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Of Boats and Walls

Migrating Iconographies

“So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence.”

Migrating Iconographies: History and Art

According to Susan Sontag “[i]deologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings”.¹ These images generate and transport cultural meaning contributing to shaping the present, re-evaluating the past, and envisioning the future. The iconic status of historical boats and walls, such as the ‘Mayflower’ in America and the ‘Endeavour’ in Australia, or the Great Wall of China, foregrounds the power of “‘condensation symbols,’ or emblematic images”² to represent a period, encouraging a shared, unifying and homogenizing reception in national memory cultures. While these images are bound to specific contexts, they may change over time “in their import, range of reference, applicability, comprehensibility, and appropriateness”.³ Thus the established national celebration of the iconic boat in settler countries evokes different associations in the context of contemporary migration politics, foregrounding previously submerged contradictions in national narratives. A striking example of these shifts is the visual construction of Australia as a migrant nation in the National Maritime Museum in Sydney harbour, which not only features a reconstruction of James Cook’s ship ‘Endeavour’ to visualize the foundation myth of the settler colony, but also includes displays commemorating the more recent arrival of migrants and refugees on Australian shores. In this context two exhibits of a boat and a wall are placed within close proximity: the Vietnamese refugee boat ‘Tu Do’ with 31 survivors being welcomed from totalitarianism into freedom in Darwin harbour during the Second Cold War (1977), and the 100 meter long and 2.8 metres high Welcome Wall (est. 1997), inviting migrants to Australia to have their names inscribed on the wall. However, in the current situation the museum’s exhibit of the Vietnamese boat called ‘Freedom’ turns into an ironic reference to the treatment of refugees who seek asylum in Australia at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, when ‘boat people’ are turned back or arrested and transferred to (offshore) detention centres, while the notion of the wall as welcoming sign in

1 Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 86; motto also by her.

2 Jeffrey Olick: *The Politics of Regret*, p. 108.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

the Maritime Museum ironically resonates with current calls for building walls against migrants, evoking histories of division as most famously materialized in the Berlin Wall. In the context of the current global resurgence of calls for border fortification, the Berlin Wall is invested with renewed significance and affective, emotional and symbolic potential beyond its immediate German and European context. As migration is inevitably both, a transnational and a localized phenomenon connected to specific memory cultures, iconic uses of the boat and the wall call upon different associations in different contexts. The examples of the 'Tu Do' and the Welcome Wall in the Maritime Museum foreground how site-specificity can generate unintended (and unwanted) side-effects in the (inter)national reception of official iconographies. These examples foreground the potential of the boat and the wall as iconic markers of reinforcing but also of unsettling and challenging notions of national unity and identity.

Contemporary art across different media and genres engages with the affective, emotional and ideological implications of the boat and the wall and explores the tensions and contradictions of their use in different historical and cultural contexts, with the aim to build transnational human solidarity communities. The immediate world-wide dissemination of cultural products tapping into different histories and memory cultures attempts to work towards a new definition of activism in art in the context of the current unprecedented global humanitarian and planetary crises.⁴ The hope for "creating global solidarity groups"⁵ is vitally connected to a "globally shared knowledge of others' pasts"⁶ as precondition for the emergence of "cosmopolitan memory" enabl[ing] 'horizontal' connections between smaller memory communities".⁷ However, as Kennedy and Radstone have pointed out, it is necessary to take into account "the power relations that play into the *direction* in which mnemonic symbols travel, the interests served by the sometimes incorporative thrust of transnational remembering and the apparently location-specific or even resistant aspects of those elements that remain outside the transnational field".⁸

This concern is particularly important with regard to histories of victimization and trauma, as research about the interaction of the Holocaust memory with different national, social and cultural memories has shown. The terms "multidirectional memory"⁹ and "cosmopolitan memory"¹⁰ are connected to the hope for the development of new alliances in the strife for human rights and social justice.¹¹ However, in contrast to defining and embracing cosmopolitanism in terms of "a

4 Ann Rigney has pointed out the intricate interrelations between memory and activism identifying distinctions between "*memory activism* (how actors struggle to produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance, as described in Gutman, 2017), the *memory of activism* (how earlier struggles for a better world are culturally recollected, as described in Katriel and Reading, 2015), and *memory in activism* (how the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present, as set out in Eyerman, 2016)" (Ann Rigney: Remembering Hope, p. 372).

5 Siobhan Brownlie: Mapping Memory in Translation, p. 17.

6 Ibid., p. 183.

7 Rosanne Kennedy, Susannah Radstone: Memory up close, p. 241.

8 Ibid., p. 238.

9 See Michael Rothberg: Multidirectional Memory.

10 See Daniel Levy, Natan Sznaider: Memory Unbound.

11 See Daniel Levy, Natan Sznaider: Cosmopolitan Memory and Human Rights.

willingness to engage with the Other [...] through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting"¹² and a "delight in difference";¹³ the term has also been criticized, particularly by feminist and postcolonial scholars as encouraging a commodification of difference within the frame of late capitalist consumer culture.¹⁴ Nevertheless, despite an acknowledgement of the danger of a misuse of the concept as "a superficial, opportunistic reuse of the other's history"¹⁵ flattening out differences and thus ultimately as a form of forgetting, there remains an insistence on the necessity of such a shared cosmopolitan memory culture "based on the concept of human rights and the idea of global citizenship, whereby an individual may embrace an affinity and empathy with global others as one of his or her identifications".¹⁶

Contemporary art forms appealing to collective social memory and individual embodied memory simultaneously, tend to foreground the experiential quality of memory,¹⁷ often turning to affect as intended effect, which seems to promise a universal visceral response. Approaches to affect as decisive precognitive force beyond representation have sometimes tended to ignore that "representations are always imagistic and thinking is distributed through the body".¹⁸ However, such a conceptualisation of an intricate interrelation between affect, emotion and representation¹⁹ is decisive for an understanding of contemporary art forms, particularly those evoking traumatic histories of escape, displacement and death, which rely on the capacity of the spectator to be affected by "[c]ultural products that strongly engage the senses and emotions [...] allow[ing] these products to be appreciated transnationally and transculturally";²⁰ even if they relate to "a past event through which he or she did not live" as Alison Landsberg remarks in her analysis of "prosthetic memory".²¹ According to Landsberg "[i]n the best cases, prosthetic memories can produce empathy and thereby enable a person to establish a political connection with someone from a different class, race or ethnic position."²²

In this essay I will explore the global impact of iconographies of the boat and the wall in the context of current issues of migration and border fortification, as visible in four specific recent art projects: Christoph Büchel's 'Barca Nostra / Our Boat' (Venice Biennale 2019), Ai Weiwei's 'Law of the Journey' (Prague 2017, Sydney Biennale 2018), Natascha Sadr Haghghian's installation 'Ankersentrum /

12 Ulf Hannerz: *Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture*, p. 239.

13 *Ibid.*

14 See Arjun Appadurai: *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*; Timothy Brennan.

15 Siobhan Brownlie: *Mapping Memory in Translation*, pp. 185 f.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 183. This ties in with Rothberg's argument that "when the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed, [...] it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" (Michael Rothberg: *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 5).

17 On the importance of the experiential mode for an understanding of memory, see Alison Landsberg: *Engaging the Past*.

18 Felicity Callard, Constantina Papoulias: *Affect and Embodiment*, p. 257 (with reference to António Damásio).

19 See António Damásio: *The Strange Order of Things*; Sara Ahmed: *Afterword*.

20 Siobhan Brownlie: *Mapping Memory in Translation*, p. 184 on digital connectivity.

21 Alison Landsberg: *Prosthetic Memory*, p. 2.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Surviving the Ruinous Ruin' (Venice Biennale 2019), and Ilya Khrzhanovsky's immersive 'DAU Project' (Paris 2019). The examples range from art installations to immersive art evoking geographically and historically different contexts, raising questions about how art copes with the difficulty of speaking to locally, culturally and politically differently situated audiences at specific exhibition sites.²³ While all four examples use site-specificity to activate response, they employ different forms of the experiential mode involving different strategies to engage the audience in affective and cognitive processes, encouraging links between recent and/or more distant historical events. Despite their different – and often controversial – strategies, all four projects build upon the tensions between the universality of images of the boat and the wall and the specificity of distinct histories and life stories in an attempt to unsettle audience complacency and to disrupt a problematic reassuring feeling with 'the pain of Others', which denies – in Susan Sontag's above quotation – the spectators' complicity in their suffering.

Of Boats: The Affective Power of Materiality in Christoph Büchel's 'Barca Nostra / Our Boat' (Venice Biennale 2019) and Ai Weiwei's 'Law of the Journey' (Prague 2017, Sydney Biennale 2018)

The international Venice Biennale 2019 resonated in unexpected ways with the official form of commemoration in the Sydney Maritime Museum, focussing on the affective power of the boat and the wall in our age of migration, albeit in decisively different ways. While the installation in the German pavilion by artist Natascha Sadr Haghghighian 'Ankersentrum / 'Surviving the Ruinous Ruin' probed the impact of notions of the wall in contemporary debates about migration and its historical resonances, the project by Swiss performance artist Christoph Büchel, entitled 'Barca Nostra / Our Boat' brought a boat with an actual history of death and trauma into the centre of the art world. As many reviewers have pointed out, the "defining display at the 58th Venice Biennale [...] [was] a fishing boat, with huge gashes in its hull, [...] stationed in the Arsenale, the old dockyards of the Venetian Republic. Designed to carry about 15 passengers, it sank in the Mediterranean Sea in April 2015, with more than 800 migrants who had left from Tripoli, Libya. All but 27 died".²⁴ Only a short distance away from the luxury yachts and cruise ships taking anchor in the city, the vessel was placed without signs or explanatory information (apart from the Biennale catalogue) next to a café, whose customers were faced with the opening that had to be cut into the vessel to retrieve the corpses.²⁵ While initially visitors passed by without taking much notice, assuming the boat to be a rusting remainder of the former

23 These processes of translation into different contexts gain additional importance in light of the immediate global availability of images and videoclips of these art works via social media (and YouTube).

24 Andrew Russeth: Don't Turn Away.

25 "Den Cafébesucher*innen zugewandt ist jene Öffnung, die geschnitten werden musste, um Leichen aus dem Frachtraum zu bergen" (Claudia Wahjudi: Berlin in Venedig).

dockyard,²⁶ 'Barca Nostra' gradually turned into an icon of this Biennale. This raises questions about the tension between the real world and artistic representation, the material and the symbolic, as well as questions about the emotionally, ethically, and politically charged implications and limits of processes of such a translation into the context of an art exhibition. The site of this exhibited "empty mass grave"²⁷ opened a debate about the display as a desecration of the victims (even leading to a petition for its removal), or as effective shock tactics necessary to unsettle the spectator position and to forge an alliance against forgetting the victims of the disaster.²⁸

In their discussion of 'Barca Nostra' in the context of relational art practices, Eleanor Paynter and Nicole Miller raise concerns that "[i]n the absence of a clear question posed by the work, the ensuing debate risks alienating audiences from the boat's material history, obscuring the gravity of current migration issues".²⁹ According to Büchel it is precisely this process of a controversial public engagement with 'Barca Nostra' that was central to his project. His team's statement emphasizes that "physical signage and explanatory text at the Arsenale would disrupt the process by which questions are raised, assumptions are made, intentions are projected onto the project, and a meaningful debate ensues".³⁰ In the course of the Biennale, the presentation of the boat withholding all further information drew attention to the dehumanizing anonymization of the "boat people", while motivating the visitors of an international art exhibition as well as the local population to acquire knowledge about the lives of the deceased. The affective charge of 'Barca Nostra' was bound to the knowledge of its history, encouraging the spectators to remember and reread the coverage of the actual event,³¹ in order to take part in a movement against a politics of forgetting. This gained additional urgency in light of the 2019 directive of the Italian government to arraign and fine all NGO rescue organizations setting refugees ashore in Italy, and the subsequent arrest of the German captain of Sea Watch 3, Carola Rackete, after her dramatic docking in Lampedusa with 40 migrants. In this context Büchel's 'Barca Nostra' can be seen as a contribution to making the consequences of the refusal to allow refugees to enter European shores visible and felt, not only as a site of

26 "Es sind in den ersten Tagen Leute achtlos vorbeigelaufen, weil sie dachten, es sei ein Rostmobiliar der ehemaligen Werftanlage" (Siegmond Kopitzki: Die Barca Nostra auf der Biennale - ist das Kunst?).

27 Andrew Russeth: Don't Turn Away.

28 "[Barca Nostra' represents] a relic of a human tragedy but also a monument to contemporary migration, engaging real and symbolic borders and the (im)possibility of freedom of movement of information and people" foregrounding "our mutual responsibility representing the collective policies and politics that create such wrecks" (Elisabetta Povoledo: Wreck of Migrant Ship That Killed Hundreds Will Be Displayed at Venice Biennale). "This devastating relic is positioned right next to a cafe, where art-worlders in Ferragamo trainers gossip without paying the slightest attention. Not even half a moment of silence. To walk past this appalling conjunction is to hang one's head in shame. How can it possibly be presented here, of all places, as a memorial, still less an exhibit?" (Laura Cumming: Venice Biennale 2019 review - preaching to the converted).

29 Eleanor Paynter, Nicole Miller: The White Readymade and the Black Mediterranean: Authoring Barca Nostra. See also Javier Pes, Naomi Rea: 'Absolutely Vile' or 'Powerful'? Christoph Büchel's Migrant Boat is the Most Divisive Work at the Venice Biennale.

30 Ibid.; see also Cristina Ruiz: Fierce debate over Christoph Büchel's Venice Biennale display of boat that sank with hundreds locked in hull.

31 See Eleanor Paynter, Nicole Miller: The White Readymade and the Black Mediterranean.

mourning for the deceased, but also as the site of an open gashing wound left by a crime against humanity.³²

Challenging the distinction between aesthetic and social spheres³³ is equally yet differently central to Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei's art installations about the fate of refugees worldwide, designed for global audiences. In 2016 Ai wrapped 14,000 life jackets "previously worn by fleeing refugees on their journeys across waterways to reach Europe"³⁴ around the columns of the concert house on the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin and distributed 1,005 more in the shape of lotus flowers forming an 'f' on a lake on the premises of Belvedere Palace in Vienna, thus incorporating additional layers of displacement in his work in order to raise questions about responsibilities and an ethics of response with regard to different contexts.³⁵ His installation 'Laundromat' (Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, New York 2016; now permanently Kunstsammlung Düsseldorf) consisted of 2,046 pieces of clothing left behind in the refugee camp of the Greek border village of Idomeni, which were cleaned, ironed and arranged "according to gender, age and garment type" on exceptionally high clothing racks "through which visitors could wander" as in "a retail store".³⁶ As far as possible, traces of the former wearers were eliminated. In contrast to Büchel's 'Barca Nostra' withholding any detailed information, "the walls and floor were wrapped in newsreels, encasing the clothing display in associated images and headlines. [...] A documentary accompanied the exhibition, showing footage of refugees at the Idomeni camp and the cleaning process undertaken for the exhibition".³⁷ The affective power of the exhibit 'Laundromat' lies in the tension between the image of a retail store and the spectators' knowledge who wore these clothes and under what circumstances. The line-up of garments and shoes testify to the nameless refugees' experiences³⁸ in dehumanizing camps while foregrounding the spectators' distance to it.

In the context of Ai's engagement with material objects relating to the experience of migration, his installation 'Law of the Journey' (2017) turns the global image of the small refugee boat into a monumental 60-metre long inflatable black rubber raft mounted on a timber base filled with anonymous faceless rubber figures in life jackets 'floating' above the heads of the spectators in metropolitan

32 "Its presence feels at once obscene and essential at the most closely watched art exhibition in the world" (Andrew Russett: Don't Turn Away).

33 See Eleanor Paynter, Nicole Miller for the collapse of the distinction between aesthetic and social spheres in regard to 'Barca Nostra'.

34 Natasha Noman: Ai Weiwei Hung 14,000 Refugee Life Jackets on a Berlin Concert Hall.

35 "His work F-Lotus consists of 1005 used life vests, each of which has been worn by a Syrian refugee, stitched into a series of 201 lotus flower-like rings, which the artist has installed on the baroque pond in the grounds surrounding the 21er Haus. [...] The letter 'f' in Ai's work refers to a mildly offensive English-Mandarin homonym, which is sometimes used by anti-governmental activists as a gesture of defiance" (Phaion: Ai Weiwei floats life-vest lotus flowers in Vienna).

36 Julie Macindoe: Ai Weiwei's Laundromat and the Aesthetics of Displacement.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.: "Standing at attention in a gallery in downtown New York, these shoes were ghostly, leaving no foot prints of where they've been. For refugees who walked the migration trail, shoes were the functional and metaphorical contact point with shifting ideas of place and home. But in their existence, the shoes also stood on behalf of those who once wore them, testifying to their experience".

cities, such as Prague (National Gallery 2017) and Sydney (Biennale 2018).³⁹ Like 'Barca Nostra' the installation comments on the dehumanization of the "boat people", who literally merge with the boat, the material of which was provided by "a Chinese factory that also manufactures the precarious vessels used by thousands of refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea",⁴⁰ while the visitors' 'submerged' perspective from below does not lend itself to encourage a problematic identification with those lost at sea, but rather dis-eases the spectator's distanced position. Like 'Laundromat', Ai Weiwei's 'Law of the Journey' is accompanied by additional visual and written material. Thus, a wall covered with cellphone-pictures of refugees and their plight taken during the filming of Ai's large scale documentary film 'Human Flow' (2017)⁴¹ serves to counter their anonymity and alleged homogeneity and draws visual attention to the scale of this humanitarian crisis. Quotes from writers ranging from Socrates to Kafka to Hannah Arendt to Zadie Smith on the fate of refugees and on notions of humanity accompany the visitors' walk along the exhibit. The installation is complemented with four videos - 'At Sea' (2016), 'On the Boat' (2016), 'Floating' (2016) and 'Drifting' (2017) - focussing on the refugees in the Mediterranean sea and the artist's attempt to capture their plight. This multi-media commentary can be either read as a form of distrust of the affective potential of the boat, or as an enriching offer based on the belief in a necessary interaction of affective and cognitive aspects in the receptive process.

Taking up the dehumanizing term of the "boat people" Christoph Büchel and Ai Weiwei make use of material traces of the refugees' journey foregrounding the haunting absence of those to whose fate the affluent consumer societies around the globe largely contributed. The affective potential of Büchel's 'Barca Nostra' and Ai's installation objects resides in these traces of the refugees' life stories. Both artists intend to affect the viewer via challenging received patterns of aesthetic consumption via 'displacing' their exhibits into culturally and historically charged exhibition sites or into public spaces of metropolitan city centres in order to generate site-specific resonances. Büchel's 'Barca Nostra' at the Venice Biennale instigated a public debate about Italian immigration policy, while the display of Ai's inflatable boat at the Sydney Biennale called upon the context of Australian immigration policies in light of the foundational myth of Australia as immigrant nation. Its display at the exhibition site in the National Gallery in Prague not only called upon European migration policies, but also upon the use of the building as assembly point for Jews before their deportation to Theresienstadt during World War II.⁴² Despite their differences, these projects share the concern about the current "refugee crisis" and comment on the central involvement and responsibility of Western civilisations (in Europe, North Amer-

39 Andrew Frost: Sydney Biennale review: "Over at Cockatoo Island, another kind of political art is on display. Ai Weiwei's 'Law of the Journey' (2018) is a gigantic, space-filling sculpture, an elongated and oversized life raft filled with huge bodies of adults and children, the entire thing mounted on a timber base inscribed with quotes attesting to the importance of a humane refugee policy".

40 Nicholas Carolan: Ai Weiwei Journeys to the Ends of the Earth.

41 See press release by biennaleofsydney.art.

42 See Gessato: Law Of The Journey By Ai Weiwei.

ica and Australia) in the development of this crisis as a result of a long record of (economic) exploitation, foregrounding the interconnectedness of localized histories in a globalized world.

Of Walls: Translation Matters in Natascha Sadr Haghghian's Ankersentrum / Surviving the Ruinous Ruin (Venice Biennale 2019) and Ilya Khrzhanovsky's DAU Project (Paris 2019)

While Büchel and Ai's exhibits of boats focus primarily on contemporary issues of migration, Haghghian's and Khrzhanovsky's wall-related projects draw attention to the continuation of the past into the present, taken on as an act of translation, which recognizes – as Sue Lieberman argues – “[t]he emergence of experience [...] into conscious memory” as “a process of translation into symbolic form. [...] whether that shape takes verbal or other expressive form”.⁴³ In this context Siobhan Brownlie uses the term “critical processual translation” to refer to “multiple types of cultural transaction involving transfer, interpretation and transformation not only as the movement from one language to another and from one text to another, but from one genre/medium to another, from personal event to text, from one generation to another”.⁴⁴ Such an understanding of translation in terms of “creative negotiations of difference”⁴⁵ calls upon the ethical responsibilities at stake.⁴⁶ In the current age of a global dissemination and reception of images and (hi)stories, the question of how “mnemonic processes unfold across and beyond cultures”,⁴⁷ gains particular urgency for contemporary art forms engaging with histories of exploitation and oppression, victimization and trauma. Such histories are addressed in the art projects by Haghghian and Khrzhanovsky, which centre on material and metaphorical walls as ambivalent signs of fortification against “intruding” others and of incarceration of those “inside”. As forms of (trans)cultural translation they involve complex mechanisms of remembering and forgetting and raise fundamental questions about the ethical demands on artists and spectators in this process.

Highlighting different aspects of translation between languages, cultures, and histories of trauma, the art project presented in the German pavilion ‘Ankersentrum / Surviving in the Ruinous Ruin’ at the Venice Biennale 2019, curated by Franciska Zólyom, (director of the Gallery for Contemporary Art in Leipzig), encourages spatial and temporal connections. The project takes up distinct historical resonances of notions of the wall in relation to contemporary debates about migration, foregrounding interlingual and intermedial forms of

43 Sue Lieberman: *Translating Silence*, p. 332.

44 Siobhan Brownlie: *Mapping Memory in Translation*, pp. 2 f. (with reference to Bella Brodzki: *Can these Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory*)

45 Sandra Bermann: *Introduction*, p. 5.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 7: “If we must translate in order to emancipate and preserve cultural pasts and to build linguistic bridges for present understandings and future thought, we must do so while attempting to respond ethically to each language’s contexts, intertexts, and intrinsic alterity”.

47 Astrid Erll: *Travelling Memory*, p. 9.

translation as 'crossing over'. The pavilion exhibition centrally positioned a huge wall, which revealed itself on the other side as a dam built against flooding and submersion. The title of the project 'Ankersentrum' (Anchor Senter) commented upon and defamiliarized by mis-spelling the 2018 official coinage of the term 'Ankerzentrum' (anchor centre), for refugee registration camps in Germany. The term anchor centre is intended to evoke associations of the successful anchoring of "boat people" on arrival, while camouflaging its actual purpose of denying residence to refugees deemed not qualified for asylum. Moreover, the coinage of 'Ankerzentrum' replaced the term 'Auffanglager' (reception camp) because of its potential associations with the term 'Konzentrationslager' (concentration camp) in Nazi Germany. The artist's alteration of the political coinage and spelling ties in with Jeffrey Olick's discussion of images and phrases "as mnemonic lightning rods" within specific contexts.⁴⁸ In addition, the Biennale project explored the implications of the German words 'Duldung' (toleration), and 'Festung' (fortification), which have emerged in the German national context during the current 'refugee crisis'. The link back to Nazi-history was underlined by the site-specificity of the German pavilion in Venice, originally built in 1909 and transformed in the monumental architectural style of the Nazi-period in 1938, still welcoming visitors today into "Germania", embossed in huge letters above the entrance portal.⁴⁹ Consequently blocking this main entry the artist asked the visitors in through a back door with the promise to open up a new experiential space appealing to different senses.⁵⁰

The visitors entered a room which was dominated by metal structures equipped with loudspeakers reminiscent of the construction sites of provisionally erected fenced-off camps. However, rather than evoking the voice of authorities giving orders, the sound installation 'Tribute to Whistle' by a group of international musicians and composers brought into play the whistle as symbol of resistance against deportation. The huge nine-metre-high concrete wall in the main space of the exhibition with a tiny opening leaving traces of an undefined black liquid on the floor meandering between scattered stone blocks ironized the rhetoric of a necessary fortification against the threat of a 'flooding' of Europe by migrants. At the same time, it triggered associations with the Berlin Wall as a symbol of enforced division preventing free mobility. In an adjacent space, staples of plastic fruit and vegetable crates and an Italian tomato advertisement were placed to evoke associations with the exploitation of migrant workers in Italy. The project thus emphasized the situatedness within the German context, drawing upon iconic images and verbal phrases connected to the German past and present, while opening up associative links across different cultural and historical boundaries, alluding to the implication of global consumers.

In this context, the visibility of the artist as cultural translator⁵¹ gains particular relevance and raises questions about whether and how the artist's engagement contributes to the intended effect of creating transnational solidarity

48 Jeffrey Olick: *The Politics of Regret*, p. 113.

49 See Sarah Alberti: "Jeder Stein trägt Geschichte in sich".

50 See Deutscher Pavillon Pressemitteilung.

51 On the call for a visibility of the translator see Lawrence Venuti: *The Translator's Invisibility*.

communities. In the opening event of the German exhibition, the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian, a professor of Sculpture at the Bremen Art School, appeared in a doubly mediated form, taking on the persona of Natascha Süder Happelmann, a name generated via autocorrection and misspellings of the artist's name in bureaucratic contexts, while her face remained hidden behind a stone mask made of papier-mâché. The artist was a silent bystander throughout the opening event, while her official statement was read out by her speaker called 'Helene Duldung' (Helen Toleration) or – even more appropriate in this context – Helen Suspension of Deportation. The masked artist also appears in two videos of eight- and ten-minute duration, available on the project homepage. The first video features the artist walking along wired fences and stopping in front of guarded gates and barriers blocking off barrack-like buildings, while the sounds of passing cars mix with those of musical instruments tuning the note of A. In the second video the masked artist walks across a sheer endless unploughed field, stops at clearly marked Apulian roads and observes a fenced-in factory area. Demonstrators chant slogans claiming residency for migrants, while the artist stares at the deserted loading site of the factory. It is only in the closing credits that the spectator is informed about the specifics of the locations of the videos: the refugee registration camps in Bavaria, and the crossroads in Apulia, Italy, where more than a dozen migrant workers harvesting fruit under slave-like conditions died in accidents in 2018.⁵² When the exhibition opened, the videos were complemented by a third one focusing on a German refugee ship detained in the Sicilian port of Trapani.⁵³

Withholding and releasing information, being present, but only in a masked form, Natascha Sadr Haghghian foregrounds the role of the artist, while her individual identity remains hidden. This draws attention to naming as ascription of identity, meaning and value,⁵⁴ and can be read as a critique of the assimilation of artists into "the art world's self-congratulatory critical machinery, which prizes token diversity and performances of tolerance while suppressing any work that fails to respect the unwritten rules of minority play".⁵⁵ At the same time the stone-headed figure looking at a Bavarian refugee camp and an Italian crossroads where migrant workers died, addresses the question whether and how onlookers can be moved, drawing attention to the dehumanizing perception of migrant people as faceless others, as well as to the 'Versteinerung' (petrification) taking place within inhospitable 'host' countries. While some reviewers

52 Description of video 1 and 2 adapted from Tobias Timm: *Hirn unter Stein*.

53 For a first impression see #Ankersentrum #VeniceBiennale #MayYouLiveInInterestingTimes.

54 See Mara Sartore's interview with Franciska Zólyom: "Names not only designate beings and things they also constitute, determine and identify them. By doing so they also distinguish, separate them from each other and ascribe meaning and value to them. [...] it is important to look for alliances, connections and affinities between forms of being. To overcome demarcations and the effects of discrimination that they entail".

55 "Part Diogenes, part MF Doom, Süder Happelmann is a perfect candidate for Biennale disruption, a masked purveyor of slippery pranks that irrigate the usually dry field of institutional critique. Even her lack of a stable CV makes it difficult to assimilate her into the art world's self-congratulatory critical machinery, which prizes token diversity and performances of tolerance while suppressing any work that fails to respect the unwritten rules of minority play. Ben Mauk: *We'll Burn Your Pavilions*.

criticized 'Ankersentrum' for its lack of ambiguity,⁵⁶ others complained about the opacity of the accumulation of politically intended ciphers with particular reference to the naming and masking of the artist.⁵⁷ The latter statement, however, seems to confirm the intended effect on the spectator who – despite the clear political message of the installation – is not provided with reassuring answers which would leave the spectatorial position unquestioned.

As stated in the press release, 'Ankersentrum' probes the possibilities of survival, resistance and solidarity⁵⁸ in the "ruinous ruin" of the German pavilion through a "somatic experience". This is intensified in the 'DAU Project' by Ilya Khrzhanovsky, which most radically explores the possibilities of translating the past into the present through an immersive experience for the spectators, drawing on the metaphorical and literal walls of the Soviet regime. The 'DAU Project', which opened in Paris in February 2019, has been repeatedly cited as one of the most ambitious art projects of our time setting out to explore notions of freedom and repression, violence and solidarity.⁵⁹ It re-visions the world of the Soviet Union between 1938 and 1968 and the life of the Russian Nobel prize winning physicist Lew Landau (1908-1968), who believed in free love, worked on the hydrogen bomb, was repeatedly awarded with the Stalin prize, but also imprisoned.⁶⁰ The 'DAU Project' foregrounds the intricate interrelations between culturally and historically situated memories of oppression, war and migration, calling upon Stalinist state-violence connected to the imprisonment in labour camps or deportation of "state enemies" and ethnic minorities, amounting to a forced internal migration of an estimated six million people. At the same time the project encourages global links beyond these historically anchored confines. Originally intended to travel to different metropolitan areas (from Paris to Berlin and London), the project inevitably engages with questions of the translation of histories of oppression into different historical and cultural contexts.

The visitors' immersive journey in the Paris production began with the application for entry visa, followed by an individual guide program based upon the results of an initial questionnaire (ensuring that visitors did not embark on the same route), involving performance scenes as well as talk formats, one-on-one encounters, concerts, and film presentations. The films shown during the event are part of this Gesamtkunstwerk, which had been in the making for a decade. It involved the meticulous reconstruction of the Soviet research institute

56 "Ist das jetzt subversiv? Dafür sind die Botschaften zu eindeutig" (Boris Pofalla: Die Deutschen bauen ein Abschiebegefängnis in Venedig).

57 MDR KULTUR-Kunstredakteur Andreas Höll: "Es ist eine Addition von politisch gemeinten Chiffren, die ziemlich diffus wirkt".

58 "Auf der Suche nach den unsteten Formen und Möglichkeiten von Überleben, Widerstand und Solidarität werden immer wieder auch Ruinen in Beschlag genommen, umgewidmet, umgebaut, bewohnt" (Deutscher Pavillon Pressemitteilung).

59 "Unterstützt wird die Installation von den Berliner Festspielen. Intendant Thomas Oberender zufolge lernt man bei dem Projekt, wie große Utopien in repressive Erfahrungen umschlagen können. Man lerne aber auch Formen von Solidarität, Kreativität, unglaublicher Intelligenz und Aufopferungsbereitschaft. 'Man lernt, was Geschichte mit dem Einzelnen macht, aber wie auch Einzelne manchmal Geschichte machen', so der Intendant der Berliner Festspiele" (Vladimir Esipov: Berliner Mauer als Kunstprojekt).

60 Landau "glaubte an die freie Liebe, baute mit an der Wasserstoffbombe, erhielt mehrfach den Stalin-Preis, wurde dennoch inhaftiert und wieder freigelassen" (Iris Radisch: Das andere Universum).

in the Ukrainian town of Charkow, in which Landau had worked, where Ilya Khrzhanovsky gathered a community of about 400 people including scientists and artists, to immerse themselves in Landau's world – most of them for a couple of weeks – within an overall period of three years.⁶¹ The outcome of this (only partly scripted) docu-fiction project, in which the present everyday life of all participants was intended to merge with the environment of the past, amounted to 700 hours of video material transformed into thirteen feature films. The film material follows the lives of the participants of the project, who almost all play themselves except for Landau and his wife, into their mundane as well as most intimate moments, recording their immersion into the oppressive and violent world of the institute of the Stalinist past and raising reviewers' concerns about the reality-status of presented scenes of violence and about the intended effect.⁶²

DAU film participants willingly submitted to a totalitarian system of total surveillance, which was recreated in the process of filming, and which uncannily resonated with current developments of voluntary submission to surveillance by digital (in particular social) media eroding the boundaries between reality and fiction.⁶³ Teodor Currentzis who played Lev Landau, pointed out, that “[y]ou are in an environment that you know is a game, but it doesn't work if you are not yourself. [...] I felt very uncomfortable many times”.⁶⁴ Reviews of the films, some of which were released independently in 2019 and 2020, echoed this ambivalent reaction, emphasizing an “eerie, intimately disturbing”⁶⁵ effect, leaving a feeling of unease and uncertainty of how to respond.⁶⁶ Currentzis' description of an experience of inhabiting – or rather oscillating between – two worlds, captures precisely the effect of immersion. Alison Landsberg has pointed out that although the experiential mode “bespeaks a widespread popular desire to bring things close”,⁶⁷ it does not fulfil “[t]he fantasy that one might actually have unmediated access to the past by looking or touching ‘authentic’ objects [...]”.⁶⁸ Rather “the affective engagements that draw the viewer in [inevitably are] coupled with other modes that assert the alien nature of the past and the viewer's fundamental difference from it”.⁶⁹ This is achieved in the ‘DAU Project’ through a self-referential duplication of the process of immersion, as visitors of the performance venue are confronted with the immersive experience of their cinematic ‘doubles’.

The value of such a “presentification”⁷⁰ of the past thus centrally depends upon the careful design of the immersive event. Reviewers of the on-site immersive

61 See Joseph Hanimann: *Selbstzerstörerisches Totalspektakel*.

62 *Ibid.*: “Sollen diese in allen Einzelheiten nachgebauten sowjetischen Wohnstuben, Funktionsbüros, Wodkaschenken und Massenschlafsäle mit durchgelegenen Pritschen, die wir durchwandern, uns Angst machen oder irgendwie nostalgisch in vergangenen Zeiten zurückversetzen?”

63 “Soviet citizens, and DAU's participants, submitted to a totalitarian rule with eyes open; today we seem oblivious to it. [...] We live in a transparent world, but we cannot accept it” (DAU's star Teodor Currentzis quoted in Steve Rose: *Inside DAU, the ‘Stalinist Truman Show’*).

64 Teodor Currentzis quote in Steve Rose: *Inside DAU, the ‘Stalinist Truman Show’*.

65 Peter Bradshaw: *DAU*. Natasha review.

66 “Even now I am not sure how to take it” (Peter Bradshaw: *DAU*. *Degeneration Review*).

67 Alison Landsberg: *Engaging the Past*, p. 3.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

70 See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *Production of Presence*.

event in Paris were predominantly critical of the actual realization of the intended gigantic Gesamtkunstwerk⁷¹ which conjoined an overwhelming abundance of information with disturbing visual material. Expressing their concern about the lack of clarity of the message of this immersive experience, reviewers asked whether the venue was supposed to evoke a nostalgia for the past or a fear of a totalitarian self-destructive system. However, according to the director Ilya Khrzhanovsky this lack of explicit guidance is central for the individual journey of the visitors enabling a process of self-discovery.⁷² Nevertheless this process is decisively bound to the cultural and historical context in which the experience takes place. Thus, the example of the 'DAU Project' once again testifies to the importance of "the materiality of a particular site and how it affects" the visitors' journey.⁷³

The success of the 'DAU Project' as a warning against the current revival of the belief in totalitarian regimes and as an exploration of the effects of living within walls depends as much upon the multimedia design of the event as on its site-specificity. In Paris the performance took place in and between two opulent theatre buildings of the nineteenth century, the Théâtre du Châtelet and the Théâtre de la Ville, which were then under reconstruction,⁷⁴ foregrounding the aesthetic dimension of the event with a focus on the process of the creation of the experience itself. This was criticized as a distraction from the histories of oppression to be called upon, and thus as a prevention of an engagement with potential links to current political developments, catering instead to the narcissistic desires of global consumers who are primarily interested in experiencing themselves in a spectacular event, particularly in potentially one-on-one encounters with celebrities like performance artist Marina Abramovic who participated in the filming and in the performance event.

By contrast, the original plan of the performance venue to open in Berlin in October 2018, which was prevented by city authorities despite the support of the minister of Cultural Affairs Monika Grütters, included the construction of a closed off area in the city center for the four-week duration of the production, surrounded by a wall to be erected overnight like the Berlin Wall in 1961, and to be torn down on the closing night of the production on 9 November 2018. In the German context such a reconstruction of the Berlin Wall as an icon of division could have provided an important link between different historical contexts relating to oppression, war and forced migration from the first half of the twentieth century up to the present and could have made a powerful statement in commemoration of the collapse of the Berlin Wall on the final day of production. In such a context the visitors' immersion in a world of violence and control, collectivism and extremes⁷⁵ could have emphasized the necessity of solidarity against

71 "Menschenzoo oder gigantisches Gesamtkunstwerk" (Iris Radisch: *Das andere Universum*).

72 Iris Radisch quoting from her interview with Ilya Khrzhanovsky: "Nicht auf das Ergebnis komme es an, sondern auf die Reise, auf die man sich begeben. [...] Die UdSSR sei [...] nur ein Spiegel, in dem jeder sich selbst entdecken könne".

73 Susanne Buckley-Zistel: *Tracing the politics of aesthetics*, p. 782.

74 See Jürgen König: *DAU-Projekt in Paris*.

75 "[E]ine Welt der Gewalt, der Überwachung, des Kollektivismus und der Extreme" (Iris Radisch: *Das andere Universum*).

mechanisms of oppression. Beyond the 'DAU Project' the ensuing public debate reflects the scepticism about immersive art as an individualized phenomenon with unpredictable directionality and a concomitant distrust of its potential for the forging of solidarity communities and for activist interventions in current totalitarian politics.

Sadr Haghghian's 'Ankersentrum' and the 'DAU Project' make visible the specific historical contexts of actual and metaphorical walls. 'Ankersentrum' projects the ways in which language walls off – but inadvertently reveals – unwanted truths, and how it interrelates with (moving) image and sound, expressing the belief in the possibility to develop strategies of resistance and to build solidarity. The 'DAU Project' and its use of different media invites an extended immersion into a specific part of Russian history with profound repercussions for world history on the European continent, and resonates with contemporary border fortification and nationalistic politics in different parts of the world. In both venues the focus on the walls surrounding those collaborating with – and profiting from – authoritarian dictatorships or current consumer capitalist societies draws attention to the site-specificity of the reception process and to the implications of immersive experiences.

Conclusion

The projects discussed in this paper engage with a wide range of different forms from the presentation of "authentic" objects and fabrics, to image, sound, video and text, to the creation of a multimedia immersive performance event. The projects attempt to bring close to spectators the life stories of those whose voices are not heard, who are denied individuality and denounced as 'boat people', but also of those who have collaborated with a system of oppression and the repercussions for their lives. In this context the affect of the uncanny intrusion of what seems radically 'other' in public spaces and art venues of metropolitan cities is intended to raise haunting questions about links across geographical and historical divides and about the implication of current global spectators in cosmopolitan areas in these histories.

In all examples the different historical contexts of the exhibition or performance spaces are brought into productive friction with the venues generating an oscillating effect between radical difference and disturbing closeness, albeit with varying intensity, ranging from an emphasis on the foreignness of the exhibit (in 'Barca Nostra') to an invitation to immersion (in 'The DAU Project'). Thus, the spectator's own position as part of affluent consumer societies profiting from the exploitation and exclusion of its 'others' is called upon by laying bare and encouraging the visitors to see the hidden links between the present and the past, between their own and seemingly foreign histories in a call for an ethical response and with the hope for forging a global solidarity community as prerequisite for change.

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