

A World Not Ours

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Curated by Katerina Gregos

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Art Space Pythagorion, Samos, is pleased to announce its exhibition for the summer, *A World Not Ours*. The exhibition borrows its title from the award-winning homonymous 2012 film by director Mahdi Fleifel, which in turn borrows its name from a book by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani (1936–72). The film is a portrait of three generations of exile in the refugee camp of Ein el-Helweh, in southern Lebanon, while the book speaks about diaspora and the search for identity. The exhibition takes place in a location that has been at the heart of the refugee crisis that began in 2015, largely as a result of the war in Syria. Samos is one of the three Greek islands (together with Lesbos and Kos) closest to the Turkish coast, and as such has been at the crux of this humanitarian tragedy that has been played out on the region's shores. Given the highly charged location, it is vital that an art exhibition here should address this situation, which has been an unremitting reality on the island, and a pressing, unresolved issue for the whole of Europe. The exhibition will focus on the issue of the refugee crisis and forced migration by bringing together a group of artists, photographers, filmmakers and activists who offer reactions, reflections, and insights on the subject. Bringing together diverse practices from installation, performance, photography, film, video and photojournalism, the participants in the exhibition move beyond one-sided and standardised media representations of the crisis, and acknowledge the complex roots of one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Harnessing methods that range from activism and direct action to poetics and metaphor, participants in the project provide a reflection on the issues of forced displacement and the experience of homelessness, perpetual insecurity, diasporic identity and existential limbo. The work that is on view is the result of in-depth, long-term research, on-the-ground engagement and first-hand experience. The works here offer genuine empathy and sincere motivation, as opposed to what Tirdad Zolghadr has been called 'poornography' (1): the use of images of poverty and precariousness to create sensational images in the media as well as in art. In the contemporary art world, the refugee crisis has unfortunately engendered opportunism, with some rushing in to profess their engagement by producing facile one-liners and generating publicity for their own sake. This exhibition, rather, includes artists who opt for a nuanced way of working with issues that are often under the radar, working with discretion, thoughtfulness and beneficence. Many of the participants come from the Middle East or south-eastern Europe, from countries that have experienced war, trauma, exodus and precariousness first hand.

The controversial deal between the European Union and Turkey that was put into place in March this year (whereby for every Syrian returned to Turkey, the EU will resettle one from a refugee camp there) has seen the numbers of refugees subside. However, this does not mean that the crisis has been resolved. There may be fewer boats landing on the shores of the Greek islands, but as long as there is war going on, people will continue to risk their lives to leave danger zones and seek out a better and safer future for their families. The refugee crisis has become one of the most fundamental political and existential issues of Europe, testing the continent's attitudes towards human rights, notions of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

The crisis has brought political polarisation, a rise in nationalist rhetoric, prejudice, increasing xenophobia and racism to Europe once again. The question of refugees may be highly politicised but it is first and foremost a humanitarian question. So far, Europe's policies have been largely anti-refugee, with many countries unwilling to open their doors, and seeing the migrants as a threat. At the beginning of this year, nineteen European countries refused to take any asylum seekers from Greece, reinforcing the critique that 'Fortress Europe' is as closed as it ever was. In that sense, there is not only a refugee crisis but also a crisis in the management of migration in the EU.

In January 2016, the EU had resettled just 0.17 % of a total 160,000 refugees that they had promised to resettle. (2) To put things further into perspective, the EU's entire 2014 asylum influx accounted for just 0.03% of its population as a whole, a tiny proportion. (3) Children, who constitute one third of those arriving, have been particularly affected, and although all of the European countries through which the refugees pass have signed the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, most are turning a blind eye to the situation. Billions of euros have been spent sending back migrants to their countries of origin, or to countries near conflict zones such as Turkey and Lebanon, and keeping them out of Europe. It is a fundamental question whether that money would be better spent on integrating them into European society and offering opportunities for work and education. The fact that immigration has played a positive role in the economies of hosting countries has been conveniently overlooked. There is no doubt that the cultural history of Europe (indeed the world) has been enriched by migrations.

Migrations are not autonomous processes; they are the result of larger dynamics. According to figures compiled by the UN, 62 per cent of those coming into Europe are fleeing war, dictatorship and religious extremism. The conflict in Syria is the biggest cause of the present migration, but other factors are also important, including the ongoing violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, human rights violations in Eritrea, the civil war in Libya, as well as extreme poverty in the Global South. The number of asylum seekers in Europe has increased dramatically over the last few years and is expected to rise even further. Migration due to climate change is also going to be one of the future challenges the planet will have to face. Apart from increasing xenophobia and racism, amnesia has taken grip. Europeans seem to have forgotten the refugee crisis that took place within the continent in the aftermath of the Second World War. We Europeans, our parents or grandparents, have been in the same situation as the one that the Syrians are in today.

Although Europe itself has seen its fair share of financial crisis recently, especially in the South, Europeans need to remember that they remain relatively prosperous. We also need to remember that the migration crisis did not occur in a vacuum, but has been the result of geopolitical power games in which Europe and the West are not innocent. As Slavoj Žižek has

pointed out, 'while large migrations are a constant feature of human history, the main causes in modern history are colonial expansions'. (4) Prosperous Europe today is largely the result of this imperial past and this is one of the reasons we cannot turn a blind eye. Of course, the roots of the issue are not confined to Europe's colonial past. As Jürgen Habermas points out in his book *Europe: The Faltering Project*, 'the painful transition to post-colonial immigrant societies' within Europe is coinciding with 'the humiliating conditions of growing social inequality' that are the result of globalisation, neoliberal economics and changing labour conditions.

All European countries in which refugees seek asylum must deal with this issue. But Greece, a virtually bankrupt country that itself is suffering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, is at the forefront of the refugee crisis, and has become a focal point for the conflicting viewpoints on the subject. While the international community makes demands of Greece to halt the influx of refugees from Turkey, without taking any measures against the trafficking themselves, many Greeks on the islands are trying to alleviate their predicament, by providing, food, medical or legal aid. Others, however, see the refugees as a threat to tourism and some even taken advantage of the situation to seek profit. It is a bleak example of the distress that Greece itself finds itself in, where the 'Other' becomes the predictable scapegoat.

Since the refugee crisis will not go away by itself, it is necessary that a greater awareness of the nature, complexity, and extent of the issue be developed. Why, might one ask, should an exhibition address such an unresolved critical issue, which is so highly sensitive and difficult to represent? The answer is quite straightforward: artists and cultural practitioners have a different way of looking into socio- and geopolitical catastrophes. Policymakers generally try to capture problems in practical terms and to handle them as manageable quantitative data. The media treat disasters predominantly as consumable, spectacularised events, which eventually become old, forgotten news. The general public, mostly under the influence of populist parties and sensationalist journalism, experiences humanitarian disasters as a personal threat to their jobs and lifestyles. Artists, on the other hand, may highlight the complexities underlying such questions, pointing out all kinds of different positions that can be taken in relation to them. These alternative approaches invite us to look at problems from different and unexpected angles and reveal a multitude of unimagined or

misunderstood aspects of important phenomena. Artists not only reveal the predicament, but also point out the myriad subjectivities that get lost in the mainstream narratives. They steer clear of polarising notions of 'them' and 'us', make us aware of our own predispositions, biases, preconceptions and hopefully guide us to become more open-minded, and less self-contained and secluded. They frequently offer a wider perspective and greater criticality, and show contemporary issues under a different, more considered and nuanced light. They bring untold stories to life and reveal hidden experiences, subjectivities and narratives. This is precisely the goal of this exhibition. Through their work, we wish to raise public awareness of the different and less familiar aspects of this humanitarian disaster – the worst since the Second World War – especially as it is experienced today in Greece. What is needed, ultimately, is empathy, the ability to consider the question 'what if this were me? How would I react then?' The exhibition will hopefully help to foster that viewpoint. As migration will remain one of the pressing issues of our time, with more and more people forced into flight and nomadism for political, economic or environmental reasons, we need to re-consider what it means to co-habit this spherical, increasingly interconnected planet in terms of mutual hospitality and generosity. This is one of the most serious challenges of our time, and the solution cannot be the divisive politics of exclusion.

Katerina Gregos

<http://www.schwarzfoundation.com/en/>

Notes

1. http://sulki-min.com/unitednationsplaza/readingroom/Zolghadr_Poornography.pdf
2. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/refugees-eu-resettles-tiny-number-pledged-target-four-months>
3. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/09/daily-chart>.
4. <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18385/slavoj-zizek-european-refugee-crisis-and-global-capitalism>