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War on Images: The art of provoking (re)actions

1. Introductory note

The following text presents a series of reflections based on various research projects in which the authors are involved, particularly the *4Cs: from Conflict to Conviviality through Creativity and Culture*. A European Cooperation Project co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union between 2017 and 2021, the 4Cs seeks to understand how training and education in art and culture can constitute powerful resources to address the issue of conflict as well as to envision creative ways in which to deal with conflictual phenomena, while contributing to audience development through active participation and co-production. The project aims to advance the conceptual framework of intercultural dialogue and enhance the role of public arts and cultural institutions in fostering togetherness through cultural diversity and intercultural encounters.

Grounded in the belief that culture and creative practice can emerge as powerful resources in conflict situations, the 4Cs wishes to respond to this challenge by exploring the ways in which culture and the arts can help bring individuals together within a model of intercultural dialogue, mutual recognition and equal participation. Furthermore, the 4Cs aims to respond to the challenges of migration, security and freedom of expression by raising awareness about the role of creative and cultural work in the strengthening of European identity and European citizenship in a project of peace and conviviality.

In the 4Cs research path and activities, we came across a series of artistic practices that translate the transformative potential of art in emerging conflictual phenomena. The examples described below show how much potential exists in art's ability to provoke (re)actions.

2. Ways of seeing and conflicts (of vision)

“Ways of seeing” depend on the cultural context where they are inscribed – what one knows and what one believes – framing the vision as both conditioned by and constitutive of identity. The description, coined by John Berger (2008 [1972]), forerunner in Visual Culture Studies, was crucial to an understanding of visibility as a social construction of the visual, and as a visual construction of the social (Mitchell 2008; Gil 2011). According to John Berger, “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.” (2008 [1972]: 37)

When Martin Jay (1988) showed that a scopic regime functions as a systematic structure of the visual, he was describing precisely the diverse instances that compose particular ways of seeing and how the ways of seeing depend on power and political structures, as well as on technological visual devices and (cultural) habits. So, we do not control the way we see, at least not totally. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown from the beginning that war and/or conflict, both as a geopolitical phenomenon that implies the use of militarized force, and as a (visual) metaphor, is a tool that power structures use repeatedly. There were several political leaders across the globe who said “we are at war” in an attempt to raise the awareness of the population about the state of exception required by the pandemic. COVID-19 instituted a new scopic regime and demanded a new way of seeing.

George Roeder (2006) defined war as a “way of seeing”, contending that conflicts develop from strategies of representation and visual technologies that determine them. Judith Butler (2009), on the other hand, claimed that the visual framework of conflict influences the way war episodes are perceived and remembered. The interrelation between war conflict and visibility has constituted itself as one of the most relevant themes in the scope of Visual Culture Studies (Mirzoeff 2008; Mitchell 2011). Paul Virilio (1994) even argued that military logics and logistics always worked as propellants of the development of visualisation devices. The similarities between weaponry and image-capturing technologies, noticed in 1930 by Ernst Jünger, have been increasingly receiving more attention, exacerbated by the emergence of remotely controlled weapons, possessing the double purpose of monitoring and attacking (Chamayou 2015).

On the other hand, the lexicon of conflict and disagreement is full of visual analogies, words and expressions that relate to perspectives or conflict of visions. In

his book *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*, Thomas Sowell claimed that a conflict of visions differs from a conflict of interests. According to the author:

[...] visions are not mere emotional drives. On the contrary, they have a remarkable logical consistency, even if those devoted to these visions have seldom investigated that logic. Nor are visions confined to zealots and ideologues. We all have visions. They are the silent shapers of our thoughts. Visions may be moral, political, economic religious, or social. [...] Conflicts of interests dominate the short run, but conflicts of vision dominate history. (1987: 2)

Facing war as a way of seeing or including the conflict of visions in this spectrum of reflection allows us to think of war beyond war and ways of seeing beyond physiological vision, articulating, without any chronological pretension or succession narrative, works of art that allow us to reflect on the various predispositions of the conflict from the cultural and sensorial fields to the tropes (which are not always figurative tropes) of war. The “weaponized gaze” (Stahl 2018) is omnipresent in contemporary culture and visual literacy is one of the best defenses that we have against it.

3. Image as a battlefield

In 1981, Jean Baudrillard wrote the controversial text *The Gulf War Will Not Take Place* in which he announced the appearance of a “weak level” of war, “stuttering, of dissuasion, the asymptomatic form of war that means not ever even finding war, the transparent degree that enables war to be seen only in the depths of a dark room” (1991 [1981]: 109–110). Despite the provocative title, what Jean Baudrillard announced in his article in the French newspaper *Libération* was that the violence that would occur (and occurred) in Iraq would be an atrocity (re)presented as a war. And as W.J.T. Mitchell (2011) stated in the preface to his book *Cloning Terror: The War of Images. 9/11 To the Present* (and a preface with an openly critical title – For a War on Error):

Every history is really two histories. There is the history of what actually happened, and there is the history of the perception of what happened. The first kind of history focuses on the facts and figures; the second concentrates

on the images and words that define the Framework within which those facts and figures make sense. [...] The War on Terror, similarly, can be broken down into two histories: what happened, and what was said to justify, explain, and narrate it as it was happening. The difference is that, in our time, both the things done and the things said are filtered through mass media, and the role of images and imagination is much expanded. (2011: xi)

From the First World War to the contemporary constant state of terrorist alert, through 9/11 and two Gulf wars, the scopic regimes of war went through several metamorphoses. If centuries ago battlefields were circumscribed to geographic territories, now we witness a “diffuse war” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010), in which weaponry is remotely controlled, or the body is transformed into a lethal weapon. This ubiquitous presence of conflict began a re-semanticization and re-imagination of the concepts of terror and atrocity, which work, in the present, as substitutes for war and violence, or are, paradoxically, associated with the idea of spectacle or invisibility.

The *3.16* photographic series by Augusto Alves da Silva provides a unique example of the aesthetics of this spectacle-invisibility paradox. The series is made up of eleven photographs taken in the Azores between 7 am and 7 pm on the day that became known for the Azores or Lajes Summit. This summit, which took place in the Portuguese islands on March 16, 2003, sealed the final pact between George W. Bush, Tony Blair and José María Aznar that triggered the Second Gulf War, and was hosted by Portuguese Prime Minister Durão Barroso.

Three of these photographs coincide with the touching down of the planes carrying George W. Bush, Tony Blair and José María Aznar, with the remaining eight taken before and after. As the artist stated: “Just as in 1991, the massacre decided at this meeting was neither seen nor mattered. There remained the idyllic landscape of the Azores on the decision of Barroso”.¹ Augusto Alves da Silva utilised the pretext of the Azores Summit hosted by Portugal, with the initiative of Durão Barroso, to construct an anti-war discourse and aim specifically at the foreign policy of the United States and its allies.

The artist recorded a very precise moment in a diplomatic chain of events by creating a set of images that deny all evidence of violence or bellicose intent. The

¹ This text is the full caption of the work titled *3.16* (2003) by Augusto Alves da Silva.

landscape, as a photographic genre par excellence, is deployed as camouflage for the violence that the signing of a pact of aggression foretold (and even to the extent of heralding this without the slightest hint of shame). And the event, after all, resulted in one of the cruellest of events that carries us to, in opposition, the Iraqi desert landscape, with its gutted settlements and populations dispersed and tainted by hatred. The images of Augusto Alves da Silva de-multiplied into reflective outputs, boosting the suffocating power that seems to contradict the calm depicted in these representations.

How might it be that a war, whose total numbers of dead and injured has yet to be staunched, was engineered and decided here? Are these images not far more disturbing than those that show violence explicitly? The “suffering of others”, to adopt the expression of Susan Sontag (2003), may be happening and happens even when it is not intelligible to the senses. The invisibility of war is capable of being captured by the camera’s lens on so very few occasions.

Furthermore, these photographs raise other questions: who is and what is the photographer? In this case, photographer and artist Augusto Alves da Silva focused on one of the classic moments of journalistic photography, the arrival of the protagonists – here, the leaders of some of the most powerful countries in the West. However, he turned away from recording the “moment” of recognition of the theme by the spectator/reader with the descent down the stairs of the planes, by choosing a very distant point of view, the landscape, within which not even the planes carrying each of the politicians are perceptible to the naked eye. However, the dialogue with photojournalism remains very much present. The criteria of current relevance and the need to be *in loco*, particular to photojournalists, are appropriate to artistic discourse. The information and narration specific to the language of the media are also very much present while exposed to a different type of more complex mediation.

Within this vast and peaceful panorama, one hardly registers, far off in the distance, the military airport where, one-by-one, the planes bringing the envoys of war land. In fact, nothing is happening in each of these pictures. What we are able to observe is the direction of the clouds, the only indication of threat, shadows and lights over the green fields and the blue sea. If the theme had not been introduced externally by the title, even if cryptically (3.16), we may not have guessed what would happen in the following hours, and far less in the days, months and years to come: the extent to

which the world became more dangerous based on what was agreed in that idyllic landscape.

The artist's need to identify the theme is not some artificial means of explanation that contemporary art is so frequently accused of: in this case, it is essential to understanding the message. Perhaps for this reason, the artist always accompanies the exhibition of these photographs with a self-authored text that emerges as a type of manifesto for the photographic series. It is indeed worth paying attention to the words of the Portuguese photographer:

The images of "9.11" were and are repeatedly shown as evidence of the terror experienced in New York. The insistence on the presentation of these videos and photographs, allied to the spectacular facet that they characterise, hierarchically rank in an unequivocal fashion the importance of these deaths in relation to all other human lives in any other place on the planet. Hence, this proves still more disturbing and clear when comparing the videos of "11th September" and the abstract filming by television channels of the fireworks broadcast to illustrate the bombardments beginning the Second Gulf War [...].
(Silva 3.16 2003)

The Second Gulf War is one more episode in the so-called war on terror, a war of images and rhetorical devices that lingers on under the glare of attentive and avid eyes, who lost all their reference and were left overwhelmed by semblances of war, stereotypes and the spectacle of conflict.

The photographs of Augusto Alves da Silva also lead us to revisit Susan Sontag. In her homage to the work of Don McCullin, Susan Sontag wrote "a photograph can't coerce. It won't do the moral work for us. But it can start us on the way" (2003: 17). Such a stance can also be found in the work of the Portuguese photographer. Augusto Alves da Silva does not photographically impose recurrent images of conflict scenarios: images of barbarity, catastrophe, suffering, death or imminent death. The landscape is transformed into war (a warscape); after the first impact on the viewer, it simply returns to its original landscape format. However, in the meantime, everything has changed: the image is reproduced in the imagination; we can all see George W. Bush, Tony Blair and José María Aznar signing the treaty of war. The ecological logic to which Susan Sontag appeals in *On Photography* would also seem to be present here:

Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include one of the images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well (2002 [1977]: 180).

The singular rhetoric of Augusto Alves da Silva, who photographs from a distance an event (that is being repeatedly and simultaneously photographed), expresses not only a reflection of an event but all the other images appropriating this same event. The mutually constitutive relationship between visibility and conflict, and the excessive circulation of war images, widespread by the belligerent factions and the media, has had direct consequences on the artistic creation, which has accumulated new ethical responsibilities (Holloway 2008).

Boris Groys (2010) took a similar position while describing the genealogy of the relationship between artist and warrior, arguing that, for centuries, the warrior needed the artist to fixate on his image. With the standardisation of imaging production devices, the artist started inhabiting the edges of conflict visibility, accumulating, in the process, other duties in the axiology of seeing, showing the image as the critique of the image itself.

4. The art of provoking (re)actions

4.1. Submarine states: Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's *Quicksand* (2017)

One of the most daunting tasks for artists has been finding ways to best visually reflect (upon) the intricacies of the world we live in. Our contemporary times are shaped by multiple crises of globalisation, the failure of many of the promises of political systems, and the rise of borders at a universal level. In Europe, from the Ukraine crisis to Brexit, from the current refugee emergency to new migration flows, from the threat of terrorism to growing nationalist sentiment, new conflicts are taking shape, challenging once stable ideas of belonging, cohesion and hospitality.

It is the context of these complex issues of contemporary conflictual phenomena, particularly in Europe, that the work of Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen (1971, Denmark) addresses. That is especially the case with *Quicksand* (2017), which

presents us with unexpected relationships between tragedy and humanity, and visibility and invisibility.

Quicksand is an audio and video installation. A vast black and white sea fills the exhibition room and, while facing it, it feels like we are fully immersed in its deep vastness. The sea has been historically portrayed, probably most notably by the work of J. M. W. Turner, to visually evoke the sublime and the uncanny, the emotional, both overwhelming and frightening, experience of encountering something so vast, much greater than us and that which we can understand. In *Quicksand*, the sea is, at first sight, an immense Black and White sea (at some point suddenly in colour) that is nothing more than a beautiful slowed down ghostly liquid. However, if we listen to the voice of the main character, we soon understand that we are witnessing the scene of a tragedy. A similar experience has been evoked in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's other works, such as *The Floating Series* (2016–ongoing), a series of images where each image is composed of a dark background (either a black image or a darkened sea) and a colourful foreground (sleeping homeless people covered in blankets). In these series, we might think that the bodies are floating in a void, a passive background with beautiful dark tones. However, an informed reading will remind us of the terrifying scenery that these sleeping people had to face in their forced paths escaping home.

Set in 2033, *Quicksand* tells the story of Jason – whom we never get to see, we only hear his voice narrating his story – a man fighting for his life in the Mediterranean Sea, the same sea that so many migrants are crossing today to escape war. Whereas today's migrants are trying to escape from war and establish their new lives in Europe, Jason is trying to escape from a hostile – not too distant – 2033 England.

Quicksand amplifies tendencies visible in present day Europe and sets them in the near future, in a conflictual environment where the manufacturing industry is long gone, job security is a thing of the past, and people are competing for work that is poorly paid and inconsistent. In this vision of 2033, the economy has imploded, hospitals and state schools are closing and trains rarely run. Politically, the far right has become increasingly influential, taking advantage of people's frustrations to stoke resentment against immigrants. Europe has collapsed and throughout the old continent, borders have closed. It is against this backdrop that Jason, a husband and father, decides to join the exodus of people who pay people-smugglers to help them

leave Europe in the hope of starting a new life somewhere else. Jason's journey ends when the boat he is in capsizes and he and many other European migrants struggle to survive.

Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen has been visually translating today's societal challenges, particularly the migration crisis, across his body of work for the past decade. For *The Floating Series*, the artist spoke with people in the Parisian neighbourhood of Stalingrad and documented their desperate situation over the course of two months. Migrants who were forced to leave their countries to escape war encountered a Europe where they would find themselves with no option but to live in the streets, from where they would be, in most cases, forcibly removed, as the 2000 migrants who were expelled in November 2016 from this area of Paris would reveal. The retouching and the light make the bodies of *The Floating Series* visible in a way that makes us look at and perceive these individuals – whom most people would rather keep out of sight – as beautiful and important people, like the aristocrats and religious figures depicted in Renaissance paintings. A Union Jack on a blanket and a Spiderman sleeping bag seem to unveil a desire to get to a Western world, where super heroes can save us all, while a tiger appears to protect the sleeping person and the deep blue cloth makes this body resemble Mary, mother of Jesus, in the Italian Renaissance painting *Madonna and Child* (1427) by Masaccio. This is the striking effect of chiaroscuro in *The Floating Series*: the bright light of tenderness and humanity it instils in images that are, in fact, witnesses of a horrible tragedy that, despite all media coverage, seems to remain invisible at many social and political levels.

FLOATING_39CC.tif

Fig.1. Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, *Floating #39* (2018). Pigment print.

FLOATING_...CSF3060.tif

Fig.2. Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, *Floating #43* (2018). Pigment print.

The way we get to know the characters in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's visual narratives is radically different from how we would see the same people in the news. All his work seems to find tender moments within the tragedy. Whereas media imagery is highly paced in its narrated quick-fix reports and demands an immediate

(or none at all) response, the layers in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's images give time to both the subjects portrayed and to the viewer, allowing time for reflection. We see the sea as a dangerous thing, but in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's work we also see it as a beautiful immensity that sustains moments of tenderness. In *Quicksand* we know the protagonist is drowning, but we hear tender phone messages between him and his wife.

At first, *Quicksand* welcomes us with a sublime dark sea. It takes time to see what it is like to be underwater. It takes time to listen to Jason's story. It takes time for us to relate to Jason. It might take much longer – too long – for us to relate to today's migrants' tragic situations. The broader implications of this "submarine" state for the forms of subjectivity at stake in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's work seem to conjure the sublime and the subliminal state of the times we are living in. And such a state is as overwhelming as it is terrifying.

4.2. Retelling History: Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades* (2010–2015)

With a research-based practice, Wael Shawky (1971, Alexandria) questions notions of identity based in geographical, religious or artistic positions. In his *Cabaret Crusades* (2010–2015), he tells the history of the Christian campaigns from an Arab perspective, offering profoundly fresh insights into a narrative and a history that those in the West have received from an entirely different viewpoint.

Cabaret Crusades is a video installation consisting of three inter-connected films, in a series – *The Horror Show Files* (2010), *The Path To Cairo* (2012), *The Secrets Of Karbala* (2015) – and a group of puppets that are also the actors in the last film of the trilogy. Based on *Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983), a series of texts with observations from writers of Medieval Arabia, collected and edited by Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf, the three films unveil the countless European incursions into the Holy Land, beginning with the First Crusades in 1096–1099 BC. Narrated in Arabic with English subtitles, the stories of the Crusades mirror the division between the Christian and Islamic Cultures and the effects of such a divide in the times we are living today.

In this installation, Wael Shawky adopts what David Boje (2001) calls narrative methods, a practice that favours micro-stories – stories told by multiple voices – over grand narratives – History as an absolute and ontological truth. With

this method, Wael Shawky questions the truthfulness and legitimacy of so-called facts, bringing to light different perspectives of the same events.

Starting with its title – *Cabaret Crusades* – this work suggests questioning the problematic nature of telling stories in different versions and how this process influences the way we build and perceive what we call History. These series of films and puppets take us to a distant past that none of us has witnessed. If, as an audience, we cannot relate to the action – crystallised in a distant past and with non-human characters – how does Wael Shawky manage to make us empathise with the narrative that we are being told?

Wael Shawky juxtaposes historical narrative with the children's universe of puppets; seriousness with innocence; and terror with humour to tell events that are crucial to the development of an Arabic identity. Even though before the Crusades, different groups had co-existed in a (almost) peaceful way, the trauma of the European invasions has marked contemporary dichotomies: East and West; Christianity and Islamism; Shiism and Sunnism. It is precisely in this juxtaposition of apparently contradictory places, feelings and ideas that the relationship between these past (Hi)stories and the contemporary human condition in a shared conflicting context becomes clear and we cannot avoid a sense of empathy.

Each one of the three films of the installation showcases more than 200 years of History through the voices and gestures of hundreds of characters whose life is portrayed by traditional songwriters, artisans and puppets' handlers. All the films share a critical vision of these 200 years to explore what is commonly understood as *the* Arabic identity and, consequently, the horror and the absurdity of what makes its History.

The characters, as well as the cities and the events, are introduced quickly through short texts on the screen. More than serving a pedagogical purpose, these textual references contextualise the audience in the History as we know it in a dilution of the boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and myth, national History and tales. In this dilution of boundaries we are, inevitably, forced to question what is, in fact, true.

Produced a decade after yet another Western occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the years marked by the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa that culminated in what became known as the Arab Spring, this 30-minute film tells the story of the cruelty of the European invasions in a contemporary context.

Instead of fetishizing violence, Wael Shawky highlights the humanity of the victims; showing celebrations, ceremonies and human behaviour, it becomes impossible not to empathise with the people portrayed. In one scene, the King and the Queen of Edessa welcome the Baldwin of Boulogne (one of the leaders of the First Crusade) and, immediately afterward, the couple is beheaded. The choice of the materials for the scenes and the characters does not depend on formal aspects but in the ideas that they encompass: these puppets were already characters in other European histories; the strings that make their movements are a clear reference to the control and manipulation of the writing and the (story)telling that make what we know as History.

In *The Path to Cairo*, the second film of the series, Wael Shawky critically presents the Arab History's complexities in the first two Crusades. For this film, the artist created his own puppets in an even more surreal stage, designed in a two-dimensional perspective and inhabited by miniatures. The plot is more difficult to follow than the first and third films mainly due to the difficulty in recognising the characters, the cities and the historical events that it portrays. Nevertheless, even without recognising all the elements in the narrative, the 4-hour-long film manages to capture our attention with the thoughtful links between each small story. *The Path to Cairo* is filled with scenes of kings killing each other, brothers conspiring in each other's deaths and a bride (symbolising a city) getting married over and over to each new king taking over the nation. The scenes reveal, above all, a story (or a version of a story) in which the crusades destroy everything that gets in their way. With this approach, Wael Shawky does not portray the Arabs as victims but as active agents accountable to their faith in the world we live in today.

In the third and final film, *The Secret of Karbala*, which lasts 2 hours, the puppets are made of Murano glass. Unique, fragile, created by Venetian masters, these puppets introduce themselves as historical characters and surreal creatures resembling reptiles and sea monsters. Starting with an intricate viewpoint of the division between Shiism and Sunnism, *The Secret of Karbala* proposes to scrutinise the complexities embedded in each culture. In this film, Catholics, Christians, Orthodox, Shiites, and Sunnis are equally critically analysed under a humane perspective. Wael Shawky continues telling the (or a) story beyond the predictable, when the Muslims of Jerusalem recover sovereignty, continuing to the moments of the Fourth Crusade, choosing to end the story with the bloody barricade of Zahra, a Croatian Catholic city that is a rival to Venice. In the end, all these men fighting in the

name of (a) God get stuck in a storm at sea; all of them pray to their own God and tell the very same story under radically different cultural viewpoints.

Rather than offering the comfort of the certainty of a History on which we can all rely due to what we believe to be facts – a grand-narrative, this series of micro-stories, which are long, complex, intricate and, at times, confusing, seems to paralyse the audience. And it is precisely in this moment of paralysis that we are forced to stop, reflect and question this story as much as what we know as History.

History tells us that men have been killing each other in the name of a God who has been used as an excuse for many wars that we still witness in contemporary times. These films, as enchanting as terrifying, are upsettingly relevant today; they say a lot about war and conflict, and so much else in between. Wael Shawky's trilogy offers a series of alternative perceptions to History to remind us of the dangers of perceiving it as one single truth. What remains to be done with such possible viewpoints and truths will not be the responsibility of what Niklas Luhmann (1984) called the system of the arts, which is grounded in perceptions of the world. We are the ones to be accountable for what comes next.

4.3 The power of silence: Ahmet Ögüt's *The Silent University* (2012–ongoing)

The Silent University is, as the title suggests, a platform for knowledge transfer and exchange. Created by Ahmet Ögüt (1981, Diyarbakır) with Synthia Griffin and Nora Razian from the Learning & Community Partnerships team at Tate, in 2012, during an artistic residency at Tate Modern in partnership with Delfina Foundation, in London, it has since been implemented in institutions such as Tensta Konsthall, The Showroom, ABF Stockholm, Amman Spring Sessions, and Stadtkuratorin Hamburg. These institutions have functioned as hosts, as *The Silent University* is an organisation without a physical presence.

Run by groups of professors, consultants and researchers, each group contributes to the academic programme in different ways, such as the development of lectures, research in a specific field and personal reflections on what it might mean to be a refugee or an asylum seeker.

Presented in a format that resembles Academia, in its research and publishing activities, it revolves around seminars and workshops developed by and for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who, for different reasons, found themselves forced to

leave their countries and, due to political reasons or simply lack of language skills, are silenced in their host countries. *The Silent University* has, until now, mainly worked with people who had an active professional or academic life in their countries but, in their new homes, are unable to put their knowledge and know-how to use.

For *The Silent University*, *silent* and *silence* imply an active understanding of silence. In Ahmet Ögüt's words:

It is a poetic protest.

It is a functional tool.

It is about exchanging positions through empathy.

It is a consciously delayed exchange.

It is a currency.

It is a statement saying; "I am here, I do exist".

It means if you want to meet me, first you have to understand me. It means I won't tell you my story until you deserve to receive it. It is about the strategies of exchange. (2012: n.p.)

In a collaborative approach, participants develop courses and conduct research directly connected to their professional practices. Through this collaborative and collective methodology, *The Silent University* reactivates the participants' knowledge to create a place in which the currency lies in the immateriality of knowledge itself. In such a process, *The Silent University* challenges the idea of silence as a passive state, exploring its potential through writing, research and collective reflection. These explorations translate the systemic failures and the inevitable loss of knowledge and skills in the process of silencing refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

Partnering with institutions such as Tate Modern in London, and Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, *The Silent University* demonstrates the power of the collective reminiscent of Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture, according to which we, as creative individuals, would have the potential to shape and transform society. In turn, the host institutions become an integrating part of the project in a creative process that presupposes – more than the in-kind support of the venue – an appropriation that implies a development and transformation within each institution.

If, at first reading, it might look like a simple partnership or an in-kind support, a closer reading will lead to the idea of "parasitic practice" proposed by Janna Graham in a public presentation in Basel in 2012. This practice presents itself as a contraposition to the practice in effect. According to Graham, such activity

criticizes the institutional elitism through a dialogue between individuals from institutions and guest/independent cultural agents. The question raised by Graham is based on trying to figure out when we are parasites and when we are hosts. Furthermore, the parasitic practices are defined as a methodology for artistic production in four dimensions: occupying; dialogic; critical/transformativa; commissioned/outsourced. What these dimensions have in common is the context in which they operate: even if made for a museum or an exhibition space in order to receive financing and legitimacy as art, the consequences of their production pervade the locations of the cultural institutions into social, economic and political domains.

A different light is shed on the relationship between hosts and parasites in the extensive work on the idea of “noise” by Michel Serres (1982 [1980]). The philosopher reminds us that, in French, the word for white or static noise is “parasite”, which refers simultaneously to an organism that feeds a host and a guest who offers conversation and praise in exchange for food. Michel Serres uses this idea of parasite to explain its function in a system: interfere in its order and generate disorder, or produce a new order. What is interesting in Michel Serres’s definition is the positive light in which he views the parasite: a productive force from which a system is structured. The parasite – be it biological, social or informational – is what balances the systems.

Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogia do Oprimido (Pedagogy of the Oppressed)* (1968), offers an interesting insight into the relationship between parasites and hosts in knowledge production – in his method, critical thought would be crucial to conceptual freedom as opposed to the understanding of students as empty containers in which educators would place knowledge.

More than giving a physical place to the project, the partner institutions of *The Silent University* become then, part of a production process ranging from the development of publications, website, and programming beyond the time of the stay – always temporary, as the participants in their host countries – of *The Silent University* in the buildings it occupies.

The Silent University therefore dramatizes the characteristic relational aspect of much of what we see, in contemporary art, as installation – not in the name of the medium’s specificity, for which the artist who created it seems to have little interest, but as a means of generating a critical, productive and migratory relationship between

conceptual and social systems in its material implementation. The decoding of these relationships will depend entirely on each one of us.

5. War on images

What the History – and stories – of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seem to tell us is that artists, curators, cultural agents and producers want, more than ever, to play an active role in the creation and transformation of society. Conflictual phenomena, particularly deriving from the emerging waves of migration and the refugee crisis, have become a major source of artistic and curatorial investigation over the past decade, and continue to grow today. Artists who have received attention for addressing the conflictual aspects of migration in their work include Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, Wael Shawky, and Ahmet Ögüt, whose work was previously presented through a series of examples, and they are among many more, such as Omer Fast; Herman Asselberghs; Mona Hatoum; Dinh Q. Lê; Richard Mosse; Michael Rakowitz; Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin; Francis Alÿs; Annu Palakunnathu Matthew; Krzysztof Wodiczko; Eyal Weizman; and Emily Jacir, just to name a few.

Curators and institutions have also been amplifying their position as active actors in these current societal challenges as the Manifesta 8, in 2010–2011, exemplified. For the first time in its history, the Biennial integrated a sub-theme in its title to put Europe and Northern Africa in dialogue as a direct consequence of geopolitical issues in the region where it took place. The selection of work by artists from Africa showed a particular emphasis on the history of Arabic culture rooted in the Region of Murcia.²

Several artists have focused on the problematic of borders as a way of understanding these contemporary conflicts and post-conflicts that define the political, economic and social realms in which we are living. Interestingly, many of these artists are based in Europe. That is the case of artists like Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen (born in Copenhagen, based in Paris), and Herman Asselberghs (born in Mechelen, based in Brussels), who recorded the ferry journey from Algeciras to Ceuta, the Spanish enclave located in Morocco, for his film *Capsular* (2006), as a

² Manifesta 8, <https://manifesta.org/manifesta-8/> (accessed 5 March 2018).

means of tracing the geographically ambiguous edge of Europe's southern boundary, which many Africans attempt to cross illegally. Without actually showing any migrants in the film, Herman Asselberghs traces a (European) geography where the lives (and deaths) of migrants remain contained in an enclosed designated area and, as such, become invisible and erased in a process reminiscent of Lieven De Cauter's capsular living (the film's title is, in fact, borrowed from the Belgian philosopher's book "The Capsular Civilisation"). As in Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's *The Floating Series* (2016–ongoing), *Capsular* considers the lives of migrants in a European city (Brussels – where the journey and the film end), but this is not always the case. Many artists based in Europe look at the crossings between Europe and Africa but, instead of focusing on the life of migrants in their new home cities, they aim for the locations of crossings, as if migrants' original and final struggles would be placed and crystallized at these sites. Borders, in this case, become one single place on the map, whereas in the cases of looking at the afterlife of migration, borders are seen as a multiplicity of realities.

Such differences in tackling the complexities of migration point to the question of what part of the journey is visible and what remains invisible. In contemporary art, borders in their divide between what can and what cannot be seen live in the realm of vision, a realm that has been explored by photography and film – particularly documentary – since its inception. Portraying migrants, in whatever forms – as Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's portraits in *The Floating Series* – or coming up with so-called participatory projects – a category in which *The Silent University* could easily fall – share many ethical questions with the documentary: is it exploitative of a reality of the vulnerable people portrayed? What does it mean to take images of disadvantaged people? What would make one think that these migrants would like to participate in an artistic project? And why would they participate? Who benefits from such participatory projects?

An interesting viewpoint is Martha Rosler's critique in her essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)", written in 1981. Martha Rosler regarded many documentary photographs as victim photography. In her view, the elite classes were shown a world that they would not normally (or willingly) travel to – they are introduced to the (exotic) "other". How do artists in the last decade cope with the debates that warn one against what it means to take images of so-called disadvantaged people?

Any attempt to answer these questions takes us back to what we see and to what we do not see in contemporary art. In other words, to what becomes visible and what remains invisible in the selective process of producing an image, either real or fictional. The retouching and the light make *The Floating Series*' bodies visible in ways which make us look at and perceive these individuals – whom most people would rather ignore – as beautiful and important people, like the aristocrats and religious figures depicted in Renaissance paintings. This is the striking effect of *chiaroscuro* in *The Floating Series* and of the fictional dialogues in *Quicksand*: the bright light of tenderness and humanity it gives to the images that are in fact witnesses of horrible tragedies. While media tell us to see migrants and refugees as a threatening mass, as “them” as opposed to “us”, the artist proposes a different perception based on the manifold stories of migration.

If we think of *The Silent University*, in its relational and participatory processes, it is different from the history of socially concerned documentaries because Ahmet Ögüt invites people to speak for themselves. He presents a multiplicity of views, which is crucial to his goal of empowering silence rather than documenting realities. Media and documentary depictions typically show the living conditions of migrants and the difficulties they encounter on their journeys. What artists such as Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen and Ahmet Ögüt do that is so valuable is to investigate the larger social, political and economic causes of migration, not simply stereotyped views of migrants or of migration's effects.

Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen's *Quicksand* is set in the future, in an England living the consequences of today's actions. That is also the case in Omer Fast's *Nostalgia* (2009), an installation in a sequence of three separate spaces. At first, we are faced with a British park warden constructing a trap to catch game. Then we move into a darkened room with two screens showing a narrative reconstructed with actors, of an interview between Omer Fast and a British-based, African-born immigrant whom the artist talked to in London. The third space is composed of a fictional film set in the future. We see a tunnel between Africa and Europe, and white Europeans are attempting to flee Europe for economic reasons towards Africa, while encountering a series of difficulties along their path. In both cases, the theme of immigration is put in a different perspective through a trap in the narrative's structure. The way the stories are told orally makes constant inversions, in which the shift

between an elsewhere and England (in *Quicksand*) or between Africa and Europe (in *Nostalgia*) is one among many physical and social apparatus.

But does this repositioning require overlooking our own participation in the system of exclusion? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) told us that the documentary tends to induce in us a sympathy for victims – we become closer to those who are suffering, so close that we tend to forget our responsibility for participating in the larger situation that perpetuates the conditions of violence.

Perhaps one of the biggest illusions is the idea that if a work of art tries to tackle the questions around migration in the most factual way possible – as a documentary does, it will somehow be a more legitimate response to the situation. Fast's and Larsen's constructed narratives tell us otherwise. Of course, we know these are fictional narratives. However, reversing the action was a fantastical proposition about the types of borders that keep us apart.

While Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, Ahmet Ögüt, and Omer Fast examine the realities of European countries and point the finger at their responsibilities for the current situation of what is usually regarded as the “other's” conflicts, Wael Shawky scrutinizes the complexities embedded in the different cultures of Catholics, Christians, Orthodox, Shiites, and Sunnis to show that they are all to be equally held accountable for today's reality. These artistic practices do not aim to – as a documentary does – create sympathy with victims. Their goal is to allow people to articulate a demand for political inclusivity and economic justice, a demand to come to terms with today's conflicts, rather than being cut off and forgotten.

Many artists working on borders and the effects of migration today are based away from the borders and the zones where conflict is active, but there are also many artists from and based in these regions such as Yto Barrada, a Moroccan-French artist working in Morocco. In her *The Strait Project: A Life Full of Holes* (1998–2004), a photographic book and series, she juxtaposes several kinds of photographs – her own photographs with found aerial views of the Strait of Gibraltar, landscape shots that are almost abstract, to evoke the tension embedded in a place that is a crossing point of continents and cultures. That is also the case of Amira Hanafi, who has been based in Cairo since 2010. Interested in the complexity of meaning that comes from collaging different voices, in the intersections of identities that are expressed, and in how multivocality can be an expression of collectiveness, and its rewards and challenges, Amira Hanafi has been experimenting with narrative structures that translate the

difficulties of writing History. In her *A Dictionary of the Revolution* (2014–2017), she created a vocabulary box containing 160 words in colloquial Egyptian that were frequently used from 2011 to 2013 in public political conversation. With words divided into four categories (concepts, characters, objects and places & events), the box was used in around 200 conversations with individuals across six governorates of Egypt: Alexandria, Aswan, Cairo, Mansoura, Sinai and Suez. Choosing cards from the box, people talked about what the words meant to them, who they heard using them, and how their meanings had changed since the uprising. Other examples include Aliaa ElGready (Egypt), Ibrahim Jawabreh (Palestine), Iman Hasbani (Syria), Jameel Subay (Yemen), and Rola Khayyat (Lebanon), just to name a few.

vocal-box.tif

Fig.3. Amira Hanafi, *A Dictionary of the Revolution* (2014–2017).

word-diagrams.tif

Fig.4. Amira Hanafi, *A Dictionary of the Revolution* (2014–2017).

Many questions could be asked about the difference between work done by artists based in places where conflict is active and work done by artists based in (at least apparently) peaceful countries. Maybe the most obvious would lie on the legitimacy of speaking of a reality that is not shared or lived. In December 2017, in a conference titled “Conviviality and the Institutional,” in Lisbon (MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology and the Catholic University of Portugal), independent curator Katerina Gregos spoke of her projects to question what are the ethical issues that arise in sensitive and contested subject matters such as the refugee crisis, and how does one go about dealing with the problems of representation and cultural appropriation that are inherent to curating such topics and particularly the issue of identity politics. She asked the audience what she has been asked over and over, as a European curator: who has the right to represent whom and why?³

Any attempt to answer this question takes us back to what is our role in society and what is our part in the emerging conflicts taking shape everywhere. We are affected by what we see. Images influence the way we look at and understand the

³ <https://www.4cs-conflict-conviviality.eu/post/conviviality-and-the-institutional> (accessed 12 March 2018).

world. This implies a huge responsibility of artists (image makers) and cultural producers (image facilitators), regardless of the location where they are born or where they are based. It might be true that the production of images determines conflicts (Roeder 2006) but, as Judith Butler (2009) pointed out, it is that same production that has the potential to and responsibility of shaping the ways we perceive and act upon conflictual phenomena. In other words, the way that the artistic and curatorial deal with the problems of representation and cultural appropriation that are inherent to visually translating such topics and particularly identity politics, implies an active, (self-) critical and informed position. But, above all, it implies an understanding of humanity at a planetary level.

Filmography

Quicksand (2017). Directed by Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen. Film commissioned by the Goethe-Institut London and Culture+Conflict and supported by the Danish Arts Foundation, the Embassy of Denmark in London and The Elephant Trust. The film is made in collaboration with Duncan Pickstock and Mikkel H. Eriksen

Capsular (2006). Written by Herman Asselberghs. Cinematography by Fabio Wuytack. Produced by Argos Centre for Art and Media.

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