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How to cite

Berggren, E. (2019). Representation, Victimization or Identification. Negotiating Power and Powerlessness in Art on Migration. *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK*, 4(2), 113-136. DOI: 10.26409/2019JMK4.2.09

Retrieved from

<http://www.mediterraneanknowledge.org/publications/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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Article first published online: December 2019



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN
DOAJ

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[Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK](#)

Representation, Victimization or Identification. Negotiating Power and Powerlessness in Art on Migration

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Abstract

A commonplace idea, and worry, in much political art is the emphasis on not to victimize the object/subject in artistic strategies, and to portray people as subjects with agency. And the way to do this is to allow for identification. This article asks if this strong idea might be shaped by an ameliorating guilt for victims, which in turn is partially informed by an inability to free the gaze from a hegemonic view of people as agents. Instead the article looks at some contemporary artists who surface an opposite recognition, the radical lack of power for large groups within the global migration system, without attempts at temporary symbolic solutions. It will be argued that the recognition of powerlessness is and has always been a ground for political as well as artistic representation, mobilisation and solidarity.

Keywords: Migration, identification, representation, victims, powerlessness.

Art about migration confronts us today with the problem of how to *represent* the often politically unrepresented and how to exhibit an ongoing and man-made catastrophe – the deaths at the borders. The so-called refugee crisis appear to have created a productive crisis also of images and facts. What should be in focus: the refugees, the victims, the camps, the drownings, the smugglers or the systems and countries that propel this crisis? How can commonplace questions in *political art*, such as those of *identification, agency, power, exclusion and inclusion* be incorporated and dealt with in an exhibition project? Neither of these questions have only one answer. But the argument in this essay holds that the migration issue challenges a set of prevalent ideas in contemporary political art, and, that a closer look at some artistic strategies can deepen our understanding of the relationship between political activism and political art, and also force us to question a few commonplace assumptions about political as well as artistic representation.

Political representation is not the same, of course, as artistic representation. These concepts denote quite different activities, most of the time, yet they are connected, especially when we speak of art that is clearly motivated by a political and social condition, and carries forth a critique and an explicit or implicit demand for change. In the most straightforward meaning of the term, drawing on Hanna Pitkins work, (Pitkin 1967) political representation is “to make present again.” A reminder. Political representation occurs when political actors speak, advocate, symbolize, and act on behalf of others in the political arena. Normally, political theory have discussed this in terms of someone or something (a person or a party) speaking for a *citizen or group* within the polis. Already here we run into a problem, which is also a point in this article, political as well as artistic representation have had a hard time grappling with politics across borders (Nail, 2015). Representation in politics is of course also a practical matter related to the democratic functioning, to let a party or someone speak for a group or an interest is to make interest aggregation and articulation possible and to make something present in the political arena. Representation in art can be understood in a related way, especially when the object/subject of art is a group of people and their current condition. The artist take on the role of re-presenter and makes the condition of the group present, and thus aggregates both interest and audience and articulates, with them. The truth of the representation is not so much the critical issue, as its accuracy relative to the condition. I will use the notion in the original simple form, to speak and act for others and to make someone or something “present again”.

In the following I will discuss a set of curatorial choices for the exhibition project “Is This the Time for Art” (2014-2017) which I produced for *The Museum of Forgetting*, a nomadic curatorial project that have for 12 years created art exhibitions at various venues often with a political critique as entry point. I will suggest that the topic matter itself – migration – opens up for rethinking some of the traditional positions and common place ideas within political contemporary art by considering the location and the real or imagined power or powerlessness of migrants, artists and audiences. As the title of the exhibition reveals, the project was consciously shaped by the difficulty of matching the gravity of the issue with an appropriate artistic expression. How *represent* an ongoing catastrophe in the art context? A mere

aestheticization of the human suffering and lethal exclusion of the migration system appeared perverse. The weight of the problem and the severity of the crisis, didn't seem to fit with an art show and its peculiar finality, limitations and otherworldliness. In the curatorial work the realization emerged that it was possible that some events seemed to disallow exhibition. Yet still need it. Thus the question, 'is this the time for art?' It became a temporary solution to the ethical problem of aestheticizing a crisis. It also expresses the difficulty in finding a bridge between political and artistic representation. The question turned the project into a curatorial investigation with a double aim, to find artworks that reflected our sense of crisis and to understand the potential role and problem of aesthetics in this crisis.

The question shares some kinship, with Adorno's famously depressed question about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz and, as he later qualified, if one can "go on living" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1966, p. 362). The regular yearly numbers of drowning migrants confronts us with a morally challenging fact, which bears a dark kinship to Adorno's concern. There are two aspects of this. One is the mentioned difficulty to represent the deaths along the borders of Europe, and the other is the fact that in regard to the current migratory system, the European audience, artist and curator, no matter how critical, are also members and in part representatives of a *polis* which has put this system in place.

Here the argument is that the migration issue is in bad need of powerful and critical representations, and thus have to revisit and rethink typical links in political art today, such as the widespread suspicion against *artistic representation*, i.e. to avoid the power move it is said to entail "to speak for someone else." The response to this concern have been to try to climb down from the authoritative position as privileged speaker and mix with the audience in strategies that embrace various expressions of relational aesthetics (Bourriard, 1998). Here, crudely lumped together, we thus find interactive, participatory, direct-action and performative approaches. They all share to some degree the skepticism about representation and a concern to avoid objectification and exploitation. With an analogy from the political world, these artistic strategies seek to come in a more direct contact with their 'constituency'. Moreover, whenever representational strategies aren't completely abandoned, as they rarely can be, an often suggested remedy to the problematic power position entailed in representation are aesthetic

strategies that allow for *identification* together with the assertion of the *agency* and *subjectivity* of those represented as opposed to representations that *victimize*.

Many of these strategies have brought an important reflexive critique of taken for granted positions and divisions of labour within political art. It has been part of a widening of the voices and a 'partitioning of the sensible' and a dismantling of the unfair distribution and privilege of voice (Rancière, 2013). However, the argument here is that, in a world marked by radical exclusion, the salience of some of these standard positions in much contemporary art must be revisited and at times called into question. The radical exclusion that art on migration is thus not only exclusion from art, but from the political world as such. An inquiry following this lead may surface some of the taken for granted national, territorial and bordered premises that the world, including the art world, have operated with, even in politically radical and critical modes. As migration challenges borders, and our knowledge and oblivion about them, art on migration gets a few of its premises exposed. The concern behind the often recurring claims and positions regarding what art about "the other", or art on suffering, must or must not do, is often framed as one of "ethics". However, a closer look at these concerns can reveal how they are also, at times, inhibiting a critical view of what it portrays, represent or re-enact – today's migration regime. I will discuss this with a note on art's political potential in general and its relation to success or failure, and furthermore through a short look at how contemporary art is bound up with a special relationship to space. The spacial dimension of political art, and its political potency, is as I will try to show an innate quality of contemporary art, yet one in need of scrutiny at times. Lastly, a few examples of works by artists will be discussed as they have deviated from some standard ethical demands within political art and taken on the migration issue in innovative ways, and moreover, ways that grapple with representation and place, the presence and absence of people as subjects and objects. These are Nuria Güell, Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga, Oscar Lara, and Kimbal Quist Bumstead. But before I look closer at these artistic strategies, I think it is essential to get a grip on what is at stake in and behind the issue here discussed, the regular and well known deaths that seem to be an integral and even accepted part of the current migration regime.

1. Facts on the ground, and at sea.

The “migration issue” or the “crisis” addressed here, is, to be more specific, the deaths and deportations, incarcerations and the destruction of lives, that the current migration regime of Europe produce on a regular basis. In the curatorial project “Is This the Time for Art?”, this, the most lethal, excluding and unbearable aspects of migration today was what triggered the project.

Today, about 25 million people are judged to be officially recognized ‘refugees’ by the UN and UNHCR. However, near 70 million are regarded to be subjected to forced migration, including also economic, political- or climate refugees, as well as internal refugees. (UN: International Migration Report, 2017.) During the recent peak years of asylum seekers to the EU, 2015 and 2016, 1,3 and 1,2 million people respectively sought asylum to the Union. Granted asylum in 2015 were almost 1,3 million, yet in 2016 this had been halved, with no corresponding drop in asylum seekers 2016. (Eurostat: Asylum statistics 2017.) This should be seen in relation to the vastly larger pressure of refugees on countries near Syria. One example, Lebanon, has taken more than 1 million refugees from Syria in this period.

The regular safe roads to the EU have been all but closed. In 2015 one million migrants crossed the Mediterranean in an effort to reach Europe. Since long, but increasingly since 2015, a set of systems, coordinated by EU:s border agency Frontex, have been installed to prevent the entry in to Europe. This has reduced the numbers trying to cross. So in 2017 EU saw only 650 000 asylum seekers. But the danger has increased. Since 2014 to 2018, the deaths on the Mediterranean have averaged 3500, shifting from 5000 in 2016 to 2300 in 2018, yet the number who have embarked on these journey have, as said, gone down dramatically. (UNHCR: “Desperate Journeys – Refugees and migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe’s borders.” January 2019, 5). Most commentators thus conclude that EU:s efforts at stopping migrants from reaching the shores of Europe have vastly increased the danger.

This has been long in the making. Since the 1990’ s, EU have adopted a “remote policing” policy, in which detention and re-sending migrants are central tools. (MigrEurope, 2013). The huge bureaucratic apparatus, with Frontex - EU:s border surveillance agency at the center - involves smaller

agencies, private firms and military units and local police forces. A reason for all the deaths on the Mediterranean is a EU directive, put in place already in 2001, which makes it illegal for airliners, ships and other transport companies to let people travel to the EU without residence permit (Council Directive 2001/52/EC).

The lethal aspects of EUs migration policy is not only about drowning. The number of EU-supported detention centers were in 2012 almost 500 (473), inside EU (Migreurop, 2013). Yet, there are also a number of sites in neighboring countries financed by the EU, in North Africa, Turkey, etc. Ad to this a large number of invisible, clandestine and temporary sites, ad-hoc transit stations and “hot spots” with little or no transparency or regularized management at all, many run by private subcontractors, some by smugglers, and so forth. The total number of camps and detained persons in EU:s “remote policing” system is thus largely unknown, as is the number of deaths within them. Ad to this that reports of an epidemic of suicides in the camps have surfaced during the last years. (The Guardian, 2018).

There is today a strong consensus on a hard line on migration and calls for evening stricter, i.e. more dangerous, policies. The movements across Europe, often called *right wing populism*, but which in many instances should be described as varieties of *fascism turned main stream*, have had a clear influence over government policies on migration regulation. Anti immigrant parties, and policy, is no longer the marginal exception underlining the liberal-democratic rule. This has changed both laws and the political discussion in ways that was to most Europeans literally unthinkable 30 years ago (Berggren, 2007).

So, in sum, the migration regime in Europe today is a *system* that in many ways surpass the dystopic visions expressed some two decades ago with the notion of a “Fortress Europe”. A notion ridiculed by the defenders of European integration, whose idealized language spoke of peace, humanitarianism, cosmopolitanism and open borders. By and large, there are reasons to speak of a reshaping of *the political* as such, i.e. the boundaries, structures and constitutional framework of the ground on which our political systems reside and operate.

2. *Art's burden.*

All art can be read politically. The distinction political vs non-political art is thus most often an impossible one, or at best, contingent upon perspective. Yet, I will here by-pass this central boundary problem in art by simply referring to art that explicitly speak to an issue that is already politicized, or that seeks the attention of its audiences in order to politicize an issue. In short, an 'issue' that ultimately is settled outside of the art event. Here, two elements are central in thinking about political art. One is the weight it must carry in terms of fulfilling or failing in its political ambition and the other has to do with its location, as the political in art has always been intimately bound up with its space and place.

In fact, most theoretical works on art and politics treat this issue as one of aesthetics, direct their attention to how art works include political dimensions or how they can be interpreted within an aesthetic or critical theory framework. Yet, more rarely as a burden or a problem which connects the art work to the world or the gallery to the street and world outside in a more direct way (Alliez and Osborne, 2013), say in terms of the for politics pertinent questions of success or failure.

But, in spite of its powerlessness, I maintain that political art must take seriously what eventually happens to the problem addressed, otherwise it would be a mere aestheticization of a political matter. And indeed this concern haunts much political art. However, we sense if the engagement is sincere. I believe most is. Yet, at the same time, art cannot take full responsibility for offering and realizing political solutions. Rancière reminds that art also must account for its powerlessness:

Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity /.../ That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfill its political promises are condemned to a certain melancholy (Rancière, 2002).

This is a condition for political art: it must reconcile, yet not solve, its political ambition with its limited capacity to actually create change. This conundrum is further complicated in art that, as has been common in the last decades, emphasize its *autonomy* while also seek to overcome or avoid *representation*, escape mediation and go beyond the symbolic gesture, leave

the allegedly segregated, privileged art space and break out, perform and let life and art merge into art-action, into art-life (Thomphson, 2012). With such “radical” aspirations, an even greater “failure” is lined up in terms of political accomplishment. Yet, Rancière seems to suggest that this partial failure is what artists and curators must bear. Only the failure save the knot that links the autonomy and heteronomy of art (Rancière, 2002).

I think this is right, as with the Greek tragedy, the ‘failure’ is not only honest, but also essential, as it *gives something back to the audience*, to contemplate, reconcile with or be inspired to act on. Illusion without delusion. This corresponds to what Adorno and Horkheimer suggested was lost in late capitalist cultural industry. Without the *tragic dimension* all that is left for the audience is a mimetic screening of fiction, a cover up (T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, 1972/1947). The failure of the world, of politics, must of course also be included in art on failed politics. The unfinished, the tentative and probing is essential in art as well as politics in search of its battle ground. Uncertainty of impact is a shared quality in these spheres of action. Any contentment, closure or satisfaction in the activity, or the exhibition, on for example migration today, is strikingly out of place (See Thompson 2017 for a related thought yet reached through practice).

A first reflection on art on migration is that, beside involving an extreme clash between the gallery and the deaths on the Mediterranean, it reaches out, outside, not only the gallery, but the regular *Polis*, a specific real and imagined community. Like migration, it transcends borders, focus and raise questions about both the workings of art as a political tool and of politics based on a territorial logic, as TJ. Demos has explored and discussed with rich accounts of a variety works and their political significance in *The Migrant Image* (Demos, 2103). To understand why the spatial dimension is a challenge to contemporary artists addressing migration we must look back for a moment on art’s relationship to *space* in relation to politics and representation.

Contemporary art is described and defined in many ways, as starting at different junctions or breaks, the 1920s, WWII, the 1960s, 1989, or it is defined according to its content matter or its somewhat puzzling relationship to the ‘contemporary’ itself (Karlholm, 2014). One way of describing it however, is to think of it as being concerned with its place.

Thanks to, in particular, Marcel Duchamp, the room in which art is exhibited became charged in a new way. His ready-mades transformed everyday, banal, objects and placed them in the gallery. Ever since, art became art, cursed or blessed, also by being moved in or out of this space.

We can think of that as domestic art politics. Duchamp revolutionized the categories and meanings of art works and the art space, yet is rarely seen as a typical political artist. But he flung the doors open.

In the 1960s and 1970s many artists left the traditional art space, an idea conceptualized by Brian O'Doherty's classic *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, published as three essays in *Art Forum* in 1976, later as a book (O'Doherty, 2000). Doherty broke down the normative underpinnings of the gallery. The whiteness of the cube served as an idealized screen standing in the way of the world, pretending to be neutral, pure and ideal, it contributed to mystify art, commodify it further as well as keeping the troubles of the world outside, or purify them into aesthetics. His critical intervention echoed aspects of Benjamin discussion of the art worlds response to the severed linkage to ritual in the form of *l'art pour l'art* as a "negative theology": "...the idea of 'pure' art which not only denied any social function of art but also categorizing by subject matter." (Benjamin 1936/2000).

Since Doherty, radical movements and energies of the 1960s and 1970s, its' break outs from museum or gallery, have become almost in itself a trademark of radical political art, so as to avoid excluding those subjects one wanted to address and engage in dialogue. In fact, the critique of the white cubes, the gallery and the museum has become a standard trope today, even for museums. The general thrust of this move, to open up, move outside and 'take it (art) into the streets' was and is of course driven by a general inclusive and democratic aspiration. It is pursued through actual moves, as well as symbolic gestures, and expresses an often bad conscience about or lack of faith in the gallery space, as well as a search for the relevant battle ground, the democratic constituency (Sholette, 2011; Lacy 2010, Karlholm, Kaprow & Smithson, 2013; Lundström, 2015).

Another side of this engagement has been the common rejection of *representation*, in favor of participation and action through performative strategies among artists. There has been a strong tendency to try to rearrange the power relations in the art situation, not only by moving out

from the traditional setting, but also in how one regards the relationship between artist and audience, speaker and listener. Negotiations that in the 1990s got renewed energy with Bourriard's important intervention in *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 1998).

3. *Art on migration - identification, subjectivity, agency and representation*

In the following we shall look closer at some artistic strategies that have dealt with the challenge to art's ethical and political strategies, that current migration entails. I shall discuss them in relation to some central concepts that these artists both expose and distance themselves from. These are as said the normative idea of *identification*, the couple *subjectivity-agency*, the problem of *representation*, lastly, I bring in a notion, less frequent today, maybe because of its baggage from past political projects: *the system* (Jameson, 1987). A view towards 'system', or its equivalent here, the 'migration regime', it is argued, can counter some of the problems that past notions lead us into.

An underlying thought behind this discussion is thus that all these strategies of recent contemporary art are challenged in the confrontation with the current migration regime. The roles of audience, artist and constituency must be rethought. The question of who the subject and object is and where art shall live its life, is altered, when the subject/object is radically excluded, both from the art sphere *and* the political community surrounding it or surrounded by it. And this in turn, changes the way we can look at, or try to escape, representation.

The offer or possibility to *identify with* a protagonist, a subject/object of an art work, has long been seen as an ethical requirement and possibly even more so as the reproduction and spread of images seem to grow endlessly. This is typically sharpened in art of a documentary, contemporary and political vein. The anonymity of suffering people should be broken. This was for example what Susan Sontag discussed in *On Photography* (Sontag, 1977) as the "voyeuristic relation". It was a basic ethical question, to put captions on photos of people, especially those in precarious situations. Hence, to name those we supposedly engage with through images, or wants to engage in or for. This is also a requirement for

how to engage an audience, only if we portray recognizable human beings and persons as individuals, can we *identify* with them, i.e. see ourselves in another. The images of anonymous people is said to *objectify*, turn them into objects for desire, (shallow) empathy, or simply decoration and thus runs the risk of becoming (and repeating) a form of exploitation. This is also expressed as a demand to grant *subjectivity* to those we speak of or with. This in turn, is connected to the notion of *agency* – which is also imperative in political documentation and art. That is, to show that those portrayed have a “will of their own”, and a capacity to act, and to lift up this quality, rather than their positions as victims. Or better, to let them speak themselves and so give shape and form to their own narratives. Linked, or sitting adjacent, to these ideas are the equally common idea to *empower* somebody, a person, a group and/or the audience.

It is hardly controversial to state that these requirements have had a strong hold on artists, photographers and film makers. They are also good ideas. Behind them lies a will to hold up a victims’ or persons’ human-ness, and, in turn, the assumption that audience engagement and care is dependent upon an inter-subjective relationship, a “getting to know”-quality through a possibility for identification.

Yet, here it starts to get tricky. As the intimacy of a caption, a name, an age or a village, is a bit thin in terms of friendship. Also, the human-ness of people, elevated through emphasis on will, *subjectivity* and *agency*, seems to rest on an initial worry or even assumption about the opposite. The question is why we need to *identify* with someone to extend our sympathy, empathy and solidarity and recognize their innate humane-ness? Can one not, as we are speaking of art no less, *imagine* they have an identity and, also, a will of their own, are humans, with subjective feelings and desires? Of course, I do not question the power of identification as such. But in relation to migration, and thus drowning on the Mediterranean, rafts, and incarceration in detention centers: to what extent can we, as relatively safe, privileged and dry, Westerners, *identify* with that fate (Compare Bal, 2015)? Does not an image of people on a raft or of starving humans in the desert of Sudan carry just as much or even more information about our *differences*? For all the identification one can create, it can hardly counter the strong message of such images in a gallery or a newspaper, somewhere in Europe, that “their” situation is radically different from “ours”. What I want to

suggest is that even though an image or art work can indeed educate and even erect bridges between groups of humans, that are different in culture, power, living conditions and experiences, it does so all the time, but interwoven in that perception, in the knowledge conveyed, is also a strong experience and plenty of information of *difference*.

Thus, the prerequisite of identification for sympathy or solidarity leaves those we cannot identify with, also without our solidarity. That, in turn, leaves us with a sad prospect for anyone, far away, in need of the solidarity and support of others, more powerful and thus better situated to speak to power, i.e. to take on the task of representing.

A suspicion emerges that all these efforts to break or correct the alienation of a situation and a relation, which often is suggested as a way to avoid a mere self-satisfying reassurance of conscience that stays in the gallery space, and the belief that this can be accomplished in the images, itself rests on a rather self centered attitude. For the last normative element mentioned above, *empowerment*, becomes as a demand on representation, peculiar in relation to images, art and performances that address people and situations that at first instance hardly ask for art, and are by any measure radically powerless. The thought that the art-situation have the power to distribute power, hand out or give agency, in relation to subjects that are clearly not the receivers of art, but in fact, closer to objects of it, is a bit grand and delusional.

My ambition is not to say that these are all misguided concerns, nor are they outdated. By and large, it has to do with direct contact, inclusion and relevance. And the question of who and where and how photos and images and art works portray people, is never irrelevant. All of the strategies above, have their place and will be continuously employed. No doubt, a shift of perspective is necessary for relevant critique, and for letting more voices be heard. (See Mazzara, 2019) Few things are ever completely outdated. However, the whole movement of breaking out of the museum and questioning the white cube ideal, have lived a vital, yet deeply paradoxical, life alongside the museum and the white cube gallery, and not rarely been passionately embraced by these institutions themselves. Maybe this was all, in part, contingent upon the safe *Polis*, surrounding the cube and museums with relatively stable categories of 'inside' and 'outside'?

To further discuss how the migration issue challenges contemporary art forms, I will bring in some artists that have chosen other strategies to address the migration regime and try to make us think and act and engage in a relevant way in relation to it.

Oscar Lara

The video installation “100 years” by Oscar Lara is a film that places the human subjects/victims at the center, yet convey no initiated experience of migration. The video shows the cropped faces of asylum seekers who have lived in a small cell in a Danish detention center. The mouths of these faces, which is what is seen, states how long each have been detained while waiting for asylum. This was installed at first in a show at *Fabrikken* in Copenhagen on a replica of a cell from the detention center. The piece is very straightforward, reminding of all the years destroyed. Adding up to 100 years. But the brutally cropped faces, de-individualize and explicitly hides or withdraw information, details, as to intentionally anonymize, most obviously by hiding the eyes. But a jarring sense of loss is forced upon the audience, hearing the years in detention: “7 years...five years...3 years”, and so forth, while identification that also allows for a displacement of the trauma, outside of ourselves is inhibited by the opacity of the cut image. Lara uses the blocked identification as the tool with which to keep focus on the structural matter. The dehumanization of the image reflects the dehumanization of the system, which is on display through the installation on a replica of a detention cell, and in the quantity of faces and years, and also in fact, in the very anonymity of the protagonists/subjects/objects of the piece. Still, the work also stirs the emotional register, precisely because of what it leaves for the audience to figure out. The image reveals vaguely age, the number of years in detention, how much life has been robbed, and the repetitive character speaks of mass incarceration. But there are no names, countries, stories, relatives, hopes, dreams. We can fill in the blanks. And in so doing we have to engage our own references – hence become interactive through interpretation.

Image 1. Still from video, "100 Years", by Oscar Lara



Nuria Güell

Nuria Güell's art works has another way of addressing the politics of the migrant situation. Güell participated in 2013 with a performance at the Gothenburg Biennale – "Offside. Too Much Melanin." She has developed the concept "displaced legal/moral application" to describe her method in which she starts out from a legal or moral principle but turns it around to reverse the power relationships involved. In this work she had the biennial employ a so called illegal migrant, Maria from Kosovo, who had been living with her husband in hiding in Gothenburg for 8 years, in fear of being deported. Her three children are born in Sweden. At the biennale Maria stood outside one of the art venues and invited people from the audience to play "Hide and Seek" with her. She went hiding and then the audience went looking for her. Afterwards she offered the audience to talk about her situation with her.

Güell's performance did indeed present us to an individual, a very real person and her story as a victim of a migratory regime. And we as audience actually had the chance to get a little acquainted. Yet, Maria's invitation to play, was itself a play, on top of another play with the laws that gave her a temporary residence permit while her case was being reviewed (during which she was employed by the biennale). In this performance the audience were thus offered to symbolically and ironically take the role the Swedish police and authorities have had, to look for her. There were

several element in this set up that caused discussion about ethics – to “use” Maria for art, to expose her, place her outdoors, “exhibit” her and her tragic situation, and of course, the whole idea to “play” with a migrant was to many indeed a bit offensive. In fact, the reality of Maria’s fate and the fictional playful set up of the art performance seemed unreconcilable. It reminded of a minor classic installation/performance within contemporary art on migration, *Foreigners Out! (Please Love Austria)* by Christoph Schlingensiefel from 2000. This performance and television show kept asylum seekers from a detention center waiting to be deported were in a container on the main square of Vienna and filmed them – Big Brother style – so the audience (on web TV) could decide each who would be voted out (and “sent home”). Last refugee standing was supposedly given a residence permit.

Güells satire was not as drastic but, or therefore, managed to raise several questions beyond the “scandal,” and make the art situation dense with political and ethical uncertainty. She seemed to draw upon and continue the exploitation and the precarious situation Maria was in. But the ambiguity of the direction, ethics and point of this play, about who were really addressed, targeted or mobilized, gave the work a long lasting effect on visitors and forced us to think again and eventually see in sharp light, the laws upholding the situation Maria was stuck in and spoke about. The first thing the audience was asked to do, was, in a way to suspend social decency and play hide and seek with a person who had been living in hiding. Still, to go along, play “police”, was also to perform an act of solidarity. The refusal to play with ‘Maria’ for example based on an ethical consideration and concern for her precarious situation, was confusingly similar to the way we regularly block out the suffering of others, and in this case, that choice repeated the oblivion towards and the invisibility of Maria that the system had forced upon her.

Kimbal Quest Bumstead

“The horizon is far away” (2015) is a video work which seemingly operates within a traditional documentary mode. However, the arrangements in the production does away with any such readings. Bumstead had manipulated the situation beyond the typical documentary aesthetics, with cuts, cropping, voice over, arranged meetings and so forth. His film is taking

place in an abandoned refugee camp in the desert of Tunisia, on the border to Libya. "Choucha" camp was established by the UNHCR to temporarily house those that were fleeing from Libya during 2011. In 2013 the camp was officially closed, and those who had been denied asylum, mostly from sub-Saharan African countries, were advised to return to their countries of origin. Many attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe via Lampedusa, and the rest stayed living in the desert waiting for a solution.

Bumstead picked and choosed among those he meet in the camp as if casting, and what he found was a *representative*, an eloquent man who was given a role rarely given away in documentaries. "Brainy", as he is called by his friends, probably because of his way with words, got to narrate important parts of the films. This reminds us how rare it is, in spite of all the emphasis on letting people be heard and to grant subjectivity, agency and voice to people who are portrayed in precarious situations, that a director delegate the narrating role to one of them. So "Brainy" does not only get to tell about his situation, and of his friends, he also *explains* it and is thus the educator in this work, as when he in a section of the movie freely reflects on what it means to live in Coucha:

Do you know how painful it is to be in the streets?

We are living in the streets.

Because someone who is living in an open desert, getting to four years of the western calendar... are exposed to different kinds of things.

So really, it's very difficult to interpret, and painful at the same time to explain.

Because do you think someone who sleeps in a tent, someone who sleeps in a tent, can give a definition of hope?

Because inside the tent, there is nothing that symbolizes hope.

So in other words, the man cannot even define hope.

Especially when you are sleeping in a system that is explaining nothing to you, and yet, is in control.

These words aren't complaints or outcry, they amount to a calm reflection which makes clear for everyone the lack of power which he speaks of, as well as the lack of empowering or agency that supposedly could have been distributed in this meeting. Discouraging as that may seem, it is a case of speaking truth *about* power.

Image 2, Still from video film "The horizon is far away", by Kimbal Quist Bumstead



Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga

Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga have collaborated on a series of art projects that address questions of migration and political boundaries, while they simultaneously ask questions about the image of migration. Their works are often based in the reality of refugees, with images and experiences that are regularly suppressed and forgotten in the media flow. However, their conceptualizations engage us but also address our own position as witnesses, bystanders and possibly even perpetrators? I will bring in two of their projects here. The first one – “Aluche-Barajas”, is a web based project gathering images from phone clips uploaded on social media sites by the public around Europe, from detention centers, air ports, busses, carriers, ferries. The images are depicting the concrete and brutal operations of the migration authorities, and their extensions. Ortiz and Quiroga seem at first to be operating within a logic of traditional exposure of that which is hidden, suppressed and forgotten, i.e., to bear witness. But as revealing images meant to stir us and maybe take action they carry a paradox in that these images are already out there, on YouTube, Instagram and the likes. In the corner of the image the artists have added a small piece of information, the extent to which the film clips have been shared and gone viral or not. And, although images such as these are rarely published

in mainstream media, they are indeed suppressed, while also familiar. We have seen glimpses. Watching them in this work evokes, I think, chock and also a sense of repulsive familiarity and sadness, as these are images of something simultaneously forgotten and widely published and shared, well-known and denied. Another aspect of these clips are their repetitious and rather anonymous quality. Who took them, who are filmed? One sees bodies, people wrestling, places, cries, i.e. deportations, but get to know no one. The anonymity denies us the relief of identification or any illusion of having established an ethical relationship between watcher and watched.

The other work is also based on information “out there”, in this case reports of deaths along Europe’s borders, printed in long lists on panels and hung from the ceiling in the gallery space. In “NN 15543” anonymity is thus explicit and central. The number states the number of dead migrants encountered on the shores and on borders or in centers of Europe, between 1998 and 2012. The years as well as the number reveals little, yet, we know that the numbers are too low. What is listed is what made it to public knowledge through media and from police reports, so that an activist group could gather names or information about the encounters.

Ortiz and Quiroga deleted the few cases with identifiable names from the original list, and ended up with the figure 15543. They printed these lists on panels that hung in a slight ironic monumental set up from the roof. Importantly, the installation also added information about which institutions, departments, and companies that upheld the system and thus are implicated in the deaths of migrants. In several small tablets opposite the panels, the audience could read about Frontex, the EU, Iberia Airlines, the Spanish Government, GS4, and so forth. Underneath each logo of these organizations were information about their activities and further below each organization’s tablet there sat another tablet detailing specific deaths connected in various ways to these organizations.

The whole work made up a strong “je accuse!” in regard to the migration regime. However, the lack of people to identify with, see as subjects, empowered agents and so on, was striking. Instead it showed us the operations of a system, a regime, a machinery in operation and its material physical, political and economic logic and consequences.

Image 3. Detail of “NN 15543” by Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga, by Caroline Kwick



Image 4, from Aluche-Barajas, by Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga



Conclusions

When we set out to make an art exhibition about the current migration regime, a starting point was Hanna Arendt's laconic and sad conclusion in a passage of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* of the fate of the Jew, the law and thus political space:

If a human being loses his political status, he should according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided. Actually the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man. (Arendt, 1994, p.300)

We saw the same lack of extension of rights to migrants as Arendt had identified in her analysis of Europe's fascist regimes. Arendt's verdict caught our interest also because it spoke of the boundaries of the political, and the danger in ending up outside its realm. To lose political status is lethal. This moreover speaks to the necessity for representation for those who are not legally included in the polis, that is lack of political status, vote and voice, and also, in relation to what was discussed above, the tragic vanity of trying to assert the humanity of people who have been denied legitimate political status.

The artists presented in this article have chosen strategies that account for the changed landscape for art and politics that migration entails. That is the main reason for my selection of them, but it took a while to understand what these artists had to teach about the migration issue, aesthetically. By and large, in these works they turn away from direct actions that try to escape *representation*. (Although, many of them make work that sits in between performance/action and symbolic gesture/representation, as for example Güell's game of hide and seek). Representation becomes recharged with meaning in relation to subjects that have been deprived a voice in a radical way, are *outside of the polis*, stuck in camps, or at risk in the desert or on rafts at sea. Although the suspicions against representation have often rested on an inclusive participatory rationale, a rarely surfaced premise have nevertheless been, as said, the ordered political community, with relatively unquestioned borders. But when the radical exclusion from is brought into the equation, the implicit premise that the street is the place

where the desired object of engagement/subject of change/ is sought is challenged. To put it simply, “the problem” addressed is also largely excluded and fenced out behind barbed walls. The “break out” from the white cube and the museum thus runs the risk of becoming a paradoxical and mute action. This mustn’t be understood as a literal move to an actual street, but is often pursued through more or less convincing efforts to simply open the space to new audiences – a relevant art-political act in itself, or temporarily create events and actions in the city, yet not erect “public art” (See for example Thompson 2017 and 2012, or Lundström 2015). The argument here is that the constituency to be mobilized – the audience – is not the same as the subject/object of this art, i.e. the migrant. So what this demands is to mobilize an audience not to break their shackles, but to solidarize and help out. In another way, represent, politically, the unrepresented. In the gallery this can only be propelled by artistic representation.

Migration and radical exclusion forces us thus to think again about the meaning of the art room, its withdrawal from the rest of society, and the prospect for transcending unequal shares of power for those involved - artists, curators, audience and subject/objects of the art in question, in this case, migrants and refugees. As the art-space is recharged with another meaning, it forces *representation* back. In relation to those not let in to the gallery or the street outside, there are few options other than to start “speaking for someone”, i.e. to *represent* in the political sense of the word. And in societies where the toil of migrants is largely out of sight and inclusion of them is questioned by the main stream political establishment, the withdrawn art space can become a refuge in itself, where, maybe, resistance can grow, as well as anywhere else.

As is clear by now, these works also do not seek an opening for *identification*, i.e. they are not nervous about anonymity or distance, rather they use it, experiment with it and hold it up as a specific condition of the migrant regime: the disenfranchising, rightless, voiceless, nameless and origin less state many migrants are forced into. Consequentially, there is not so much concern in convincing the audience of the *humanity* of the migrants in focus. That is in most cases a premise. Secondly, it would be counter to a central point many of these artists make, in some different ways: that the political system’s denial of peoples humanity (rights,

political status, etcetera) cannot get an artistic solution. It is a political matter. This has also to do with the fact that the message that someone, or some group, is part of humanity, is always by the implication that this might be in doubt, a possible insult. Yet, again we live in a world, and Union, where this is something many need to be reminded about. But such a reminder, moreover, rest on another contestable assumption, that the culprits, the perpetrators of the “inhuman” migration regime, the agents of what I have called “the system”, would rethink their policy had they or it only understood that migrants are human beings. This is a hope we often cling to. It is expressed in the many cries and graffiti tags in refugee camps: “Are we not human?” “We are not animals!”. A legitimate question, but, when taking a closer look at this idea one can ask if that is really the problem, i.e. the lack of insight that these people are human. It is indeed a typical way of understanding racism. But is it not the other way around? The dehumanization of the migrant, or for that matter, the black person, the Jew or the Sami, is the tool for which to rationalize racism, in other words, the denial of asylum, rights, legal status, precarisation and exploitation, land grabbing and so forth, ultimately thus, tools for protecting privilege and power?

In sum then, a central focus of the works presented above are thus not the individual migrant, as human, as subject or as agent, but their *powerlessness*, and *the system* that breeds it. This is a very accurate focus, as it more efficiently solve many of the problems that had shaped prior political strategies. A focus which include a critique against the system upholding the migration regime and which also includes the audience as both implicated and responsible, by the power we have as people with political status within the system that excludes, and thus as potential agents of solidarity in relation to the precarious situation of so many migrants. Hence, the directness sought, can be found in the gallery as well as any other place within the walls of exclusion.

Powerlessness might seem to be a strange choice. But, if we ask why powerlessness and lack of agency, victimhood and objectification are so detested today, an inability to deal with *collectives* comes into view. The dominant shape of the individual today is as an agent on a market, this runs through all walks of life and within all institutions. Could it be that this blinds us to the systematic victim, not the “victimized”? The atrocities of the migration regime is enabled by an extreme categorization i.e. collectivization of human beings into a group not worthy our care, our

deepest values, our solidarity. And this, in turn, rests on the paradoxical disqualification of all groups and collectively expressed grievances, political identities, formed out of historical repression and exploitation. This paradox, the collectivizing denial of rights, and the denial of the right to become a political collective, is a major characteristic of our times and of the migration regime (Jonsson & Willén 2016). It is a sort of reversed *veil of ignorance*, where everybody, in the EU, find themselves safe, on the other side of the veil, yet, oblivion about where they were in the past, where they came from, and that they too, and/or their forbearers were once ignorant about where they would end up (Rawls, 1977).

Powerlessness can however be a starting point, and an entry to solidarity. As it has been before. The recognition and shared experience of powerlessness and exploitation have been an ignition to political mobilization through time. For the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and the workers movement and so forth, it seems as just as relevant a ground for a migration movement. And as anyone familiar with these historical movements, they have all benefitted on solidarity across borders and boundaries between the powered and the powerless, and by representatives from within their own ranks and from the outside.

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