

Fragile Presence, Time for Movement

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Today, with the neoliberal trimming of public institutions of art, artistic work has become an entrepreneurial activity within a restrictive framework that is conditioned by the exploding art market, creative industries and the political agendas of governments prescribing a certain canon of art. The question of how to organize the (re)production, distribution and reception of art beyond the frameworks of the market and reactionary art institutions is crucial to art practices that support emancipatory directions of change. From the viewpoint of artistic practice as a means of social transformation, this can only be done in coalition and cooperation with others - with groups, organizations and entities that want to bring forward emancipatory change in society.

Such artistic practice is not hermetic but in interaction with the surroundings in which it is created, and its value is measurable insofar as the work is recognized by others as a relevant contribution to a certain cause, i.e. as an articulation of a demand within the society. In this essay we will describe our artistic practice in the context of the refugee solidarity movement, including self-organized collective exhibitions, works commissioned by art institutions, and protest actions. We will show how art can contribute to the visual language of a new collectivity and how art can become a means of empowerment and solidarity by creating time and space for collaboration and collective action.

When large numbers of refugees arrived in Serbia in 2015, solidarity groups were formed to provide clothes, food and other assistance. Many people helped with assisting refugees to get shelter and medical help, or simply spent time together organizing joint activities like cooking, sports, concerts, films and visits to exhibitions, as well as making friends with people on the move. A network developed among local people, migrants and activists from all over Europe along the Balkan route. In autumn 2015, together with other artist friends and a curator, we organized an exhibition called 'COLD WALL' at the Studio of Young Artists' Gallery in Budapest. (1) This exhibition focused on Hungary's recent closure of its border to refugees travelling from Serbia. A second exhibition followed in Ljubljana at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (2) when Slovenia fenced off its border in the same way as Hungary had done. At the Museum of Contemporary Art in Novi Sad, artists and solidarity groups organized a third COLD WALL exhibition in 2016. (3) This was both extended and transformed by the participants of 'NEW mUSEum F.A.C.K.' as part of an experiment at the Novi Sad museum in how to make use of a cultural institution. (4) Within the

frame of this event, the group called for a 'F.A.C.K. borders meeting' to be held in support of migrants and against the policy of closed borders. The group discussed how to use the museum in ways that might be useful for their struggle and activities, including networking, work meetings, discussions, workshops, performances, projections, presentations and assemblies. Later on, activists used the visual materials created for the exhibition in a solidarity action held in a park in Belgrade where most of the migrants were camped at that time.

For the 2016 October Salon exhibition in Belgrade we made a large wall painting with cardboard sculptures and takeaway newspapers scattered across the space. This work, which we called 'Fragile Presence', is a visual interpretation of the March of Hope that took place in late summer 2015 when migrants set off on foot from a train station in Budapest to the German border. That long journey was taken to escape the threat of being detained in camps, and so 'Fragile Presence' shows scenes of liberation from the camps and a central composition with people breaking through the walls of 'Fortress Europe'. This breakthrough depicts the moment when a new collectivity is brought about that succeeds in overcoming obstacles in spite of its own fragility - the moment when the dynamic of human bodies breaks down the border regime of the European Union. This movement of refugees creates its own time that transcends local temporalities. Their struggle becomes part of other struggles that likewise seek to occupy, open up and transform space against the linear chronologies of restriction and oppression.

The reception of the people migrating on the March of Hope was made possible by an extensive network of solidarity along the route and among the host communities. In the years since that journey was taken, state-organized structures have taken control of managing migration and the issue is now brutally instrumentalised in election campaigns by rightwing politicians. Today, parties of the New Right have established themselves in parliaments throughout Europe, gaining votes through xenophobic propaganda and the spread of fascist conspiracy theories. In their countries of refuge, migrants are physically attacked by fascist vigilante groups. New Right governments actively seek to criminalize organizations or individuals helping refugees through juridical means. This is why, when we were invited in June 2018 to develop a space for meetings and workshops at the <rotor> Center for Contemporary Art (5) in Graz, Austria, we decided to create sculptures related to the struggle for solidarity as monuments of resistance and liberation. The space, called 'Fragile Presence - Action Space', was designed as a space of solidarity and empowerment in which people could gather to discuss and organize against the ongoing anti-humanist, anti-egalitarian, anti-feminist and anti-democratic turn in our societies. The space can be transformed by its users, as the sculptures can be disassembled to serve as chairs and tables during meetings and other activities.

Several months later, as part of an exhibition in the framework of steirischer herbst at <rotor>, we created a series of banners and posters with slogans in the space in preparation for a protest action in the city. Banners and flags have long been attributes of societal institutions and organizations, whether political, religious, social or economic. They symbolize the ideological and political power of a group in a moment of struggle. The images we created for the banners were our contribution to the iconography of a social movement that is forming a new collectivity. They represent stories, collective experiences, performances and knowledge that are meaningful for migrants and the refugee solidarity movement. We say a 'new collectivity' because this collective is not being formed through identitarian concepts such as nation, culture, ethnicity, gender, and claims on individual rights. Instead it overcomes the individualization and fragmentation of life and working relations imposed by today's methods of production and shows how new transnational alliances are formed through the unjust distribution of work and wealth in the world.

On 24 September 2018 we organised an hour-long action in front of the main station in Graz together with <rotor> and local artists and activists, protesting against the criminalization of solidarity with refugees. For this protest we tied together the banners and posters we'd prepared at the workshop and spread them across the whole square. A speech was given and everybody joined in, shouting slogans like "Saving lives is not a crime!" and "Stop the causes of war!". Although we were relatively few in number, our artistic protest action made a clear and powerful statement. We hope we encouraged people in Graz to keep on protesting and publicly condemning inhuman policies towards refugees, especially at a time when right-wing ideology is becoming normalized in public opinion in Austria.

To conclude, we see our practice as having contributed to various interlinked fields of struggle. One of these is the field of artistic representation, where our work developed an iconography of refugee solidarity - a visual language that is part of and meaningful to this movement. This leads to the field of the distribution of art work and the participation of others in its creation and reception. Here we seek to make our art accessible and reproducible in non-white cube situations by using flags, banners, newspapers, printed reproductions and usable objects, etc. Institutions do also have an important role to play in the distribution of art. Their function first needs to be reshaped, however, since institutions have largely become disconnected from social and political life. In the meantime, producing politically clearly articulated works within art institutions can help open them up for the causes of social movements.

References:

1 'COLD WALL - A collective answer on fences and men' was a collective exhibition by Ferenc Grof, Vladan Jeremić, Rena Rädle and Volodymyr Kuznetsov, curated by Rona Kopeczky at the Studio of Young Artists' Gallery in Budapest in November 2015.

2 'This is not a fence', an artistic commentary by Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle, was displayed in the entrance hall of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana from June 18-August 21 2016.

3 'COLD WALL / HLADNI ZID - A collective answer on fences and men' was a collectively organized exhibition by Ferenc Grof, Rena Rädle, Vladan Jeremić, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Babi Badalov, the škart collective and Rona Kopeczky at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, in July 2016, with the participation of activists from the refugee solidarity movement.

4 Forum di Arte e Cultura Kontemporanea (F.A.C.K.) is a mobile platform experimenting with self-organized programmes at institutions of art and culture. <http://www.msuv.org/program/2016-08-01-fack-msuv-eng.php>

5 'Fragile Presence - Action Space' was part of the Guerrilla of Enlightenment exhibition held in two phases in June-August 2018 and in September-November 2018), commissioned by the <rotor> Center for Contemporary Art in Graz, Austria, and curated by Anton Lederer and Margarethe Makovec.



“Cold Wall”, exhibition opening at Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 2016.



“This is not a fence”, Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana, 2016.



“Fragile Presence”, October Salon, Belgrade, 2016. Photo credits: Boris Burić



'Fragile Presence - Action Space', Center of Contemporary Art <roter>, Graz, 2018. Photo credits: rotor



Artistic protest action, main station, Graz, 2018.