

The Citizenshop:

Shopping for Citizenship with Nele Vos

Agnes Czajka (AC) and Nele Vos (NV)

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Nele Vos is a narrative experience designer living and working in Berlin. Her installation, 'The Citizenshop', is part of the 'Who Are We?' programme at Tate Modern. Agnes Czajka is a lecturer at the Open University who studies and teaches citizenship, migration, democracy and contentious politics. Agnes asks Nele about her installation and the issues she hopes it raises about the relationship between citizenship, migration and neo-liberal economics.

AC Nele, you describe yourself as a ‘narrative experience designer’. What does that mean? Do you ‘design experiences’? How do you do that?

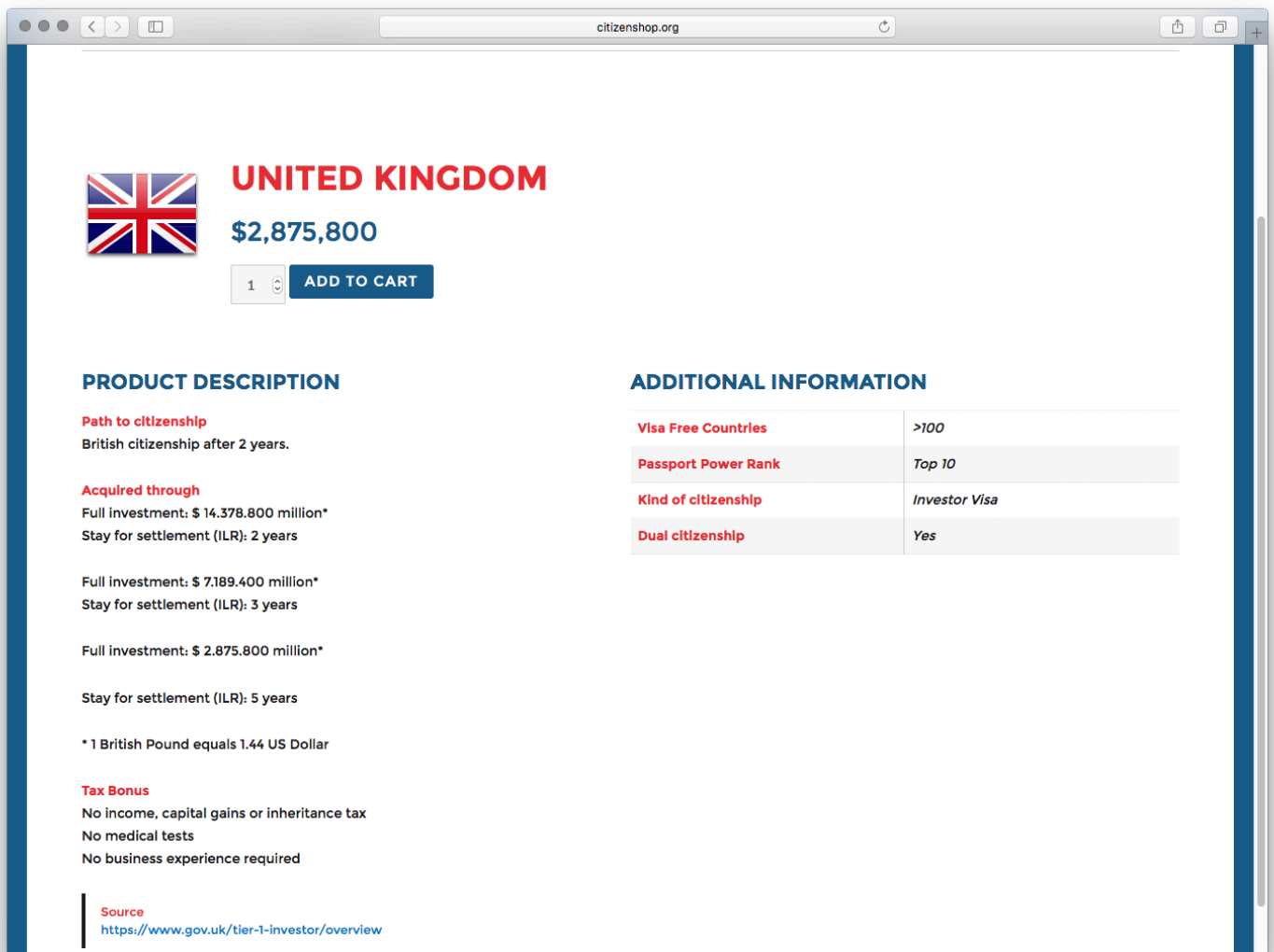
NV In my practice, Goller&Vos Narrative Experiences, which I started together with Alexander Goller here in Berlin, we combine spatial and narrative theory and use it as a foundation to design visitor journeys and the environments around them. Our projects have ranged from designing corporate narratives for fairs to reinventing the foyer space of a theatre, the foyer being an essential part of a contemporary visitor’s experience.

AC Tell me a bit about ‘The Citizenshop’. How does it work as a ‘narrative experience’?

NV ‘Citizenshop’ is a piece that I developed as part of my master’s thesis for an MA in Narrative Environments at Central Saint Martins in 2016. At its heart, it’s a spatial strategy that functions as a place for reflection on the outside world. Specifically, it aims to give insights into the current status of citizenship and how it’s changing through, for example, the increasing number of countries offering citizenship for a price. Everyone who enters the space of the ‘shop’ gets a ‘Passport to the Republic of Nowhere’, which gives them access to a collection of data on current ‘citizenship by investment’ offers in place worldwide.

AC Before we continue, I just wanted to clarify for those who might know what we mean when we talk about ‘citizenship by investment’ offers, or ‘buying citizenship’. Many countries in the world – including the UK, many European countries, the US, but also non-‘Western’ countries – effectively ‘sell’ citizenship to those who can afford to invest a specific amount of money in that country by, for example, buying a certain number of government bonds, or purchasing property. Basically, those who can afford it can ‘buy’ citizenship. And of course, the more money one has, the more ‘desirable’ of a passport one can acquire – with the US or UK, for instance, being more expensive than say, Pakistan. And so what has emerged is what we might call a ‘citizenship by investment industry’.

NV Yes, some governments have special departments that one would apply to for these kinds of programmes. But it’s more common to have this done by a private consultancy firm that can process your request without you even entering the country. In the UK, for example, you have to either invest in government bonds or real estate. It’s one of the most expensive programmes – at least for now. You don’t really need to have any language skills, there’s no income tax you have pay, and you don’t even need to have any business experience.



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL 'citizenshop.org'. The main content area displays the United Kingdom citizenship option. At the top left is the Union Jack flag. To its right, the text 'UNITED KINGDOM' is written in red, followed by the price '\$2,875,800' in blue. Below the price is a quantity selector showing '1' and an 'ADD TO CART' button. The page is divided into two columns. The left column, titled 'PRODUCT DESCRIPTION', contains sections for 'Path to citizenship' (British citizenship after 2 years), 'Acquired through' (Full investment: \$ 14,378.800 million*, Stay for settlement (ILR): 2 years; Full investment: \$ 7,189.400 million*, Stay for settlement (ILR): 3 years; Full investment: \$ 2,875.800 million*, Stay for settlement (ILR): 5 years), and 'Tax Bonus' (No income, capital gains or inheritance tax; No medical tests; No business experience required). The right column, titled 'ADDITIONAL INFORMATION', contains a table with the following data:

Visa Free Countries	>100
Passport Power Rank	Top 10
Kind of citizenship	Investor Visa
Dual citizenship	Yes

At the bottom left, there is a 'Source' link: <https://www.gov.uk/tier-1-investor/overview>.

If you think, for example, from the perspective of a Chinese businessman who wants to access the EU market then Malta currently offers the quickest and least expensive programme, with a cost of 690.000 Euros.

All of this started with a series of small island states such as Antigua, Barbuda, Dominica, St. Lucia, Grenada. Those islands faced the problem of not having enough export products, so they discovered the passport as a tool to get more foreign direct investment. And this was then adopted by more and more Western countries, specifically after the big credit crunch in 2008.

AC Getting back to 'The Citizenshop', then. At least one of the objectives of the installation is to enable visitors to the 'shop' to experience the way in which this industry works. Once visitors enter the space, they access an online 'shop' where they can browse through and purchase various citizenships.

NV Yes. In Bethnal Green, where the installation was originally located, it literally took on the spatial characteristics of a shop that was located on the High Street of Bethnal Green. The shop window displayed some the passports one could purchase in the shop. On entering the store, visitors would access an online shop where they explored the prices of

various passports and the conditions that guided their purchase. All of that information was based on data I acquired from private consultancy firms that facilitate these kinds of transactions. This part of the experience was framed by the question: ‘What can you afford to buy in The Citizenshop?’

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Most visitors didn’t know you could ‘buy’ citizenship in this way, and one of the goals of the first part of the installation was to make this transparent, to try to make public what was happening behind the closed doors of private consultancy firms, and to expose some of the ways in which states have commodified citizenship.

Having explored the online citizenshop, visitors were then invited to the back space of the installation, where the tone of the experience changed from apersonal to personal, the light changed from warm to white, and the ‘prices’ of citizenships are replaced by statistics showing the numbers of people in need of citizenship. In this second part of the installation, the role of the visitor also changed. Visitors transformed from being consumers – of the experience, but also of citizenship – to being active participants in the installation, and they were asked to reflect on what meaning citizenship had for them.



AC What will the installation look like at the Tate Modern? Will it offer people a similar experience?

NV The installation at the Tate will be adapted to the open exhibition space, so instead of entering a physical shop, visitors will have direct access to the online shop on the exhibition floor. It will also focus more on dialogue, and the personal reflections of participants after they have explored the online citizenship will play a more important role. These personal reflections will actually become part of the installation so that visitors can exchange their viewpoints with others coming at different times or on different days. The final thing that will change is the question visitors will be asked to reflect on. The question I asked in Bethnal Green was, 'What does citizenship mean to you?' After the Who Are We? co-production workshop [that included dialogues between the artists and academics involved in the programme] I decided to change the question to 'What Makes a Good Citizen?'.

AC How did you become interested in the question of 'buying citizenship'?

NV Well, global inequality has reached the point at which the richest sixty-two people are as wealthy as half of the world's population. This inequality is created and maintained by the super wealthy, and governments are catering to them. This is an old story, of course. But I also think that 'national thinking' when it comes to movement of people and 'global thinking' when it comes to trade and finance

contributes to this inequality. I see this installation as a way of provoking new thinking, and hopefully, as tool that helps disconnect, at least mentally, the notion that citizenship is about a particular connection between an individual and one nation-state. I also think it is important to understand the different mechanisms that are currently in place for the disadvantaged and advantaged people of our global society, and that is something that the installation also tries to reveal.

AC Citizenship, migration and asylum are very much on political agendas in the UK, in Europe, in North America. But we haven't heard much debate or concern about acquiring citizenship through investment. Why do you think this is the case?

NV That's a really good question. I think one reason might be because these programs are targeted to a very wealthy segment of the global population, an audience that lives in a world that is closed off, in a way, from the wider public. I'm afraid another reason why it's not discussed much is because most of us got used to the fact the governments are adapting the logic of the market, and that this is fuelling injustice.

But at the same time, there is actually information about these programmes out there, and a lot of advertising for these programmes. Friends of mine have been seeing advertisements from countries in in-flight magazines, on airlines such British Airways – just flying economy class and seeing advertisements about these

programs in Britain and elsewhere. There is also a lot of information online. You can find advertising videos for conferences that are promoting these 'citizenship by investment' programmes worldwide, which means it's a booming market. At one of these conferences, you can see the Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis standing on stage explaining to his potential future citizens where his little island is. But in fact the private investors are not really interested in spending time on that island, but rather, want to profit from the tax perks that come from holding dual or triple citizenship as part of the offer.

AC What do you think the idea of 'buying citizenship' reveals about the relationship between citizenship, migration and neo-liberal economics? We often talk about cosmopolitan or global citizenship, but it seems that the vast majority of people have very restricted access to citizenship, whereas the very privileged few can basically purchase 'global citizenship' like they purchase vegetables at the supermarket.

NV I think the existence of these programs highlights the dual and differentiated nature of citizenship. On the one hand, citizenship has become a means of controlling those people who belong to what we call the 99% of society. On the other hand, citizenship has become a method of tax evasion, the kind we used to see from big corporations like Starbucks, Google, Apple or Boots, for the wealthiest 1% of global society.

Seeing migration increasing worldwide, and the risks taken by refugees fleeing their countries, the 'prices' that different countries 'charge' for citizenship can also be seen as a way of putting a price on the life of a human being.

AC Nele, it was great talking to you. I look forward to seeing The Citizenship installation at the Tate Modern!

The Citizenship will be on display on the 5th floor of the Switch House on 14th-16th March, 12-18h.

You can visit the Citizenship online, at <http://www.citizenshop.org>

You can learn more about Nele, and read about her other projects at <http://vos-org.com>

You can find out more about Agnes's work here: <http://www.open.ac.uk/people/ac26598>



“Selling residency and special tax treatment is contagious.
It is creating a new tax loophole that will spread geographically.”

– John Christensen, Chief of the Tax Justice Network

Visas

Visas