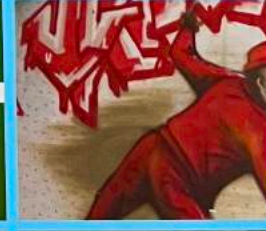
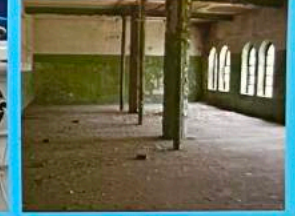
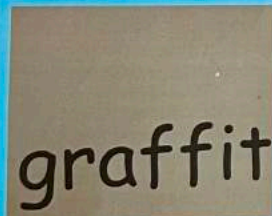
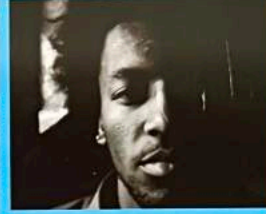
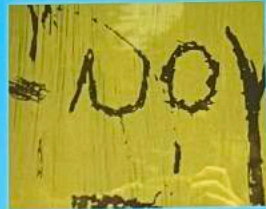
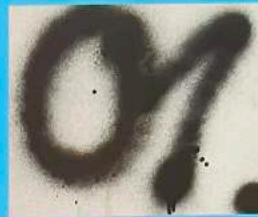


British Council News

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2002

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Halle in East Germany: the extreme right flourishes in the economic decay, just as the weeds overrun abandoned factories.

Afrobeat in Deutschland

In former East Germany, the extreme right has flourished amidst the industrial decay. Bringing the multimedia group The Shrine to develop performances with local participants aimed to provide a positive vision of multiculturalism.

Don Watson meets them in Halle, after workshop performances in Rostock and Frankfurt/Oder.

On street level, the city of Halle has the atmosphere of decaying grandeur that you expect from the former East Germany. In the historic old square, the rope and the hatchet on the elaborate clock are a reminder of the days of public executions, a testament to the Grimm's fairytale conjunction of the dark and the picturesque that is the German heritage. On the outskirts of town the weeds growing around abandoned factories are symbolic of a present that is a different shade of grim, with a rate of unemployment approaching thirty per cent.

Coiling underneath Halle's streets, the pedestrian walkway through which we pass, displays the colours of a different cultural tradition. The vivid squiggles and swirls of aerosol paint illustrate how readily Halle's youth have appropriated the art of graffiti whose spores originally flourished thousands of miles ago in the hinterlands of New York City.

Like Harlem, Halle exists in the shadow of prosperity, in Halle's case a two-hour train journey away in Berlin.

Accompanying me through the underpass are the man known only as Aladin, the Greater London Authority's Vice-Chair of Culture, Media, Sport and Tourism, Martin and Anna, who work for a youth project in Halle. Aladin himself symbolises the complexity of the modern London identity, born in Washington DC of Indian/Bangladeshi parents he came to London

himself as a refugee. He now holds an influential position in a city with fourteen faiths and 300 different languages. And boy can he talk.

As our voices echo through the deserted subway, the people-to-people diplomacy, that happens as naturally as cultures transplant in the twenty-first century, is interrupted. 'Look,' says Aladin, pointing out a repetitive insignia which scars the graffiti's ordered chaos of colour. It turns out to be the logo of the English far right-wing group Combat 18, the racist organisation that has so successfully tarnished the reputation of the English football supporters all across Europe.

This is a timely reminder of precisely what we are all doing here. The discussion on multicultural identity, for which Aladin was brought out, is part of a series of events by multimedia, multicultural collective The Shrine. Halle was targeted because, like a number of other cities in the former East, it has become a recruiting ground for the far right. The Combat 18 insignia is a reminder that connections between countries are not always positive.

The idea of The Shrine tour has been to bring together youth from the UK with a culturally mixed group from each of the three host cities. Rostock, Frankfurt/Oder and Halle, for a series of workshops with a singer, a dancer, two DJs and two visual producers.

Martin and Anna are associates of the rehearsal venue in Halle, the Begegnungs-

Zentrum für Ausländer und Deutsche, a cultural centre designed to assist the social integration of Halle's minority groups. There are, Martin tells us, a staggering 132 different nationalities resident in Halle, although they make up only three per cent of the population.

Psychologically though, multiculturalism is a new concept to Halle, as demonstrated by the very term 'Ausländer', as unthinkable in Berlin as its English equivalent 'foreigner' would be for a resident of London. The word is used frequently by the German speakers in the discussion with participants, the partners and the local media. And it is used by black and white alike. The notion of the cultural kaleidoscope of identities that Aladin celebrates in London is some way away.

Although, as the Centre director was at pains to point out, 'the UK has its problems with race relations too.'

The UK participants needed no reminder of this. Drawn from the Ocean venture in London's Hackney, they come from one of the most deprived areas of the UK, situated within minutes of one of the most profitable stock exchanges in the world. But they are surprised to be warned that groups of more than six black people walking the streets of Halle might attract unwarranted attention... but to be careful about walking around alone too.

After working with The Shrine's professional crew, the UK and German participants (identified by the local partner) produce a show on the third day.

So, DJ Rita Ray is asked at the discussion, how has it been? 'Insane,' she replies succinctly. 'We've been arriving in a city, having a quick ice-breaking meeting with the participants, one day to establish what everyone can do. Then we've had a few hours to put it all together and rehearse before putting a show on in the evening.'

Veterans of professional British Council tours of Uganda, Peru and South Africa between them, this is the first time that the

various participants have tried this approach of creating work with local amateurs. If the process has occasionally driven them to the verge of the proverbial nervous breakdown, it has also been stimulating.

In Rostock the singer Shingai Shoniwa found herself working with a Polish choir, rapper JC 001 with Russian rappers and dancer Adura Onashile with some local breakdancers.

'There was a moment of doubt where we thought, "It is just impossible to put this range of stuff together on one stage". But we did it, and it worked,' says Rita.

Contact with the ethnic Russians in Rostock was quite literally an eye-opener for the black kids from Hackney that JC was working with too. 'One of the Russian guys turned up with his eye so badly bloodshot that the white had turned red, because he had been beaten up. It was the first time that any of them had come across white-on-white ethnic violence, and it made them realise it wasn't just them that had that sort of experience.'

With parents who had staffed the huge Russian war machine in East Germany, these Russian-speaking kids were, for JC, the classic dispossessed diaspora. With the cuts in the Russian military following the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War, they were marooned in a country which viewed them as responsible for the economic underdevelopment of East Germany. Being half Indian and half Irish, JC understands the process of cultural disenfranchisement very well. He was brought up in Notting Hill, an area of London then famous for its multiculturalism and not for being the setting of a rather monocultural film featuring Hugh Grant.

'The sound of rapping in Russian was remarkable,' he says. 'There was one piece they did about their feeling of lack of belonging that was heartbreaking.'

Adura meanwhile found it intriguing to



Tutored by video: Rostock's finest breakdancers.

discover a group of accomplished breakdancers. 'The only thing was that they had learned their moves from videos, so I was able to do some work with them on integrating better with the music.'

For the Halle show, the focus is illustrating three words: 'entrapment, authority and freedom'. Rita and Max Reinhardt, the DJs who founded The Shrine, are working with one group creating a soundscape using music from the former East Germany, snatches of Handel, who was born in Halle, and the Austrian singer Falco whose music has a special significance for the German participants. 'That's what we associate with the fall of communism,' says Daniel. 'It was the music that you heard everywhere as the big changes were taking place.'

In the rehearsal space Max and Rita and the kids are standing each behind their own console, mixing the sound sources. The final sound is from Fela Kuti, the Nigerian father of Afrobeat, who died in 1997. It was from Fela's club in Lagos that The Shrine took their name.

Rita explains to one participant. 'Fela has to struggle through the mix.'



Singer Shingai Shoniwa, visual effects by Your Mum.

Meanwhile in another part of the building, Kelly Ben (from visuals team Your Mum) and their charges are hunched over Apple Mac computers.

They have video footage they have shot in the abandoned factory across from the centre, together with some photographs of graffiti they have taken from the walls of Halle.

'We're trying to encourage them to see photography as being a source material,' says Ben, 'that you can manipulate and treat and turn into an animated montage. It takes a little while for them to understand that, but once they do they're off.'

Much of their work has been in demonstrating software programmes that many of the participants have never seen before, like introducing a Rostock graffiti artist to a computer animation programme.

'He was just amazed by the possibilities for the work that he does,' says Ben.

The results the following night in the performance are one of the most successful aspects. Montages of road signs and graffiti create a powerful sense of place, as well as a dynamic between the participants, as they mix the images live to accompany the soundscape.

The audience for the performance is, it has to be said, relatively small. But do statistics tell the whole story? The recent British film *24 hour party people* documents the performance of the Sex Pistols in 1976 in Manchester. The audience there was under forty, but virtually every member went on to have a fundamental effect on the British culture of the Seventies and Eighties.

As Fela Kuti struggles through the mix, Adura's choreographed piece breaks into an electrifying solo, her hybrid of traditional Nigerian dance with modern jazz dance flitting in front of the flickering images. It's just one of those magical, alchemical moments when several contributions ignite into something very special. And everyone in the converted cinema knows it.

So, how has it been Rita? I ask as the end of show party begins in turn to catch fire. 'Well it's been insane. But then ...' she breaks into an infectious burst of semi-hysterical laughter, 'I like doing insane things.'