

"Focus on Art and Migration: supporting or changing current social narratives and perspectives?" (Dom omladine Beograda 2.10.2015.)

I thank the organisers of Trans Europa Festival for inviting me to join human rights activists and artist-activist: Riwanon Quere, Jazra Khaleed, Marko Risović, Luka Knežević-Strika, Đorđe Balmazović and Robert Kozma. It is my ongoing pleasure and responsibility to be working with the last three: Luka, Djordje and Robert on an exhibition currently on display at the Museum of African Art in Belgrade.

The exhibition in question bears the flammable title THE BORDER IS CLOSED and deals with the equally inflammatory topic of: migrations, displacement, borders, enclosures, centres, asylum seekers, and how these concepts relate to ideas of mobility, travel, status, to name a few.

The exhibition is open in the space of the Museum until December 1, 2015. Some of you, I am sure, were able to see it earlier today, and I would definitely ask all of you to go and see it after this discussion. It is worth the journey outside the epicentre of Belgrade.

Why am I here? I am here to say a few words on the topic of Art and Migration, more generally, and a few thoughts on working with NGO Group 484 and the group of Belgrade-based artists whose works so sharply testify to the imminent yet transitory presence of thousands of migrants passing through Serbia, on their journey to Western Europe.

Being a socially responsible and alert museum institution (such a impregnated word) is a very current field of thinking and practice in the museum world. The extent to which we are able to create meaningful contents around these ide(ologies) and escape the traps of their hypocritical and superficial use in practice, remains to be seen in the coming times.

As I have quite limited time (8 minutes to be precise) I will shortly reflect on two topics which I think might be of interest to those participating in the Trans Europa Festival. First, what was the character of this very pioneering and exciting partnership between a group of artist / NGO and a museum, and secondly, whether a museum is at all able to (cite) support or change current social narratives and perspectives.

Ironically, me sitting here as someone working in a government funded institution of culture, makes me a somewhat marginalised character among activists and artists who aim above and beyond the confinements of the nation state. This impression is based on the prevalent paradigm that cultural institutions, especially museums, are a mirror of existing government policies, or as the subtitle claims: current social narratives and perspectives, and that as such they are in conflict with activist and artists in a fundamental way. Essentially, we can never see eye to eye; or can we? Do you disrupt the system from without or from within?

We had been in negotiation about making an exhibition together for at least a year and a half. Finally, all the pieces fell into place earlier this year and we decided to open the exhibition at the beginning of September 2015. The fact that the peak in the "migration crisis" through our country occurred at exactly the same time was a twist of fate. To the artist working in Asylum Seeking centres this did not change much, neither in their intention or work. They were just witnessing, it is my impression, something that was bound to happen at some point, soon. The public, our, museum and wider public, was amazed, I guess is the right word, that the Museum was making an exhibition about such current social events; that we were so at the centre of things. The overall reaction has been positive; we have had no misunderstandings or violent responses. The media coverage was excellent. We were offered the much sought after media space to not only promote, but also express more succinctly what the project is about. Individual visits are still scarce, however, and I keep wondering if everything is solely our fault and whether we need to continue to apologise for the fact that we are a bit outside the centre of town and you need to make an effort to reach us. Does not everything of any value exert effort? Within the confinements of our own profession and among our colleagues there have been several reactions. On the one hand, the reaction was no reaction; the other was a sort of worrisome "oh, you

are doing a exhibition about migrants... hmmm..." like, good luck with that; finally, there were also occasions of being tapped on the back by our colleagues who saw that this was in a sense a turning point for us.

Museum narratives are expressed through museums as large-scale ideologies, suffering the symptoms of grandiose delusions, obsessive compulsive collecting behaviour, and of course "good old" psychological projection, also known as blame shifting, "which is, just to share a small definition with you, a psychological theory in which humans defend themselves against unpleasant impulses by denying their existence in themselves, while attributing them to others".

One of the questions that was posed during the making of the exhibition by individuals ranging from different walks of life and professions but which is, I think, quite indicative of the interpretations and representations of so called other non-European cultures, is why are you making an exhibition on migrants? What has that got to do with the "museum of African art", aren't most migrants Syrians? One worry, I shared with my museums colleagues was, how do we actually position ourselves in this project. On the one hand, these questions were rightly put, but what were the narratives behind them? How do we imagine this "African", or "Syrian", for that matter? On the other hand, if we are not to make a statement about these current events, who is? How were we to sleep at night if we decided to remain silent and blind to the fact that some of these migrants were actually from Africa (Also, is this important – I think that it is if we think about, why we are hearing so much about "waves of migration" migrations now, when people have been "trickling" from Africa for the past decades, even centuries, illegally?) Aren't we just playing along then and remaining enclosed within the borders of what we think ethnicities and cultures are? It is always good to cite oneself. Not solely in order to hear your own voice and thoughts, but also because each time you hear your words as a citation, you are able to re-evaluate what you think you believe is true. So as an answer to why we are making an exhibition about migrants, here goes:

The "other" we have been dealing with through the project "The Border is Closed" is a migrant. The "African" as "other", trapped in the myth of ideology, falls within the scope of a fluid "identity in the making", a transit, mobile, changing identity inherent to the margin, crossing and passing. His/her ethnicity, culture, is no longer temporally and spatially infringed within the confinements of various subordinate narratives. He/she becomes a part of a large-scale trans-ethnic group made up of different cultures and places of origin, but also, together with them, he/she refuses to be placed within the concept of the "other".

Another thing that my collaborators will attest to, was that definitely, making an exhibition at the Museum demanded we make sure it was art and not politics. Let me just stress for those who have not seen the exhibition: it is a documentary exhibition, which is extremely political and ultimately full of art. One of the worries of making a controversial exhibition in an institution of culture which is government founded and funded is that you rebel against your parents. The extent to which you are able to get away with such antics is a matter of how you are positioned in your geographical, social, political and human environs. One thing the Museum of African Art has always been is a place which deals with cultures outside our continent. The MAA's first subject was outside the borders of Europe. This museum has a very complicated genealogy which borders between western concepts of collecting and socialist ideas of non-alignment of the now no longer existing Yugoslavia, which we cannot get into at present. But one thing that I have to cast light upon if I am to be completely honest, is that this exhibition was made possible because (whether the artist and activist like it or not), for a very brief moment our government and this project supported the same current social narratives – which can be summarised as the necessity to raise sensitivity in our surroundings for those suffering the perils of forced travel. This is where the parallel stops, abruptly, because the ways in which artist dealt with this narrative was always critical and more importantly humble, escaping the need to fall into traps of false identification and martyrdom.

Finally, whether we are able to make a change depends a lot on who decides to visit this exhibition. It is my rather morose impression that museum visitors are people who already have some perception of suffering and an understanding for it. How do we reach those who are actively against us remains both a challenge and a mission? One thing is certain, however, because the artists actively work on workshops with children, there is a big chance that the coming generations will hopefully not make the mistakes of their forefathers.

Emilia Epštajn, MAA curator