



Life in the UK / Balance of Probabilities

by Didem Ozbek and Osman Bozkurt of PiST, at [Castlefield Gallery](#)

Reviewed by [Sara Porter](#) and [Emma Short](#) October 2011

Sara Porter 's view...

On first approaching the Castlefield Gallery for the press preview of Life in the UK/ Balance of Probabilities the first thing that struck me was how I hadn't noticed in my previous visit the blinds in the windows of the gallery, but then it was an atypically sunny day and in a more usually overcast Manchester, they probably hadn't been needed them last time I was there. As I got closer I realised that this was in fact the first part of Ozbek and Bozkurt's multi-media exhibition.

Life in the UK/ Balance of Probabilities is a debut UK commission of the two Istanbul based artists exhibited at Castlefield Gallery as part of Asia Triennial Manchester 2011. The work is based upon experiences of visa applications and for this purpose the gallery has been converted into a replication of a temporary VISA application centre.

The installation starts with the exterior of the gallery and the aforementioned “blinds” which on closer inspection in fact contains a variety of failed VISA application stories which makes up the '**Moaning Wall**'. When for many of us the closest we will get to a visa application is the ten minutes you are required to spend on the internet in order to get a visa to travel to the USA, it is easy to forget that the freedom to travel is often taken for granted. Ozbek has collected a variety of rejected application stories and spread them across the white strips across the gallery windows. The rejected applications cover applications for different destinations and failure for different reasons and it makes fascinating reading before entering the gallery.



The gallery entrance in keeping with the theme of the VISA application centre has been converted, with a new sign and you have to pass through a metal detector to enter (something I certainly did not have to do to access my laptop for my USA visa). On entering the upper gallery you are greeted by '**The Counters**' - 5 counters which represent the counters you are required

to approach when making your application. Here though, the journey is reversed as instead of being required to provide your reasons and justification for travel you are faced with five stories from officials that deal with VISA applications.

This video installation by Bozkurt is video footage of the actual officials and not actors and it gives an interesting insight into the approach from the other side of the desk, how they deal with the applications, the variety of assessment criteria for different countries and also the fact that running a VISA application centre is considered for profit making and not necessarily a service to facilitate the ease of travel from Turkey to other countries. Each of the counters has a different official discussing their responsibilities in the work that they do. Whilst headphones are available for audio, four of the five counters are subtitled if the headphones are already in use. It is worth taking the time to view/listen to each official as each provides a different insight into the processing of applications



The upper gallery housing this section of the exhibit has been kept very neutral and feels almost impersonal, lending itself perfectly to the actual feeling coming from dealing with the the huge numbers of visa applicants that must pass through the doors. As Bozkurt states it should be at its core - a service industry, yet those who seek custom from it are not guarenteed the privilege

of customer satisfaction.

Unfortunately this was all I was able to view on my visit as the gallery was busy working to complete the installation for previews that evening. The following details of the remaining four exhibits have been taken from the gallery press release with further details provided by interviewing Lora Sariaslan.

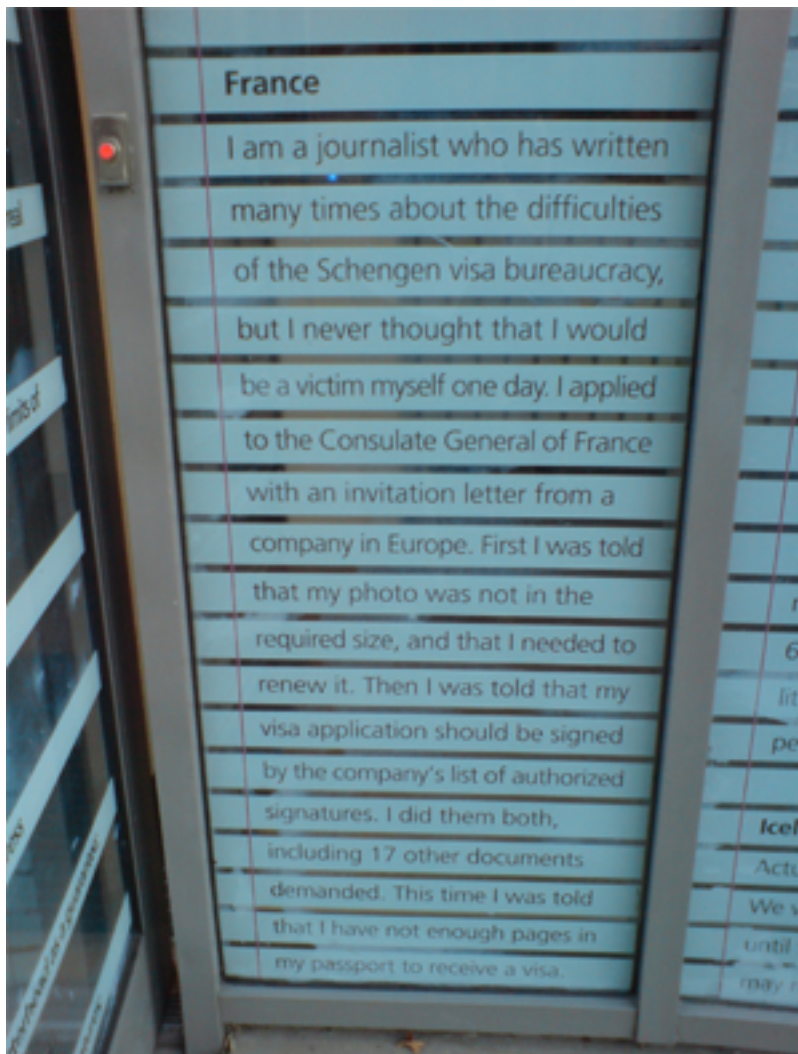
On moving downstairs to the lower gallery you are met by “Dream Trip” which starts with the four different passport types issued in Turkey, meticulously created to represent Normal, Special, Diplomatic and Service passports. This section provides the gateway to the lower gallery and provides the impression of being given the permission to travel. On the lower gallery floor there is a selection of luggage and a map of the world that has been reduced to the areas to show the countries where populations can cross borders freely.

“Collection #2/11” is a series of collected passport photographs where the faces have been removed for use in passports. Based on the remains of the pictures the images have been categorised on a typological analysis. “Life in the UK:lan” is a short animated introduction to the British Citizenship test required by the Home Office. At this point visitors are encouraged to sit the exam to test their own knowledge and defragment their understanding of national identity. “Spaces of Uncertainty” is a series of photographs depicting interior shots of VISA consulate sections and VISA application centres. Shot as if for an interior design magazine they provide a minimalist view of what are essentially areas of life changing decisions.

The exhibition has obviously been strongly influenced by Ozbek's and Bozkurt's experiences of the difficulties of travel to and from their country. From the influence in the exterior design being based on the VISA application office near their PiST/// base in Istanbul to the difficulties faced by Ozbek in having to fly back to Istanbul to change her visa status during the 1990's. It has an underlying awareness of how the decision making process has an economic basis.

For me personally what I saw of the exhibition and what I heard of the areas that I was unable to view, it works as more than a piece of art, it is an education, an insight into what so many of us take for granted, the freedom to travel at short notice. The exhibit will resonate with those of us who have required visas or work permits for abroad, often dealing with what can seem irrational bureaucracy, long waits, expense and frustration. Whilst as with so many pieces of art, it is a personal project, the interactive nature of the exhibition intaking you through a journey of VISA processing, it almost cries out a need to make people aware of the journeys that they have to make before even being allowed the privilege of foreign travel. A fascinating insight into how the freedom of travel is certainly not accessible to all and certainly an exhibit I look forward to seeing in it's completed form. Many thanks goes to Lora Sariaslan to taking the time to talk me through the exhibit.

[Emma Short](#) 's view...





[Castlefield Gallery](#), [PiST//](#), [Manchester triennial 2011](#)