A lot of complex topics come together on this site in Calais. How did you first connect with it?**

HR: When studying at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths in London, I continued research on the nature reserve in Calais, which I had started just prior to moving to London. Faiza and I started working on it together after we graduated in 2018. I was familiar with the situation in Calais in the context of the increased securitisation and border violence in Europe over the past years. This particular site drew my interest because I felt it was important to understand the role of the nature reserve within that context. A constructed 'natural' landscape, something commonly understood as a neutral, positive space, was here being instrumentalised to displace migrants and to obscure the violence implicated in that.

FAK: By the time I visited the site with Hanna in 2019, it was already functioning as a nature reserve. Access to much of it was restricted and there were designated paths and observation posts from where to view the site. Tourists as well as locals would visit to watch birds or climb the Second World War bunker that stood in a corner of the site. Already the rhetoric had changed and the site was being inscribed in public memory as a nature reserve as though it had always been that way. In our conversation with Loïc Obled, the former manager, he had told us that when they evicted the migrants and demolished the camp, there were several onion plants that they also had to remove. As the onions were planted by migrants, they were seen as an invasive species in the timeline they wanted to take the site back to which predated the migrants. This highlights how carefully they constructed the image of what is natural.

**EM: Who did you build relationships with to get better insights into the place and the complex political landscape it connects with?**

HR: In order to get an idea of how the reserve was being constructed and the kind of choices that were being made – weighing security and biodiversity measures – I first got in touch



Various specimens on the wall of the Centre for National Conservation in Bailleul, France. Photograph Hanna Rullmann.

with Alexandre Driencourt, who was the site's conservation manager at the time. He's one of the two voices you hear in the film. Between 2017 and 2019 I met him twice in Calais at the reserve, where he showed me around and answered my questions about the involvement of the Calais city council and the UK/French border forces in the making of this landscape, as well as about the kind of habitats and species present on the site.

The second voice in the film is Loïc Obled, who was the general manager back in 2017/2018, but by the time Faiza and I spoke to him in Paris in the spring of 2019, he no longer worked there. He dealt more with public and policy matters, leading meetings with the government bodies involved, although it was difficult to get any detailed information about that. We also submitted several Freedom of Information requests, asking for information about the funding provided to the reserve by the UK Border Force, which the Home Office declined to release, because 'This information could provide criminals and terrorists with an overview of the strengths and weaknesses



Typespecimen of the *Liparis loeselii* (originally called the *Ophrys loeselii*) 1753, seen at the Linnean Society in London. Photograph Faiza Ahmad Khan.

of the security measures we have in place in Calais and the surrounding area. Renewed attempts could then be made to penetrate security measures based on dedicated expenditure information.'

**EM: What further research did you undertake as part of the larger project?**

HR: There were quite a lot of people we interviewed and places we visited not featured in the film, but they were really helpful for the research and building the work. For example, the Linnean Society, which houses one of the oldest specimen for the fen orchid from 1753; nature reserves in Norfolk where the last few populations of the fen orchid can be found; the regional conservation centre in Bailleul, France, where they manage the national restoration plan of the fen orchid and hold yearly surveys of the remaining populations; and finally the Calais local archive, to look at old property maps and to see what the landscape used to look like. I think for most of the people we interviewed, their work is quite specialist and scientific and usually doesn't operate in such an obviously political context,

so it was interesting to draw that narrative into our discussions with them and to talk about how certain images and conceptions of nature come into existence, more generally.

**EM: Since completing *Habitat 2190* a year ago, what have you been developing?**

HR: We've both been involved in setting up a larger research network around 'border ecologies', to draw attention to the use of the environment in the governing of borders. It brings together various researchers, activists, artists, etc. to make visible how natural borders (like rivers, deserts, mountains) are utilised as 'hostile terrain' to deter migrants, and how environmental protection is a way to make certain spaces inaccessible. But it also more generally looks at how mobilities of human and nonhuman species are entangled at the border.

I've also been looking more specifically into restoration ecology. In the video Alexandre Driencourt explains how they are restoring the landscape to its 'natural' state, for example by removing the top 20 cm of the



Liparis loesellii at the reintroduction programme at the Botanical Institute at Cambridge University. Photograph Hanna Rullmann.

soil, to expose seeds of 70 years ago. I've been researching the role of history in these types of restoration projects, what history is considered to be a place's 'natural' state. A lot of important habitats are shaped in a way by human activity, but often this is not part of the historical narrative of 'nature.' When a landscape is restored, it almost always separates nature and culture, disregarding the way human and nonhuman species in fact live together.

**EM: Both of your work relates to social justice and climate change. What are you noticing about this moment of change?**

FAK: These last three months of the lockdown have upended the world in most unexpected ways. I don't know what the sense is elsewhere but to me it feels like here in India the government has taken this opportunity to push its fascist agenda. In his shock and awe style, the Prime Minister announced a lockdown with just a few hours' notice. Overnight, a police curfew was imposed, which in many parts of the country has remained. Surveillance

increased. The government launched a very dubious tracking app that anyone going to work or undertaking any form of travel had to download. Just before the lockdown it had passed a Citizenship Amendment Act that was fundamentally anti-Muslim in nature. The lockdown has seen several protesters of this Act arrested. The government and its lynch mob in the media instrumentalised even the virus by claimed a majority of the cases emanated from an Islamists gathering. Dissent is criminalised. The government is all set to dilute environment impact assessments which will weaken the Environment Protection Act making it easier for industries to operate with very few clearances. I am reminded of Naomi Klein's theory of 'shock doctrine', where a moment of shock, when people are overwhelmed, is used to make radical changes.