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Transdisciplinary Practices on Migration Topic: The Case of “Migrations in Art – the Art of Migrations”

Abstract: In this paper, I will deal with transdisciplinary artistic and media practices on the example of a project “Migrations in Art – the Art of Migrations” that was realized by the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad, Serbia. This project is a good example of interdisciplinary connection on the topic of migration, a topic that I also deal with in my PhD dissertation. I would especially like to refer to the new theoretical and sociological readings in this example and the way in which certain practices have been applied and linked in this project. I will also show why this approach is very important for understanding the way the issue of migrants and migration are presented in the media and in artistic practice, which significantly implies the presentation of this very important 21st-century issue. I would try to shift the focus toward migrant corridors and new tendencies in art projects that provide “flashbacks” to the past and search for connective tissue with the present.

Keywords: migrations; art; media; transdisciplinary practices; new readings.

Introduction

The Gallery of Matica Srpska (Galerija Matice Srpske), as a part of the European Capital of Culture – Novi Sad 2022, realized the project “Migrations in Art – the Art of Migrations” through the transmedia storytelling exhibition. The exhibition was realized within the program of the “Novi Sad – European Capital of Culture”, from February 18 to the end of April. The author team of the exhibition consisted of Danilo Vuksanović, Jelena Ognjanović, and Luka Kulić. At the root of this exhibition was a belief in the role that contemporary artists can play in addressing some of the most profound and challenging issues of the day. The Gallery of Matica Srpska has a long history of doing exhibitions about the most pressing topics that are happening in our society.

Working on different levels – temporal, spatial, ethical – the exhibition provided an opportunity to re-examine one’s own views and the views of society through the language of art. A book of essays “(Re) views on migration” accompanied the exhibition, as well as “Essays on the phenomenon” written by Dr. Alexei Kišjuhas, Dr. Branko Bešlin, Danilo Vuksanović, Dr. Sandra Debona, Jelena Ognjanović, Luka Kulić, and Dr. Vladimir Gvozden. In addition to the texts of the three exhibition

curators, there are also texts by sociologists, historians, literary theorists, and aestheticians/art historians writing about the phenomenon of migration from the position of their profession, but also from personal experiences, thus giving a broader picture and emphasizing positive impacts of migration. The exhibition was created in collaboration with the State Gallery “Tretyakov”, the State Museum of Fine Arts “Pushkin”, the National Gallery of Slovenia, the National Museum in Belgrade, and the National Museum Pancevo, as well as artists Taus Makachev, Safet Zec, Mladen Miljanovic, Vladan Jeremic, and Ren Redle. Through three main works – the story of the famous historical composition “Migration of Serbs” by Paja Jovanovic, the broader context of migration in the history of European and world art, as well as a reflection of the current socio-political crisis caused by large migrations in Europe – “The Art of Migration” explored the phenomenon, reasons, and effects of migration on societies and individuals.

Trace of the exhibition

People have always moved for a variety of different reasons – because they have been persecuted, because of war. They have also moved to seek better economic status or better education. Migrations are a rule rather than an exception. However, in today’s world, the word ‘migrant’ is often coded for violence, crime, war, unrest, and extremism. Migrants are often seen as people who disrupt the usual order of things. The migrant figure has emerged and made it evident that stereotypical sets of oppositions, such as otherness and likeness, domestic and foreign, still apply in most European and western countries. We might have erased borders towards the outside, but we have replaced them with multiplying internal frontiers and restrictions. The biopolitical strategy of frontiers mobilizes fear and awakens a sense of guilt. The migrant reminds us that borders are everywhere, in banks, supermarkets, on highways where tollbooths, as Paul Virilio noted, “resemble ancient city gates”. We no longer cross towards the outside; the ritual of crossing has become immanent, as Virilio says:

People occupy transportation and transmission time instead of inhabiting space’ because in today’s world we move even when we are motionless.¹

People cross borders, but borders permeate them as well. Thus, this exhibition is the story of who we are and how we got here. The exhibition on migrations and art opened, not coincidentally, with the monumental 1932 painting by Uroš Predić, *Saint Nicholas saves Shipwrecked People*. The picture shows a boat in the waves, on which says “faith”, with people of different religions aboard, and above them a saint. In Predić’s painting, all shipwrecked people are placed on the same level, raising the question of where we come from and where we are going, and whether we are essentially all migrants. The exhibition worked with a variety of different artists exploring the questions of

¹ Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, trans. by Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 9–29.

immigration and the free movement of people, and borders. Some of these artists examined experiences along borders and major migration routes by land or by sea. Many of the artists in the exhibition considered those sites and places that come up in migration narratives and attempted to create an object that was migratory in some way. Along with the works of El Greco, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, and Marc Chagall, the exhibition traced the movement of these artists around Europe and the world. It is essentially a wall drawing made using the lines and making a map of their movements through different European countries and systems. The artistic upgrades acquired through the experience of travel – migration are especially emphasized. These are individuals who influenced European and world culture, either first-generation or second-generation immigrants or descendants of people who moved across Europe and other continents. Water and boats that cross to the other shore are one of the motifs of the exhibition. Luka Kulić set up the installation “Reflections”, where light paper boats float in a pool. The installation “Didactic Wall” consisted of nine 130-kilogram marble slabs on which the artist Mladen Miljanovic from Banja Luka, as in the JNA manual, gives instructions to migrants on their dangerous path – how to navigate in nature, avoid barriers, and barbed wire. The viewer realizes that, when drawn across the territory, this has huge implications for people on either side and here it morphs into barbed wire and fences holding inherent contradictions of being both a conduit carrier and a barrier at the same time. The political nature of art stems from the very purpose of art, which is to communicate with society on multiple levels, to raise questions, to provoke but also to inspire, as this exhibition does. The absurdity of any war and the difficult fate of the migrants were depicted by the impressive Safet Zec composition *Ship*, 11 meters long, which is based on Gericault’s *Jellyfish Raft*. The shipwreck theme has often been the motif of artistic creation and the examples are numerous. A single red thread connects anonymous people on a ship in white crumpled shirts. The exhibition ends with a monumental painting *Migration of Serbs* by Paja Jovanovic. A smaller version of the painting was borrowed from the National Museum in Pancevo for this occasion. In the central room of the gallery, it communicates with the monumental version of “Migration of Serbs” which is located in the Patriarchate building of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. As the painting itself could not be transferred to the Gallery of Matica Srpska, it was beamed onto a huge screen in the Novi Sad gallery in the form of interactive animation.

This exhibition did not attempt to tell a history of migration, but rather is a signpost, allowing one, through the lens of art, to delve deeply into the topic of migration from a variety of different perspectives, and engage in a complex set of questions that face us today as a culture. Thus, the exhibit was timely. Real migratory stories, trauma, and the violence of separation were invoked at different points in the exhibition. Although they are not explicit – because the intention of this exhibition was not to arouse negative emotions – traces of the exhibition pointed to the possibilities both in life relations and in artistic practices.

Parallels with other exhibitions

This exhibition followed the trend of exhibitions in the world that have a link between migration and art, such as the exhibition in Tate Modern “Migration and Art”, then an exhibition called “When home won’t let you stay - art and migration” set up at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, with a monumental installation of Ai Weiwei, *Safe Passage*. Under the somewhat renamed title “When home won’t let you stay – migration through contemporary art” the exhibition was also set up at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. All these exhibitions were scheduled before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

The first installation in the exhibition “When home won’t let you stay – migration through contemporary art” is the work of the Mumbai artist Reena Kallat. It traces the movement of people and goods throughout the world. These lines are made of electric cable and presents both carrier and a barrier at the same time. Similarly, the exhibition begins in the Gallery of Matica Srpska, where the authors of the exhibition followed the line (instead of an electric cable they used a red thread) of the movement of three important European artists who in their paintings weaved part of their migratory heritage.

Richard Mosse examines experiences along borders and major migration routes, while Issac Julien and Kadar Attia contemplate the sea. Migrant routes by land, as well as those by sea, motifs of shipwrecks are also very common among artists whose paintings and installations were represented at the exhibition in Novi Sad.

Migration is defined as regular, repeated, and large-scale movement between different sites. The movement encompasses a hierarchy of displacements, ranging from a few meters to thousands of kilometers. We have a huge amount of literature on migration in past decades, in which migration is often understood through the lens of neo-classical models that look at economics, and demographics and regard migrations in terms of combined action of factors of push and pull. Nevertheless, that kind of approach reduces the analysis of migration to something that is defined as ‘migrant crises’.

For many artists, their migrations and those of their ancestors shape their identities and the art they produce. As people move, they bring their traditions, knowledge, and beliefs with them. As much as they absorb the culture of their new home, they influence it with their traditions. Art can directly empower migrants, allowing them to express their experiences and help change the many stereotypes and overcome negative myths around migration. As artists, they present migration as a story of who we are and how we got there.

The exhibition borrows its title, with permission, from a poem by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, which highlights diverse artistic responses to migration. Artworks are made since 2000 by 20 (21 with Ai Weiwei) artists from a dozen countries – including Colombia, Cuba, France, India, Iraq, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Artist and human rights activist Ai Weiwei installed the monumental work *Safe Passage* on the neoclassical façade of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. His installation consisted of thousands of life jackets that were worn by refugees – primarily those fleeing war in Syria and Afghanistan – making the dangerous sea journey from Turkey to Greece in 2015–16. In 2016, the discarded life jackets were recovered and donated to the artist by the mayor of Lesbos. Since his first visit to the Greek island of Lesbos in December 2015, Ai and his team have traveled to refugee camps all around the Mediterranean, including camps in Syria, Turkey, Italy, Israel, and France. The artwork itself commemorates all the refugees who undertook the dangerous passage across the Mediterranean but does not distinguish between those who perished and those who survived. Nor does it give insight into the harsh realities that greeted the refugees after their journey. Speaking about the plight of refugees globally, Ai has stated “There’s no refugee crisis, only a human crisis [...] When people talk about refugees, the words used are ‘they,’ ‘us,’ or ‘them.’ The moment of realization that we are part of them, and they are part of us, is the moment when we can begin to effect change.”

Movement and the figure of the migrant

Migratory art, however, embodies movement and transition, making aesthetics political by shifting it into new sets of relations.

It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate for their proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around.²

The recent turn to the dynamics of interconnection might be understood as a response to the limitations of identity politics in both institutional and aesthetic terms – an attempt to move beyond and around identity; to shift ‘identities’ out of a static space into a dynamic set of relationships.

Aesthetics is political intervention, reorganizing affects, another distribution of the sensible.³

Migratory aesthetics cannot be synonymous with art about migration, nor art by migrants. By not naming art as “migrant” or as “about war and terror”, the exhibition avoided the kind of thematization that over-determines the content of work, instead allowing us to see how an aesthetic method gives rise to the contemporary possibilities of exhibition practice. An attempt was made to avoid the situation described by

² Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by G. Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Jean-Luc Nancy with a picture of a compartment in a train in which we sit together but “do not touch”. Nancy conjures the utterly mundane image of “passengers in the same train compartment” who are simply seated next to each other: together but not linked:

They are between the disintegration of the “crowd” and the aggregation of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual, and near at every moment. The suspension I what makes being-with: a relation without relation, or rather, being exposed simultaneously to a relationship and an absence of relationship.⁴

Nancy did not accidentally take the train motif because that is where the politics of migration play out. In the name of security and vigilance, we are enjoined to regard the passengers in our train compartment with suspicion. This kind of curator intervention combines the image of exit or departure with an elaboration of movement across the new territory – of arrival, however provisional. It is more about strategy than aesthetic intervention. Therefore, the hybridism of this approach is obvious and blended. Moreover, it emphasizes the impact of migration on art and artistic practices in the best light. The history of the migrant is the history of social motion. Two intertwined social motions define the migrant: expansion and expulsion. Expansion of bordered societies and the expulsion of the migrant bodies that sustain them. The migrant, the figure expelled from his or her home country, is the political figure of our time. We are not all migrants, but we are becoming migrants. Today, there are over one billion migrants, and each decade the global percentage of migrants and refugees grows.

In *The Figure of the Migrant*, Tomas Nail⁵ lists the types of migrants. On Nail the nomad is the name of the migrant expelled from the territory, the barbarian is the name of the migrant expelled from political status or citizenship, the vagabond is the name of the migrant expelled from the juridical order, and the proletariat is the name of the migrant expelled from the control over the economic process. Each has its moment of historical emergence, and each continues to coexist in the present and gives us a helpful framework for understanding contemporary migration. The figure of the migrant is defined according to its feature: movement. *Kinopolitics* is the politics of movement, from the Greek word *kino*, meaning movement. If we are going to take the figure of the migrant seriously as a constitutive, and not derivative, the figure of Western politics, we have to change the starting point of political theory. *Kinopolitics* is the reinvention of political theory from the primacy of social motion instead of the state, claims Nail. The kinetic theory of expansion by expulsion is this: all hitherto

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common”, in *Community at Loose End*, ed. by Miami Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–12.

⁵ Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–7.

existing societies have been able to expand – territorially, politically, juridically, economically – only on the condition of some kind and degree of prior social expulsion. The migrant is the figure of this expulsion. Thus, social expulsion is the condition of social expansion in two ways: an internal condition that allows for the removal of part of the population when certain internal limits have been reached and an external condition that allows for the removal of part of the population outside these limits when the territory is able to expand outward into the lands of other groups. This occurs repeatedly throughout history. Each time, the regime of motion changes as does the figure of the migrant.

A central part of human history, the migration crisis is showing no sign of slowing down because all of have migrated from one place to another. By choice or by force, with great success or great struggle, people move or are uprooted for many reasons. Migration has shown an unbroken upward trend, be it of people who have left their homelands voluntarily for economic or other reasons, or of those who have been forced to leave their homes (refugees, displaced persons, etc.). Migration trends, both internal and international, are presented, along with global migration projections. The world is currently witnessed to the highest levels of movement on record and the number is expected only to increase, from an estimated 272 million international migrants in 2019 (UN DESA, 2019).⁶ Internal migration is three times that of international migration, affecting the lives of far more people, although it is given much less attention in political debates and planning processes. According to some estimates, today almost every seventh inhabitant of the world is in some kind of migration. That is why I believe that the number of exhibitions dealing with migrant topics will increase. The above-mentioned examples are themselves part of the settings where migrants, artists with migrant experience, or asylum seeker status have collaborated. It is also increasingly common for curators to design exhibitions in the direction of showing artists who have left a specific mark on the culture and communities they came to by migrating, either for economic, political, or other reasons.

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⁶ Population Facts No. 2019/4, September 2019, United Nation, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/index.asp>, acc. on June 2, 2022.

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