

Pécsi Tudományegyetem Művészeti Kar Doktori Iskola

Hámori Anett

The question of war and migration in contemporary art

Absence as imaging

Summary of DLA thesis

Thesis supervisor:

Dr.habil. Nemes Csaba DLA

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Alfredo Jaar, Teach us to outgrow our madness!
Edinburgh, Art Festival, 2019

“Regarding the pain of others”¹

"Everyone screams 'Never again, we learned the lesson' (of history)
... but of course we didn't. Still, this is good for drama." Milos
Forman on *Goya's Ghosts*²

The title of Susan Sontag's book – *Regarding the pain of others* – contains the keywords perhaps most important to me. If I wanted to summarise what describes my art and interests, her title would be the most appropriate answer. I often reflected on the reason of the centrality of this question. In the following, I will discuss exemplary artworks, at least ones that appear exemplary and revealing to me, related to this train of thought in order to explain and to myself understand this – sometimes hidden, sometimes overt – challenge: regarding the pain of others, the very ability of pain to be looked at, and the consequences resulting from it.

The Ceaușescu family was executed in 1989. The series of events relating to this were continually present in the media. I was only four years old at the time, and yet I remember saying his name, time after time, and can see the black-and-white execution in my mind's eye. These impressions and family stories undoubtedly define the way I look at violence, power, and politics. Art and making art has always interested me; the social sensitivity that accompanies it developed gradually. By the time I finished university, artworks with these themes interested me almost exclusively.

¹ Sontag, Susan. 2004. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Harlow, England: Penguin Books.

² The Age: Goya's ghosts <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/goyas-ghosts-20061111-ge3jl5.html>
Last accessed: 2021. 09. 23.

For me, the most important artistic attitude is one highlighting social questions, problems, changes in the economy or politics, i.e., reflexions on the contemporary. I came to these realisations during my studies in France.

My research subject is the depiction war-zone generated migration and its consequences in contemporary art through artworks from the collaborators of the exhibition *We shout and shout, but no one listens* (Khaled Barakeh, Gohar Dashti, Nermine Hammam, Amel Ibrahimovic, Alfredo Jaar, Sandra Johnston,) analysing situations characterised by oppression by violence, terror, and conflict.

The method of research was art critique, specifically from the artists' viewpoint and attitudes, finally summarising the research process.

The defining events of our age, such as wars, revolutions, and changes of government result in changes on a societal level as well, changes that can might be rephrased as themes for artists to work with. There are numerous fields of academy whose task is to analyse and observe these processes. Artists do just the same: they analyse, image, communicate, and encourage the viewer to think.

If we specifically focus on the relations between art and war, what artists do is to reflect on the inhumane nature of war, often from the perspective of the victim, as artists themselves are also involved in the suffering. For example, the artists of the exhibition in question did the same regarding migration, as they have all, for material or spiritual reasons, left their respective homelands.

One of the greatest difficulties of the 21st century is the question of people's mobility. Capitalism, through certain technical means, has in all ways sped up the rate of change in our environment and lives. Yet the goal is to make homes, to create suitable living spaces, where differently socialised people mix; this can easily provide the prerequisites of confrontation.

War as a topic has always been present in the arts, albeit in the classical phase of art history, mainly as storytelling, the artist being the narrator. The artist himself was a sort of tool in the hand of the powerful to be used for the representation of their interests. This has changed by our days, for now several wars are being fought parallel in different parts of the world; millions of people have to flee their homes and go through hell. All the while, people are made to "regard the pain of others," made possible by technologies manipulated by various forces, the psychological weight of which weighs us down daily and unnoticed.

But what has changed in art? In our case, the goal of art is not to aestheticise war and suffering, rather to unite the aesthetic and ethical content to act as a common denominator, a free field that encourages society to think, and in many cases, to actively participate. New tools are

required to undertake this, and art here utilises the tools of war and terror to defeat it. Art cannot exist in the isolated way it has for centuries. It now receives an active and vocal role, as it unites the fields of politics, ethics and aesthetics.

It is my conviction that our thinking is currently determined by the information that reaches us via the various platforms of media. This information is not always realistic, however. The previously mentioned artists use art fortified by a scientific attitude to correctly contextualise often distorted or inaccurate information.

From the reactions by contemporary art to migration, after reflecting the now iconic figure of Alan Kurdi and theoretical considerations, I will present exhibitions *Where do we migrate to?* and *We shout and shout, but no one listens – Art from conflict zones*.³

Images are not innocent⁴

Images are not innocent, and neither are we spectators; we are responsible for our actions. Are we willing to see things as they are, to think things over, and do we take the pains to go whatever lengths true meaning takes to discover, or are we satisfied navigating in the world with the help of controlled images and signs?

It is difficult to find the common denominator between beauty and horror, war and art. However, it is as if different branches of media have been aestheticizing terror by, under the guise of objective news coverage, they sneak it into our daily lives, our homes, rearranging the iconography of our brain – writes Miklós Peternák in his essay *On the AEsthetics of Terror*.⁵

We have a global war at our hands that affects everybody, and we cannot run from it, even if we were to distance ourselves from it, consciously or unconsciously, with all our might – it is still present in our homes, the workplace, in conversations, our thoughts, and memories. For this reason, we have to face ourselves eventually and take responsibility.

Artists raise a variety of questions with their works, which encourage the beholder to think, in many times by physically becoming part of the artwork themselves.

‘Signs’ and ‘symbols’ have a significant importance in forming the views and the socio-political identity of the beholder. There is an image we store behind our every act and thought.

³ Alan’s death certainly changed something and can be thought of as a milestone. I can hardly imagine a sight more painful than the body of a dead child. Those not moved by it have psychological issues. Thus we can establish that Europe and the world are mentally ill, having been able to regard the suffering of a child unperturbed. At the same time, the photo of Alan started discourse and called on people. Such is the noise of information constantly buzzing around us that, paradoxically, it was the image of the silence of death that proved its power to invoke.

⁴ Interview with Alfredo Jaar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-t2Yx3mz5k>. Last accessed: 2021. 09. 23.

⁵ Peternák Miklós: A terror esztétikája, <http://exindex.hu/print.php?l=hu&page=3&id=525>

At the 2013 Venice Biennale in his exhibited video interview, Alfredo Jaar talked about a ‘criminal indifference’: millions of people are dying right in front of our eyes and we do nothing save for watching it on various media outlets as if it was a reality show. In real terms, this is the greatest problem; the media made us get used to horror-inducing imagery, their sight has become natural to us. Both adults and children play video games where they can murder in virtual space. All tension is released via aggression.

I do not think this is acceptable. This is what Alfredo Jaar is trying to get us to face: he is raising awareness that something is not alright.

The arts bear a massive responsibility in overseeing the way in which information is conveyed to the viewer. As to the part of Alfredo Jaar, his taking on of responsibility towards society is certainly there.

To properly investigate and present the reasons for migration in the media might not be in the interest of certain powers; thus we mainly see the consequences thereof; newsworthy items that our trained eyes might already have grown used to.

And yet we still feel that something is lacking. Particular art works and projects are trying to investigate this. During these investigations, we can encounter personal stories, ones that can also be supported by scientific evidence, thus enabling the viewer to form opinions based on true facts.

There is a certain independence in art too, which is able to even change reality. This is a massive responsibility for an creator: you have to first make sense of the world – yourself, others – as well as research, analyse, and only make art as the very last step. Antonio Gramsci writes in prison – “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.”⁶ The only way to exist in this unique situation is to recontextualise the world and ourselves. Artists for whom social developments are central will have reacted to migration too, which is the field of public messaging.⁷

A centuries-old debate of art critique is whether aesthetics or ethics, technique or concept, appearance or content is foremost. The 21st century, however, has managed to create some unanimity regarding this debate, as concept, the message broadcast to the public has become the defining aspect, although this would not be possible without the technology of today.

⁶ Antonio Gramsci: Letters from Prison. Edited by Frank Rosengarten. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁷ The earliest public messaging campaigns, in cinematic form, were produced before and during World War II in the United Kingdom and the United States. Public Service Announcements (PSA) are aimed at a general audience, are freely distributed, and have as a goal the informing of the public or influencing public mood or behaviour. They are called Public Information Films in the UK (PIF) and 'Announcements in the Public Interest' (API) in Hong Kong.

Paul Virillo writes that nowadays, art can utilise such tools as propaganda or ‘terrorism’ against their original promoters. I think that as artists today we cannot make use of the techniques of past centuries, but rather the ‘weapons’ specifically made for the manipulation of people. Finished projects and works of art will be canonised later by artistic institutions, thus being received into the very institutions, maintained by the state, that they were originally meant to contradict. Thus these projects can even blur the lines between aesthetics and ethics, a phenomenon that can be followed from the 1960’s up to our day in the arts.

In sum, the tight link between the arts and war is apparent, or, as Virillo writes, between art and fear, art and terror.

In art, concepts and visuals come together, which is an excellent possibility for critique, and, paradoxically, it provides a chance for society, politics and culture to step up together against violence and war.

Absence as Imaging

Absence can be understood in manifold ways: it can be experienced visually or emotionally. The lack of perception in communication or visuals is also the people’s fault, as we allow that ever more prominent tragic events become worldwide phenomena. We are allowing our own ineptitude to conquer by refusing to change. As the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran says, instead of changing things, we drown in self-destruction. This is a darkness, an absence of light. The arts, and artworks, provide a chance for communication to simply start between people. I believe this is the key to progressing further. If we contemplate what we have seen more profoundly, we make time, so that images do not just flash up before our eyes, like a moment in the news on the TV or the internet. At an exhibition, we are physically present, we face, we partake in the horror, we experience a variety of sensations. After which, the question forms in us: who are we and what can we do? This is a question which we might not raise at home, within our comfort zones, from behind the screen.

What role can artists fulfil in this critical period?

Culture carries within it a potential to change, to form people. The artist interprets, takes responsibilities via their creations, they shape people’s thoughts and actions. We need to do

something to help the needy. An excellent example for this is MOAS,⁸ an organisation that help to provide migrants humane living conditions, often even saving lives.

‘Your help gives them hope’ we read on the website of the organisation. We cannot let masses of people die just because they wished to create a suitable setting in which to live for their families. We need to be open, as we are all looking for our place in the world. Culture has an important role to play in this search of identity, as we are the world, and therefore can mould it into whatever shape we like. This includes our sense of responsibility towards society too.

Dr Bernadette Buckley, professor of Goldsmith University, London, has been studying the role of artists in an age dominated by war and terrorism since the 9/11 attacks. Since the beginning of the new millennium up to 2015, about 65 million people were forced to leave their homes for some reason. This has resulted and is resulting in a number of sociological changes until this very day, so it is not a surprise that it also affects contemporary artists, wherever they may live. The hardship manifests itself in the way the artists choose to depict the process. It would be optimal to avoid bathetic or sensational overtones, credibly representing the human side of the events from the point of view of the victims and onlookers.

When one of the most influential contemporary artists, Ai Weiwei, was freed from house arrest in his native country, China, he immediately came to Europe, to Greece, where he tried to give a human face to the crisis through photography, videos, and mini portraits. According to Weiwei, an artist does not only pay attention to the events around him, but also tries to react to them. His latest action was to collect left-behind life jackets which came from the often lethal Mediterranean crossings, and hang them on the Konzerthaus of Berlin to protest against European migration policy. The building’s columns were aglow with fourteen thousand orange vests.⁹

This can be interpreted as a manifestation of absence, as these vests were worn by the migrants during their crossing, after which they came ashore, dead or alive. But now the mass life jackets appears alone, in a different context, as an instrument of an installation. Only the imagination of the beholder supplies the migrants now missing from the ‘artwork.’

Artists react to world events by individual or group action, or by putting on more classically defined exhibitions behind gallery walls. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the global centre of contemporary art, testifies this, having been the site of many exhibitions that deal with relocation, migration, and their consequences, using every possible method and genre, over the last few years. Artists leave traces for future generations. Painful as it might be,

⁸ www.moas.eu Migrant Offshore Aid Station

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=13&v=8faWQdQ_JgY HALOTT LINK! Új kellene.

they are registering recessive societal developments. But artists nevertheless retain optimism and ambition about change, change in which their own pieces might have a role.

According to Rancière, the only change of the visual arts is to make creative and original use of and to rewrite images, and by turning them upside down to redefine the perceptible into the political and the aesthetic. Images can change the system by provoking us to look at them differently, that is, not as mere pictures, but as the manifestations of a critical attitude.¹⁰

We have no choice but to face these pictures, regardless of how shocking the realisations they produce are. Previously we could not have imagined what is today all too easy to picture and now we cannot but to speak of the unspeakable.¹¹

The logic is straight and merciless: a comparison of the past and present, a critique of repeating history's mistakes and of today's migration policies, all the while being sensitive socially and with regard to individual lives. The goal is a structured common incentive. Our views ought to reach not just the general public but representatives of power, too. It is important to strengthen the empathy within people and to sensitise people via the arts. We have to expose the global scale of emotionless and powercentric goings-on in politics and business that are often whitewashed by the media, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unknowingly.¹²

The works of artists provide the viewer with the freedom to think. If we can contemplate something freely, our actions will follow that. According to Alfredo Jaar, politics is not a matter just for politicians, experts, and activists, but for everyone. Regrettably, this is not something readily observable around us; we are used to not taking notice of each other. The people got used to this: they became well-trained, disciplined, tame. With the words of Agamben, in the midst of our own ineptitude, people and the world are operate within frameworks. Culture and the arts, however, offer the viewer a chance to break out.

The beholder, in the sense of Kantian *imaginatio*, comes to realies his own inner working by creation, depiction, and presentation. This is the knowledge gained via images, made visible by the imagination.

Kant writes about this thus: In the depths of the image is imagination, and in the depths of imagination, the gaze of the other, that is, the other gazing at us and the other as image, that opens before me previously unseen sights. The "picture is the other" in which my self can show itself.

¹⁰ <http://exindex.hu/index.php?page=3&id=531> Link már nem oda vezet!

¹¹ The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror. ELH. Volume 72, Number 2, Summer 2005, 291–308. <http://apertura.hu/2008/osz/mitchell2>

¹² Szolga Hajnal: Menekültekről pátosz nélkül. Művészet és migráció 4. (2016.05.11. artportal)

Artworks compel us to take sides. Certain words are recontextualised, such as alien, home, war, migrant, etc. Through the presentation of universal values, the beholder becomes aware of the extremity of situations caused by war. Under such circumstances, both environment and man become distorted.

Stanley Cohen indicates that the reasons for war are the planet's overpopulation and historical ignorance. According to him, one of modern man's greatest faults is the inability to look the world's problems in the face. Artists, Cohen says, understand their roles well when they make people aware of the magnitude of our problems. The artist ought to take the role of the researcher, the expert, and going beyond it, ought to illustrate the results of the work employing a technique and medium, calling on the viewer to actively participate all the while.

Destruction, war, violence and terrorism have become part of our daily lives thanks to the wide reach of broadcast media. Art attempts to create balance between manipulated and real images. It wishes to sneak back the lost empathy without which we cannot really be human, just living robots that are controlled weapons in the hands of a given power.

Art plays an important mediating role between individuals' and nations' communications. It can provide an identity, make a home, encourage bravery.

By visuality we intend to convey a wide spectrum that is able to change people's hesitant attitudes. This is what Claire Bishop calls the 'social turn.' This facet of art is critically motivated, it regards politically-oriented artistic education as its goal, presumes an anthropological setting, and expects the participation of the beholder. It reflects on political questions by channelling personal experience and coming to terms with the past through a visual filter, focusing on the essence with the least possible aestheticisation. The practice of culture critique also means accountability towards the general public: it presents a painstakingly researched topic responsibly for the viewer. An age's dominant ideologies will be imaged in visual arts, the perceptible world views of an 'image-based society.'

An exhibition becomes alive, Julie Ault says, when it has significance beyond the limits of individual sensibilities, and rather asks universal questions and creates cognitive places for dynamic thought that opens up traditions and puts desires into words.¹³ As to rehabilitation, community must be the solution, and the artwork, and the processing that happens through it.

It is difficult to understand artworks that were inspired by the spirit of war or migration, given that we never had to flee amidst the vicissitudes of armed conflict, we never lost our homes, friends, relatives, and then even our memories. We do not know what it means to start

¹³ <https://formerwest.org/Contributors/JulieAult>

a new life, using psychological repression and erasure, in inhumane circumstances, physically distant from our birthplace.

Artistic projects and exhibitions that treat the topic of the difficulties of migration give us the possibility to discover and interpret the reasons that force millions of people to leave their homes. Apart from this, we can familiarise ourselves better with different cultures and traditions.

Such pieces do not only document the ‘symptoms of the age,’ they also provide unique, personal stories as a result of complex research procedures, in contrast with the over-aestheticised and attention seeking appearance of ‘bloody images.’

Conferences are being organised worldwide to analyse and follow the process of migration and its consequences. Almost every one of them features artists and the arts. Such a conference was held on January 24, 2019 at the University of Goteborg, Sweden, called *Art and Migration*, and *Border Crossings* at Getty Museum in Los Angeles, also in 2019.

The collective strength of international conferences makes it an excellent possibility for nations to form their opinions on migration freely. Experts are clarifying the lack of substantial communication, an absence sadly present on a worldwide scale. Despite the veritable heap of information coming at us on the internet, the substance does not seem to reach people. The ever growing digital world destroys real interactions that define our emotions, thoughts and actions. The digital device-sustained vegetation needs to end in order to end the horror in our midst, where hosts of children and adults huddle together on ships, lorries, and die in miserable circumstances.

The goal is enlightening people. The artists highlighted in this work are good examples as they give lectures all over the world, they create installations, they urge people to think cooperatively. There are several NGOs worth mentioning too, such as the work of CAMP helping us to understand and process the events, and the volunteers of the organisation MOAS, who actually save lives with the use of drones over the sea.

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