

Reframed lost voices: Migration and the refugee crisis in the context of exhibitions

by Tunde Varga*

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, due to the political, economic, and social changes, migration has become a major problem in Hungary. As an answer, migration has also become the topic of art exhibitions. Just before the refugee crisis reached its peak in Hungary in September 2015, two exhibitions, *Horizontal Standing* (2015) and *Unintended Consequences* (2015) were organised to focus on the question of migration to show different aspects of migration in general, and from Hungary in particular in the context of Eastern Europe.

Horizontal Standing was a research-based exhibition. The major concern of the curators was that a high number of mid-generation, qualified cultural workers left Hungary. They claimed that the conservative turn of Hungarian cultural politics narrowed down the possibilities of curators and artists, and they felt excluded from the new discursive and administrative field of art. As a consequence many art workers left the country to work for institutions abroad which could give them a more suitable place and freedom for their curatorial practice. The critique of *Horizontal Standing* was based on personal experience that derived from the curators' own situation of leaving the country and trying to find their place in a new one, on a professional and everyday level. In other words, they transformed a personal experience into a political statement in the exhibition space.

* The University of Fine Arts, Budapest.

The second exhibition, *Unintended Consequences* reflected on the problem of a younger generation: Hungary was more affected by the 2008 crisis since it was neither financially, nor politically strong enough, the government failed to counter political, social and economic insecurity. Moreover, social security, or access to education begun to be limited by new regulations.¹ The reaction was that young people left to live in countries which offered them more possibilities.

What was unforeseen at the time of the research phase of these two exhibitions, however, was how the refugee crisis would be present in a few months' time at the Hungarian borders and in the central parts (specifically at one of the central train stations) in Budapest. In the autumn of 2015 thousands of asylum seekers were kept in wait at the Hungarian–Serbian border near Röszke, and at the areas surrounding Keleti Railway Station (one of the central stations) in Budapest. The people in the hope of seeking asylum in Germany tried to transit Hungary, which the authorities blocked completely by closing the border on the one hand, and by closing the train station, on the other.² As a result people were left to overnight in the open for days without any help from the authorities, they were left on their own without shelter, water, medical aid or food. At both places, Röszke, and Budapest, the conditions were critical.³ In the Hungarian media the “illegality” of people was hyper-visible, migration was represented as a threat, while its causes was obscured.

By the time the crisis started to be visible in the summer of 2015, migration had gained a new, extended meaning for the curators and the public alike. Its representation through art gave space to a discussion to counterbalance official governmental media campaign biased against the people desperately trying to escape their social and political realities. The inability and the unwillingness of the Hungarian government and the local councils to care for the refugees in this critical situation was countered by volunteer activist groups, among

¹ For example university tuition fees were introduced in 2013 along a student contract. On the student contract see: <http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6001/Waiting-for-EU-action-on-student-contracts/>.

² At the end of the summer of 2015, the Hungarian authorities made crossing the border a punishable offence. In September 2015 a wire border fence was constructed, damaging that fence was made a criminal offence. At the same time Hungarian police and border guards were closing off other crossings into the country, those who tried were met with water cannons and tear gas (Rajam, 2016: 5).

³ Cf. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/world/europe/europe-migrant-crisis.html>.

whom artists were present to fulfil civic obligations, and to show the reality of these people.

In order to make the efforts and achievements of volunteer workers and artists visible for a wider public, a third exhibition, *Closed Arms* (2015) was organised. It showed works, civil projects, activists' initiations and communal participatory projects that gave place for migrant children to represent their own experiences by the means of visual media (primarily short animations). It also provided a platform for civilians and civil organisations to speak about their experiences, and actions taken so as to show possible ways for volunteer works to counterbalance the problems of such cases.

Contemporary exhibitions do not only show art works, but also aim to present a complex socio-political criticism, and to be a trigger for social debate. The discursive field these three exhibitions opened up was to reframe Eastern-European experiences past and present on migration from these countries, as it was a crucial and prevalent problem for a younger generation, and to highlight how migration in or through Hungary point at similar structural and geopolitical problems. These exhibitions in tune with the approach of contemporary practices juxtaposed art works with actual social practice intentionally suspending the line between the aesthetic, the social and the political.

2. Art Exhibitions and migration

In approaching the question of migration it is important to see what T.J. Demos points at: namely, that although there is a difference between the status of the refugee, the migrant, and the nomad, all three have the status of the non-citizen. He claims that migration and nomadism bear positive connotations in the art world: he refers to Lukács for whom migration is the “universal statelessness” of post-war Europe which means non-nationalistic, universal citizenship and mobility (quoted by Demos, 2009: 75).⁴ In Demos' view nomadism “embraces dislocation as a permanent home with lightness and joy ... a ‘resistance to bondage’”, and refusal of localism, “perpetual mobility and existential states of becoming” (Demos, 2009: 78). In contrast, refugees are asylum-seekers who are outside of citizenship for serious political or legal reasons: they are deprived of political or social rights in the home country.

⁴ See (Lukács 1971: 41). Compare: EU membership and the free flow of workforce (from 2011, may.1st) also motivated migration from the country.

Horizontal Standing (2015), the first exhibition, focused on the question of migrations from Eastern Europe from a general perspective.⁵ The two major works which framed the concept of the exhibition, Péter Forgács's film, *Hunky Blues* (2009), and a novel by Imre Oravecz, *Kaliforniai fürj* (*California Quail*, 2012) served to show how certain strata of Hungarian citizens were deprived of human rights around the First World War, which finally made them leave Hungary in search for a life they can be in command of.⁶ The two works make conscious use of the possibilities of their media in conveying a palpable image of past lives by juxtaposing fictional and factual elements.

The film *Hunky Blues* is an experimental documentary: it is a re-assemblage of original documentaries, photos and voice recordings about the second wave of migration from Hungary that took place before the First World War, between 1867-1903, and its target was primarily the United States. In the late nineteenth century the problems were the over-bureaucratic and hierarchized legal and economic system of Hungary, the immense social gap between the landed aristocracy, bourgeois families and the poorest strata of society, the landless farm-hand (zsellér), who lived in the backyard of the employing landowner, with no future, no social security, not enough to save to have a family, or no right to vote. The film informs about different modes of disregard for basic human rights in late nineteenth-century Hungary.⁷ It puts great emphasis on the fact that while in Hungary these people were devoid of "political agency", in the United States they counted as an empowered "citizen". This migration wave at that time was terminated by the new law passed by the Hungarian Parliament on emigration and the restriction

⁵ The cultural-political framework of the exhibition also bore a special importance from the aspect of its theme. It was realized within the framework of the so-called "Off Biennale", Budapest 2015 (a biennale designed to show the underrepresented art scene and to make a political statement about recent cultural policy). The off biennale was designed to show the underrepresented art scene and to make a political statement about recent cultural policy. <http://offbiennale.hu/en/>.

⁶ With special emphasis to page 622. The novel is about 19th-century Hungarian immigration to the New World, through a family history.

⁷ In Europe suffrage was not general, and census in different forms was common at the turn of the century, thus a great number of people was devoid of political agency. In Forgács's film one example to demonstrate inequality was the heyduke (botos hajdú). It was a person whose job was to make sure that people were subservient at the offices, if not he could use his cane to warn or punish them.

on possessing passports in order to keep the labour force in the country.⁸

The novel *California Quail*, just like Forgács's film, gives an account of the same migration wave of the late nineteenth century and the early 1900s from Hungary, but the novel's plot is embedded in a "family history". The juxtaposition of the novel and the film, a fiction and the documentary create a narrative that is not factual, but openly uses fictional modes and which also parallels past history with a present situation (Assmann, 1996). The narrative which thus unfolds is a narrative of disenfranchised people, whose status is reduced to what Agamben terms "bare life": it is a state in which "the excluded are denied legal rights, social protection, and freedom of movement" (Demos, 2013: xiv).⁹

In *Horizontal Standing* divergent aspects of disadvantages, and inequality were shown in several facets with the exhibited works. For example Hilla Ben Ari's video, which was the exhibition's title giving work, represents the situation of an immigrant in a foreign country: it is compared to a challenged person's performance on a balance beam, an impossible balancing between past and present. It stands for the obstacles the multiple disadvantages pose in a country which is not only foreign, but where one does not have the same legal status as its citizens. These problems are echoed in the exhibited works: in Adrian Paci's *Back Home* (2001) Albanian immigrants were photographed in front of their houses they were about to leave probably for the rest of their lives, Eva Kotatkova's work showed a little girl on stylized luggage, in Katrina Zdjelar's *The Perfect Sound* (2009) a young man tried to learn the proper British pronunciation in order not to be recognized as an immigrant. The exhibition also showed that the reason of contemporary migration out of Eastern-Europe is a longing for a dream: the promise of (global) economic and political equality which Demos sees as a false promise, because as he notes "globalization... is a less smooth space of the free flow of people..., than a fractured geography of borders and archipelagos that divides the uninterrupted transmission of goods and capital from the controlled movements of people" (Demos, 2013: xv).¹⁰ In this sense, Eastern Europe, despite EU membership and the free flow of its work-force is still in a quasi-marginal position.

⁸ For the decision of the Parliament on restricting migration see: 1903 §.IV. and Vida, 2013.

⁹ See: Agamben's term, 'bare life'" (Agamben, 1995).

¹⁰ See: Enwezor (2009).

As a historical parallel to this situation Kristo Papic's film, *The Special Trains* (1972) was screened. The film is about the "Gastarbeiter" of the former Yugoslavia travelling to Germany with socialist state support. The film was shot on the trains to Munich in 1971, and shows people talking about their subjective fears and sorrows leaving the family behind, and facing the hardship of living on the margins. The reason for leaving their home country is mainly to send money back to family, or to collect financial support to start a business of one's own, because they belonged to the poorest strata of their own society in Yugoslavia, from where the state practically sent them to Germany as cheap labour.¹¹ The scene when the German doctors examine these workers to evaluate their physical state and labour potential is a haunting image, reminiscent of the images of work camps. This scene reconnects to the central topic of Forgács's film (also people arriving at Ellis Island) and to the curators' life in Berlin as immigrants or Gastarbeiter.¹²

In Aleida Assmann's approach the fact that films are also included in an exhibition foregrounds not only the emphasis on the partial fictionality of any narratives, but also how influential fictional narratives are in conveying experiences.¹³ As Assmann observes, there is a special feature of films compared to text or images that make them even more intricate: films work through images and sound and create a certain ambience (*Stimmung*) due to the medium. That is, films, even documentaries, work more intensely at the threshold of the factual as they have a certain potential to affect ("Affektpotential") (Assmann, 2014: 164).¹⁴ Films incorporate images, sounds, voiceovers, music (on the level of affects)

¹¹ There were officers working for the Yugoslavian Ministry who travelled with these people to guide in Germany to the places they should arrive. One such employee speaks in the film about how the Ministry controls these guest workers.

¹² There was a similar case in the early 1900s with Hungarian migrants: Vida notes that the Hungarian government signed the highly controversial contract with the British Cunard Shipping Company, in its original version it had agreed to guarantee the company 30,000 adult, third-class passengers annually. However, it soon found itself in the crossfire of criticism from inside Hungary for serving as an emigration agent, as well as from abroad where it was accused of artificially restricting competition (Hanuska-Parádi, 2005: 179). See (Vida, 2013: 5).

¹³ Assmann notes that this role of nineteenth-century history novels are taken by feature films now (2014: 163-164).

¹⁴ These can point at, or give place to show the fictional element of such constructs, but also show that identity is not a stable entity, but is in a flux, can alter with new social realities. On the question of affect in the humanities, see (Leys, 2011: 444-452).

whereby they make meaning-making more sensual than rational. In Mieke Bal's view films in the exhibition space create a "threshold where encounter is about to take place", that is, a space where the border between inside and outside can be negotiated (Bal, 211: 14-15).¹⁵

According to Bal, the blending of factual and fictional elements occurs in the self-narrative of migrant people, since their self-experience is anchored in the past through memory but they also look forward to the future perspective (Bal, 2011: 16). In this sense self-narrative is also a circular narrative, and the present identity is created in that reality: one that belongs to memory and the other that belongs to an imagined future. Fiction in this sense is also explicitly part of migrant experience because in a foreign country one builds oneself from the (idealized or repellent) bits and traces of memories of the past (that is home), but at the same time sees oneself as a future person to be.¹⁶ For Bal, the fact that films appear in a loop in the exhibition format makes this experience palpable for the visitor. This was one of the basic experiences of the exhibition. The place of the exhibition was also very significant: it was open for a week in the curators' abandoned home, whereby their private apartment became a public space, thus the dividing line between personal and political, private and public were again put into a liminal position.

Unintended Consequences took a slightly different route in bringing the question of migration to the public domain. What it tried to achieve was to provide an overview of the problem a younger Hungarian generation have to face, and to reflect their feeling of despair and confusion. Due to the financial and political difficulties that affected

¹⁵ Exhibiting films in an installative format has the potential to create a spatio-temporal space that incorporates *facts and fiction*: personal experiences and historical facts, family myth, fantasies, novels, or popular culture. This is applied in creative documentary which is one of the most important genre of contemporary art since the 1990s, and as art shifted even more emphatically towards social or political criticism, it is a leading genre since the 2002 Documenta 11 (curated by Okwui Enwezor) (Thea, 2009).

¹⁶ The fictionality of such belongings can be seen in an MA-thesis on root migration: Zsófia Marton's research shows that the motifs of "root migration" of the third generation aristocracy from Transylvania are also a search for a lost identity, which was transmitted mainly through family history. It created a longing for belonging to a quasi-fictional identity and home, which was based on discontinuous family history, with at least one major time gap when these families left their home country. These young ex-aristocrats were brought up in cosmopolitan Western countries with an identity that is very different from that of the pre-war aristocracy. Compare also: Scholten (2013), and Wessendorf (2013).

young employees, the narrowing down of state supported education, and the increasing social insecurity, a significant number of young people left Hungary.¹⁷ The exhibition put emphasis on their lack.¹⁸ Most of the reasons these young migrants gave for leaving Hungary were similar to the reasons migrants gave in Forgács's film of the early 1900s: they left for better financial conditions and for social mobility. But what they faced were unforeseeable difficulties: on the one hand, the loss of the social network and the loss of relatives, which they tried to replace in diasporic communities. On the other hand, the problems of living in a foreign country without citizenship, where they do not have the same rights as a citizen, and are the Eastern European "Other".

In *Unintended Consequences* the emphasis was on films that were produced in the past ten years and were made in or focusing on Eastern Europe or related to Hungary. The films varied in genre: there were documentaries created for an Internet portal, creative documentaries, animations, and short, fictional films.¹⁹ Svitlana Shymko's *Here Together* (2011) followed an Eastern-European music teacher working as a cleaner in Lisbon and helping her daughter in her studies, who as a migrant can practice her profession only as a leisure activity, in a church choir. Nayeem Mahbub's *The Wait* (2011) was a film about migrants from outside the EU who are in need of EU citizenship as a route to a better world. Roland Sándor Ferge's *Away* (2013) was a fictional, lyrical short film: the dismal images showed children pushing or pulling huge luggage leaving a village on the way to the station. The absurdity that primary school children leave the village without their parents was meant to be a very strong criticism of Hungarian state policies that deprives a number of children of future opportunities. These social differences are even deeper at local geopolitical levels due to the lack of infrastructure, proper schooling, or work in most villages.²⁰

¹⁷ A detailed statistics in Hungarian can be found by the webpage of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office https://www.ksh.hu/population_and_vital_events, For an English review of the problem see: <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2015/04/08/hungarian-emigration-almost-doubles-as-youth-leave-hungary-in-droves/>.

¹⁸ For an English review of the problem, see Adam (2013).

¹⁹ <http://vs.hu/mind/osszes/mit-er-meg-az-elvandorolt-magyarok-nyomaban-ausztriatol-dubajig-1231>. The documentaries which were made by vs.hu, an internet portal, presented the life of young people living in European cities.

²⁰ (It was active till 2016 February): <https://kortarsmigracio.wordpress.com/page/3/>.

As an exhibition *Unintended Consequences* did not only screen films, it incorporated personal interviews with people who had already moved to live in another country: most of them were peers of the curators or artists. The divergent approaches on the problems of migration in contemporary Eastern Europe provided space for the visitors to contribute their own stories, or their own subjective impressions. This was underpinned by newspaper articles and statistics as the exhibition format also gave space for such information, so that subjective narratives were supported with facts and data.

Assmann claims that narratives manifest differently in exhibitions than in films and novels, since texts, images and objects are placed in proximity in an exhibition space. In her view the presence of different media in an exhibition produces concurrent narratives (Assmann, 2014: 153). Although there is a certain script at work according to the curatorial intention, images and objects always bring in something that could not be foreseen. Images do not illustrate, they have their own signifying structure, so it is more likely that they over-, or underdetermine meaning production. (Assmann, 2014: 151-152).²¹ For Mieke Bal the reason for the indeterminacy of meaning is that spatial arrangement also plays an important role in rendering a certain form of narrative that the viewer realizes as she or he moves in the space (Bal, 2011). The visitors' movement in space and the route of encountering the exhibited objects or images provides a certain freedom to conceive the curatorial statement differently, supplement or even counter it. The exhibition space thus provides a narrative which is not univocal, and which can be framed and interpreted differently according to its context. The divergent media forms and approaches to the same set of problem destabilised the interpretative process, and promoted a dynamic, performative act of meaning making, creating a flux of exchanges between the visitors' experience and the experience the films presented. Although the exhibition primarily screened films, since the exhibition incorporated so many different forms of documentation and art works, it generated an *overdetermination* of meaning that

²¹ In her view *Inszenierung* can either mean staging history through feature films or documentaries, or in its local, site-specific form it can present history through memorials, living memorials, or performances. Although Assmann sees narration, exhibition and staging as different techniques, in the contemporary exhibition format all three forms are present with the same level of emphasis and reinforce each other to make up the exhibition as a whole (Assmann, 2014: 151-153).

could be controlled by the curators and that manifested differently in the visitors experience.

As the refugee crisis was more and more visible, the curators shifted their interest towards that problem. Since the exhibition had already been closed, the curators focused on the problems of refugees arriving into Hungary at the Facebook page of *Unintended Consequences*.²² This platform gave space to present the injustices of the powerful and discriminatory actions against refugees mixed with discriminatory propaganda towards migration into the country in general.

Closed Arms, the third exhibition, was organised after the autumn of 2015. Instead of focusing on migration from Hungary, the curators aim was to make visible how the refugee crisis was present in Hungary, and how civilians and artist worked to counter biased media propaganda. It also aimed to highlight the structural causes of migration, that is the depravation of the majority of the world's population from enjoying basic rights, like access to proper food, water or education that is a given for most citizens in the affluent Western world.

The exhibition presented works which made facts public in an artistically mediated way that were otherwise not accessible through mainstream media. Dávid Gutema's film *Traffickers* (2015); the activities of Open Doors Youth Association, Hungary, including one of their works: *Stories*, and the projects of Menedék: Hungarian Association for Migrants, with special emphasis on the film *Welcome Migrants!*.²³ *Traffickers* showed how refugees were taken advantage of by local taxi drivers who offered their services to take them to Vienna at an extremely high price.²⁴ This could happen because these people had no legal or political protection. The film was made by a hidden camera and the filmmaker Dávid Gutema, a person of colour, acted as if he was a refugee. The biased opinions the drivers verbalised and the way they tried to estimate how well-to-do their "victim" was, show the disproportion of power relations, the vulnerability of people with no rights at the hand of local, sometimes semi-criminal actors.

²² See <https://hu-hu.facebook.com/events/1656396214592904/>.

²³ The exhibition took place at the 2B Gallery, Budapest, with the support of Alma on Dobbin Foundation. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/218465258484558/>.

²⁴ David Gutema's *Traffickers* is in the *Refugee Film Collection* online: <http://refugee.engad.org/david-gutema-gamatchis/>.

Open Doors' *Stories* focused on migrant and refugee children's and youths' personal stories of leaving their home country.²⁵ The short animations were a product of a workshop created for children who were placed in a refugee shelter home. The volunteer workers taught the children how to make use of media for conveying the hardships they experienced being on the road, how they could survive the everyday reality of lacking basics, and the dangers a child is exposed to. The third film, *Welcome Migrants!* by Menedék was created for a broader campaign to underscore refugees' and migrants' difficulties in finding accommodation in Hungary.²⁶ Since a permanent address is the cornerstone of obtaining legal residence within a country, all non-Hungarian born people were facing prejudices that have been enhanced due to the refugee crisis, thus it was of crucial importance to counter those prejudices.

In achieving its aim *Welcome Migrants!* focused on the aspect of cultural differences. The creators of *Welcome Migrants!* asked Hungarian well-known artists to host people arriving from countries outside the Schengen area. The film documented how Hungarian hosts and migrant guests shared experiences by living together, how they confronted or wondered at the differences or the similarities of everyday practices, cultural customs or habits, and how these situations created a co-learning and a mutual recognition of the falsity of preconceived ideas of otherness. In Demos' view "nomadism" can also be seen as a "critical strategy" and an artistic practice which transgresses different (cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic or media) boundaries in favour of avoiding essentialism of cultural or local, ethnic identities (Demos, 2013: 11).²⁷ In this respect nomadism is not only a mode of being in the world (as Lukács sees migration), but a possibility for a creative attitude towards different cultures which can productively use the co-existence of divergent cultural experiences, traditions. This diverts from the traditional binarism of the "I" and the "Other" in a cultural exchange that displaces what we consider essential

²⁵ Open Doors: <http://utilapu.hu/open-doors-youth-voices-2016/>.

²⁶ The project description and the short film for *Welcome Migrants!* <http://menedek.hu/node/607>.

²⁷ However, Demos also notes that it "singing the praises of nomadism today within the narrow scope of the European framework, without the radical political demands for equality (as it is often done in contemporary art discourse), appears self-congratulatory, even narcissistic" (Demos, 2013: 15).

cultural givens and makes us face the instability of our own position (Fisher, 2005: 261-263).

Closed Arms was also organized around a public event and discussion, where experts, volunteer workers, members of the helping civil organisation, and civilians who were involved either at the borders or at Keleti Railway Station could tell their personal experiences, difficulties, and share these stories with the visitor-participants. They gave accounts of numerous episodes of local solidarity practice, ranging from clothes distribution to providing medical help or even hosting people. The exhibition space was literally transformed into a form of public sphere. The visitors' involvement generated a discussion of common experiences, and of seeing problems from first-hand experience. The exhibition thus rendered a multi-focused storytelling countering the authoritative narrative of the Hungarian state and its media representation which presented the movement of migrants and asylum seekers as chaotic and disorderly, their presence as a threat, while it also obliterated any structural causes of their migration. The discussion contested the measures brought against migrants or asylum seekers, and provided examples how to restore their dignity and a sense of personhood. These works and the discussion also emphasised that the spectacularising narratives of crisis externalise 'migrants', making them out to be distinct others to national societies.

3. Conclusions

The three exhibitions challenged the cultural or national narratives that produce legal and illegal subjectivities, and, more importantly, with the public discussions they tried to create solidarity, to develop a sense of a society preventing negative reactions towards migration. Whereas the focus of *Horizontal Standing* and *Unintended Consequences* dealt with the problems of people migrating from Hungary, *Closed Arms* gave space to volunteers and the members of civil organisations to provide examples and information on how people can counter prejudices or actively help refugees or asylum seekers. In these exhibitions the aesthetic met the reality of the political. In Rancière's view "due to the lack of politics in the proper sense", contemporary art "is encouraged to intervene" the political. He claims, that "it seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their *in situ* or other provocations, a substitutive political function" (Rancière,

2009: 60). If art and artists can “reshape political spaces” is an open question, but politics entering the realm of the aesthetic might open a new platform as Demos notes, by “provid[ing] visibility for those who exist in globalisations shadows” (Demos, 2013: xix).

Although this goal was present only as a future hope, the participants’ views in all three exhibitions signalled the possibility of new inclusive political identities and subjectivities that reject the discourses of crisis and emergency usually surrounding migration. They also pointed at a possibility to understand and experience matters differently, to trigger political discourse and motivate civil action towards political authorities.

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