

Case Study form for Collaboration with The MERL

- **Name:** Teresa Murjas
- **Role and HEI:** Professor in Theatre & Performance, Department of Film, Theatre & Television, University of Reading.
- **Name of activity co-created or hosted by The MERL:** NISSEN

Describe your overarching project, its significance and reach.

NISSEN grew out of my work on the Creative Entrepreneur in Residence programme at the university, that focused on exploring immersive approaches to engaging the public with research. NISSEN takes the form of an immersive mixed media installation that focuses on events connected with the 1947 Polish Resettlement Act. The installation created at the MERL was a prototype aimed at around 40/50 heritage and creative sector professionals, which was shown in its fullest form on one evening in the Forces for Change gallery and co-hosted by MERL colleagues. The bare bones of the installation (without the immersive sound and projection) subsequently remained in place in the Forces for Change gallery, with some bespoke audio, textual and video interpretation, between March and June 2025. NISSEN is a longer-term, multi-output project and this marked one stage in its development.

How and why did you decide to approach MERL to work in partnership?

I have worked previously with The MERL on creative projects, in both teaching and research, and so am fortunate in having colleagues at the Museum with whom I am in regular dialogue. However, there was a deeper interest here, which connected to the idea of hidden rural lives. Polish Resettlement Camps were often located in rural settings, and only traces remain of many of them. This resonance was important as a starting point for the work.

Which MERL staff did you work with?

I first broached this idea many years ago at the MERL, in a conversation with The Director, Head of Archives and Director of Academic Learning & Engagement who pointed the way forward, but also asked important questions about the connection of the subject matter to the museum's themes and collections and suggested models of creative and curatorial practice for me to research. I also spoke at that time with The Head of Curatorial & Public Engagement about the idea, along similar lines.

When the CEiR programme ultimately presented an ideal framework for conducting this kind of exploratory and iterative practice as research, and my application was successful, it seemed instinctive and important to reconnect with those 'seedling' conversations to see what could grow. I first approached the Director to reconnect and then worked with a number of colleagues focusing on engagement, including Head of Visitor Experience and Head of Learning & Engagement, and more substantially, Head of Curatorial & Public Engagement, to ensure that processes and protocols were being followed. In terms of use of the gallery, I worked very closely with Collections Care Manager, as did my artistic and tech team, in order to get things up and running. Head of Archives supported us on evenings when we were installing the work in the gallery, and we were also strongly supported by volunteers who helped with the co-ordination of the industry-facing

evening, as well as the pared-down installation that remained in place throughout the spring and summer months. I also worked with colleagues developing publicity about the installation. I was subsequently able to reflect with the Director of Academic Learning & Engagement and Head of Curatorial & Public Engagement on the directions in which the work might further evolve.

Who did you engage, on what scale and which context(s)?

Invited arts and heritage industry professionals, MERL visitors who came through the Forces for Change gallery and engaged with the pared down installation, a workshop run by the Head of Learning & Engagement at which I talked about the installation and its underpinning research, colleagues from The National Archives who ran an associated workshop at The MERL connected with their archival holdings concerning the Polish Resettlement Act (with whom I had already established a connection). I also did a short online presentation about the work supported by the Head of Curatorial & Public Engagement at the invitation of the Migration Museum and GEM (Group for Education in Museums) network, alongside other organisations aiming to address the subject of immigration within their spaces and programmes. I continue to engage with arts and heritage professionals in my ongoing work on the project.

Which methods and approaches did you use? (e.g. co-creation, artistic research etc.)

Practice-led artistic research. Archival and site-specific research. Auto-ethnographic reflection. Co-creation with projection artist Matthew Rosier, film-maker James Rattee, metal sculptor Jack Hardy, sound artist Abeer Mohammed, technician Chris O'Shea, actors Magdalena Mosteanu and Gemma Cutler-Colclough, mentoring by Tim Powell.

Did anything about the project change as a result of the collaboration with the MERL (e.g. audiences, partners, practices etc.).

The work acted as a springboard for me to successfully apply for a University of Reading Research Fellowship, in order to continue developing the project. I have consequently been catapulted into a myriad of connections that are deepening and changing the work, helping me to refine research questions, discover potential venues for the onward installation and partners for the overall project, and very importantly, helping me to refine the form and content of the creative output, in ways that can cross media. This is also leading me to explore new ways of funding the onward work.

What level of budget did you have for the project and what did you need to spend funds on? Were some of the costs split with The MERL?

For the installation I had under £10,000. In terms of direct connections with The MERL, the museum offered the gallery space gratis, and colleagues supported me as part of their work at the Museum, within their programme of events. I had to dedicate budget to some colleagues being present outside their usual working hours, both from the MERL and my own department. As well as my artistic team, who were independent of the university, and materials for the installation itself (which had been pre-constructed and tested in a different studio space prior to being re-constructed at The MERL). I budgeted for refreshments for the industry evening, and also for a filmmaker/sound specialist to assist with some of the new interpretation materials for the onward installation, as well as photographing the industry evening.

How and when did your planning sessions with MERL staff take place?

I maintained consistent and regular conversations with MERL colleagues throughout the whole process. I was working with quite a large team overall, who had different ways of approaching practice, and I had to ensure that everyone was informed and that I was addressing all the things I needed to for the process to evolve smoothly and effectively, and to troubleshoot, taking full account of the needs of MERL colleagues. It was through this process that I gained and adjusted my own understanding of what I needed to do and how to try and do it for the best! This was particularly important around aspects such as risk assessment, for example, which had to be a closely collaborative process.

What lead in time did you allow for the project?

The project has been in development for a good number of years, as an idea and research endeavour. Between developing the Nissen hut installation design and showing it at the MERL there were about 7 or 8 months. We had an alternative plan for showing the work in my department's studio spaces, but we hoped that The MERL might agree to something like this that was more experimental and signified a step in a creative process rather than a completed 'thing'.

Do you have any thoughts about how the MERL-based event / exhibition / initiative went?

I was extremely pleased with how things went and felt very well supported throughout.

What sort of impact were you hoping to achieve?

I was hoping to bring a new idea into the museum, based on initial connections with and encouragement from museum colleagues and long-established working relationships with them. I was hoping to offer an invitation to visitors to start conversations about the place of resettlement narratives and sites within historical narratives. I was hoping to create new connections to move the work forward, create ground for new collaborations that might hopefully be of some benefit to the MERL longer term as well as to NISSEN as a project. I was hoping also to create further groundwork in terms of my own research and discover pathways for its development.

Were you able to gather evidence of that impact and if so, how?

I think the impacts of the installation are still developing, and they are visible in, for example, the visitors book that was left in the hut, the workshop with the Head of Learning & Engagement, the photographs that were taken at the installation, the email responses sent to me with feedback, the Migration Museum and GEM event, but also how the onwards engagement opportunities have been emerging since then and the connections I have been able to generate. The prototype installation I regarded as a first step in creatively articulating the research – it was an open invitation and expressed as such - and so its impacts are going to be captured across the months since it occurred, and in future iterations and developments. This work is part of a potential impact case study and so my thinking about its potential impacts is still evolving. I can't guarantee, in the end, however, that it will have any impact at all.

Can you share any results in terms of evaluation and measuring impact?

For NISSEN, although the build-up and initial stage I've described were already labour intensive and involved a significant number of people – something quite typical of practice-led research – I think it's important to understand that the creative work was a prototype and envisaged as part of a longer process. During the months following this initial stage, I've been documenting the work (including in digital form) and further developing my thinking about the installation as an artistic practice. I view this as part of my research process, a period involving reflection on and evaluation of choices I've made so far. The experience

of making the prototype has inspired further ideas about how the next version of the installation might function, and has acted as a test-bed for understanding how it might connect with other environments and audiences. So, there has been a 'tentacular expansion' of ideas and practice beyond the groundwork I've described. This has involved experiences of questioning, doubt, discovery, fear, and also further relationship building, all with a view to ultimately sharing the onward work. It has been a generative and self-evaluative period during which I have tried to actively and strategically build on what I've made so far, and imagine its future.

How would you rate the quality of the evidence gathered as part of the project?

I think the evidence will lie in the onward flow of connections made, with community, artistic and heritage partners, a number of routes that have opened up new possibilities for showing and funding the work. The installation was a starting point, not an end point.

Can you see any longer-term outcomes emerging from the work (e.g. follow-on work, relationship building, influence growing etc.)

Absolutely, and I have described some of these above. They take the form of opportunities for showing the work, as well as partnerships, and potential funding support. However, the concept for the installation as a research output and engagement opportunity is also in itself changing, in some ways quite dramatically, and all this was made possible by the intersection of the mixed-media sculpture, the gallery space in which it was based and shown, all who helped to bring it to life in that space, and all who asked questions about it.

Are there any recommendations for MERL staff when thinking about future collaborations (e.g. challenges or constraints?)

There was a moment when the time I could dedicate to developing interpretation for the pared down installation reduced greatly, because of an unexpected increase in teaching commitments. I also, by that stage, had limited resources to devote to further artistic work. I had wanted to do more at that juncture, but I did what was within my abilities.

Any other comments?

Gratitude for all the support and feedback I received, and for the openness, patience, trust and guidance of MERL colleagues around the installation, but also in the months since. I hope there were positive aspects to emerge from NISSEN for The MERL, as I fully appreciate what a significant undertaking for the Museum supporting this project was.