

Migrants under the 21st century sky

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To show migrations through artistic means, to disclose a diversity of approaches, to confront numerous statements, those that are implied and those that are straightforward, to focus on personal stories, to imply hyperboles and understand metaphors, to upgrade our documentation of the world, to delve inside virtual reflections and capture realistic meanings through reminiscences of the past, receptions of the present, and predictions of the future – is to understand movement, motion, change. To place quantities, which are physically simply definable, on another level, and connect them, through the poetics of individual artworks in different audio and visual media, into a consistent dramaturgy – is to question the meaning of movement, an inherent quality of all things natural, which have appeared through the course of history as dramatic, and often painful and tragic. In spite of the fact that everything that surrounds us, everything that resides in us, and that makes us alive, is constantly moving, we are being warned all the time that borders do exist. But the only constant in life is change.

After the inquisition trial of Galileo Galilei, he supposedly muttered to himself the words “Eppur si muove”, translated as “And yet it moves”. We do not wonder about what the scientist wanted to say: today it is considered as a kind of anecdote illustrating the limited ability to accept certain facts. When an artist showcases an artwork, which always comes with some kind of statement, we are prompted to ponder while watching, listening to, and reflecting art, about the kind of message it delivers. Unlike science, which uses various methods and procedures to deliver, as a rule, an unambiguous result, leaving little room for speculations, works of art possess the ability to inspire us through multiple unequivocal paths, through which we can seek and explore, accept them, and walk along their lines. And yet we cannot be certain about the direction of this course, even though there really only is a single path, alongside which we are able to move – our path, our very own path. With our minds, our bodies, and our hearts.

What would happen to us if our blood was not constantly moving, and what happens, when the heart stops and the brain ceases to think, when signals between the synapses fail to travel from one neuron to the next, or the Earth stops, or the Solar system comes to a standstill, or the Universe; moving? The termination of these processes is the end, in living creatures this means death, and announcing a prevention of movement is in fact a call for suicide. Because such proclamations are performed by representatives of nations, we are being pushed towards a collective suicide, a Luddism par excellence, just like we sometimes observe it, horrified, in the bizarre religious sects and their maniacal leaders. Yet numerous politicians have acted under such influences over the past few years, gathering primitives of all kinds, nations and religions around them in their populist upheavals – people whose suicidal tendencies are turning homicidal, as they aggressively demand all of us to follow them, and prevent movement.

Humans would not exist without migrations. Neither would animals, plants, the Earth, nor the planets. According to existing theories, prehistoric man originated in Africa – the “human-like ape”, Proconsul, around 20 to 25 million years ago, the “upright man” around 2 million years ago, and the “thinking man” 200.000 years ago – roamed across Asia, inhabited first Indonesia and then Australia, before reaching Europe through Siberia, and populating America via Alaska, when the Bering Strait was still frozen and passable. Thus, according to existent anthropological theories, we are all recent arrivals from Africa, if we agree to set the beginning as the starting point. You can, of course, pick any other starting point, if it suits you better, and say you’re coming from, say, Australia, or Asia.

More than 3.000 years ago, the silk road was paved from China to Europe and vice versa, a route that is becoming topical yet again; without it, countless findings, scientific, artistic, practical, as well as goods and commodities that make up our lives, would have remained undisclosed. The spice trade route, which traveled across seas around Africa to the Indian subcontinent and beyond from the 15th century onward, as expeditions set out from Europe, “discovering” territories, people, and culture, has introduced to us pepper, cinnamon, ginger, etc. One of the biggest historical misconceptions is that any European during the period of Middle Ages “discovered” anything through their travels across seas and lands, because people have already inhabited those areas long before. It is probably no coincidence that such “discoveries” occurred during the times of the strictest inquisition, which, of course, made its demands on these travels, which were followed by Christianization “by fire and sword”. The meeting of newcomers and natives usually escalated into conflicts, and were materialized in the form of colonies, which existed up to the 20th century, and were conditionally abolished only after the Second World War. One of the last countries was the South African Republic, where the apartheid policy was struck from the books only in 1994, when the first multi-racial elections were held.

This occurred during the time of the Yugoslav war, and today, once more, it seems that we are approaching such an understanding of the world. In fact, this kind of logic was never truly abandoned, only the colonies of today are more virtual, as are the wars. Until we experience them ourselves. Migrants, apparently, are a nuisance, dangerous to some, because the emotions – individual and intimate as ever – are unwanted, or even forbidden. Humanity is drowning in the screams triggered by others, who want to protect their own delusions, and cover up the limitations of their world. But – is migration truly a European prob-

lem? Amnesty International reports state that there are currently 21 million refugees in the world, which adds up to 0,3 percent of the entire world population, with most refugees hosted by Asian and African countries, which are located close to the centerpoints of disturbance. The only exception is Canada, which last year welcomed 30.000 Syrian refugees. The richest countries are hosting “the fewest refugees, and doing the least”, while the lion’s share is left to the poorer countries: ten countries, which together represent only 2,5 percent of the world’s GDP, are hosting more than half the refugees in the world.

As much as 56 percent of the 21 million refugees are stationed in Jordan (more than 2,7 million), Turkey (more than 2,5 million), Pakistan (more than 1,6 million), Lebanon (more than 1,5 million), Iran (a little under a million), Ethiopia (around 750.000), Kenya (around 550.000), Uganda (a little under 500.000), Democratic Republic of the Congo (around 380.000), and Chad (almost 370.000). These countries are located close to the crisis areas. Unsuitable conditions in the main host countries force numerous refugees to embark on a pathway towards Europe or Australia, and risk losing even their lives, as they have nothing else left to lose. Of course, the unfair distribution of the burden is sharpening and deepening the global refugee crisis, and the trend will continue, unless more states decide to approach the issue with more resolution. “If each of the richest countries in the world accepted a number of refugees proportionate to the size, wealth, and unemployment rate of the country, searching for a new home for refugees around the world would become a very solvable challenge,” the Amnesty International report says, and suggests that the richest countries in the world should provide homes for ten percent of the refugees each year. They add that “it is time the leaders began a serious and constructive discussion about the way our societies are going to help people, who are forced to leave their homes on account of wars and prosecution. They need to explain, why the world is able to save banks, develop new technologies, and fight wars, yet it remains incompetent in providing safe homes for the refugees.”

The refugee situation is a consequence of the wars caused by NATO, in other words, they were triggered by lies and pretence fabricated by America (the 2003 invasion of Iraq), which was involved in around 80 different conflicts and wars since 1945, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, i.e. the former colonists and imperialists. Slovenia, too, became part of this, starting with the Vilnius letter, and there seems to be nothing preventing us from becoming even further entangled inside these processes. The European policy of shutting down borders is contradictory; on one

hand, it appears anachronistic, while on the other, it acts as an ominous prediction of a tribal future, as it supports migrations in the sense of programs, which became, after years of embellishing the artists' mobility, one of the priorities of Creative Europe. The project Risk Change, therefore, finds itself in a rather puzzling situation of dealing artistically with the topics of migrations and the closing of borders. Like a software vs. hardware opposition. The countries are the hardware, created by politics according to their own measures, and the people are placed in the role of programs, which the countries use to achieve their own goals.

This is part of the reason why I was considering, in the preparation stage of the exhibition, the 90th anniversary of the death of the greatest Slovenian avant-garde poet, Srečko Kosovel, and his poems *Europe is Dying* and *Ecstasy of Death*, which depict a similar situation in the time following the First World War, or the Great War, as historians refer to it – but I later abandoned that idea. I am still trying to make a reference to the avantgarde, but rather than the historical, I prefer a contemporary approach; I believe that the exhibited art triggers this kind of questions as well, but I opted for life: migrations are a reflection of life, a celebration of life, they are life itself. The international exhibition **MIG 21 – Migratory Interdisciplinary Grid** is an artistic showcase of movement, covering the most integral palette of possible starting points, composed of series of intimate experiences, which contain countless meanings, as well as original, personal, and artistic layers, as suggested by the collected works.

The goal was not to organize a reportage-style exhibition presenting numerous current photographs awarded with illustrious international prizes, among which several Slovenian-born authors were selected, although such a principle would have been much simpler. Rather than that, the idea was to comprise art in all the scope and profoundness of the poetics and various media it includes. Hence, the temporal scope was limited to 45 years, with the oldest work dating back to the year 1971, and the youngest belonging to the most recent productions of 2016. Through such a temporal dimension, the younger generation too was defined, which is understood in this context as a contemporary phenomenon. All exhibiting artists are still living, except for **Mladen Stilinović**, who passed away during the preparation of the art show, on the 18th of July 2016. Like him, there were many other foreign artists in the exhibition, who have represented their countries in the Venice biennials, the Documenta in Kassel, and numerous other museums and galleries around the world, while most of the national artists, rather unintentionally, turned out to be (former) winners of the Prešeren, Jakopič, Župančič, and Glazer awards.

The theme of migrations, of movement, of motion, was associated with personal poetics, distinctive creative approaches, various media, spatial settings, interpersonal relationships, original cultures, and own interventions. The multi-layered nature of the works was combined into an elemental humanistic message. Concepts of joining human hormones with plant cells (**Špela Petrič**), transferring brain activities (**Aphra Tesla**), light and sound waves (**Monika Pocrnjič**, **Matjaž Lenhart**), and modern technology and optical DNA reading (**Heather Dewey-Hagborg**) were linked to historical cues, stemming from distant and recent past, capturing the presence, and flirting with the future. Ideological themes were linked to politics, religions, economies, and comprised even civil-social postulates, and, of course, the military (Herlinde Koelbl). Individual artistic procedures pervaded the setting with sculptures, paintings, photographs, video works, audio-visual contents, and films (**Jovan Joca Jovanović** and **Stanoje Čebić**), machinimas – video games with computer-animated characters (**antiAtlas of Borders – Isabelle Arvers**), intermedia and interactive installations using lighting (**Ivan Marušić – Klif**), or sound and light (**Jane Tingley and Michal Seta**), audio-visual impacts (**Brigitta Zics**), online projects (**antiAtlas of Borders – Joana Moll and Cédric Parizot**), infographics and depictions of the ruling structures, and printed media (**Bureau d'Études**).

The mobility of artists and art was related to the current moment – though it never was, and never will be otherwise, in the sense of movement stopping – and captured in an autonomous fusion, which connected artistic symbols from prehistoric times, i.e. from the ape-like simian embracing contemporaneity (**Jakov Brdar**), so that it would, through robotized installations (**Adam Donovan**), and images of devastated, dystopian environments (**Aleksij Kobal**) open up considerations of what Earth would be like, or is going to be, without humans. In front of our senses, our eyes and ears, direct and indirect associations to the evolution of humans and the society were intertwined, associations to the reality of the existing world (**Marko Jakše**), to multiculturalism and corporate globalism (**Uroš Weinberger**). Religious elements were used to comment on Christianity, Islam, Judaism (**Metod Frljic**) through historical figures (**Žarko Bašeski**), mixed heritage and an upside-down world (**AES+F**). In the Old Testament all three monotheistic religions have the same appreciation for the same paintings. Since all three are based in the Middle East and Asia, they are underscoring the centuries-long misconception, by means of which extremists of all kinds are misleading the uninformed masses, that Christianity is a European religion. This is simply not true, or else the same

could be said about Judaism or Islam. The religions of European peoples, i.e. of the nations that settled here, have been polytheistic since prehistoric times.

Political ideologies were interconnected in statements about wars and everything related to wars being primarily an economic category, including refugees (**Raša Todosijević**). Furthermore, that everything related to war is a huge business, starting from the weapons industry, the legal and illegal arms trade, and of course the wars themselves and their consequences, which entails migrants and their legal or illegal transports, various fences (**Jože Slaček**), the barbed wire or razor wire alongside state borders (**Marko Breclj**), which in Slovenia stretches across a mindboggling 184 kilometers, and which cost millions of Euros; refugee centers, tents, documents, asylums, etc. (**Srdjan Živulović**). It is contradictory to talk about "economic" migrations, because every migration is an economic one, and the same goes for tourism, which is, apart from that, one of the biggest sources of pollution on this planet, sparing neither land nor water (**Robertina Šebjanič**), neither heights nor depths, and permeating into outer space as well. From hell (**Julijana Božič**) to heaven (**Jože Šubic**).

In terms of geography, we have encompassed the globe, connecting a variety of art approaches within a single space, emphasizing different kinds of migrations, movements, motions (**Nika Oblak** and **Primož Novak**), dropping to the level of nucleuses (**Ale de la Puente**), symbolically strolling from here to the world of the dead, through the door to the great beyond (**Mirsad Begić**), formally from abstraction (**Ksenija Čerče**) to the concrete (**Jure Fingušt**), lyrically from "advertisement" (**Zbigniew Libera**) to direct public interventions (**Ana Pečar**), computer-wise from symbols (**Matjaž Požlep**) to dots and lines (**So Kanno** and **Takahiro Yamaguchi**), in terms of design from headscarves (**Zora Stančič**) to etalons (**Research Institute of Geo-Artistic Statistics of the Republic of Slovenia – RIGASRS**).

Art is life, its inherent essence, a testimony to this are the artworks reflecting different fates, personal and collective, family and social, civil, political, and religious (**Jusuf Hadžifejzović**), as they pull down the media curtain to face us with distant and nearby horizons (**Ulrich Wüst**); with human figures in subtle interpersonal connections, thoughtful, worried, but also playful perspectives, outlining their paths and relations (**Stojan Kerbler**). Life always finds a way, even in the most extreme conditions and in spite of the diametrically opposed human relations, which connect communities and individuals (**Oleg Kulik**), so that they become active; everyone provides their own contribution (**Adela Jušič** and **Andreja Dugandžić**). Accepting oneself and

the other, the different; allowing and accepting otherness is, apparently, the hardest thing, something that has to be stopped, and we must shut down. Travelling is a journey (**Matej Čepin**), which is manifested as a personal paraphrase as well (**Tina Dobrajc**).

I remember the anecdote about Friedrich Nietzsche, when he wrote "God is dead", and the consequent "Nietzsche is dead. God". We could suggest the same for the primitive statement of the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher: "Society is dead", and add that "Thatcher is dead. Society". And as surely we will comment in a few years' time on another nebulous idea by Angela Merkel, "Multiculturalism is dead", by saying "Merkel is dead. Multiculturalism". So many subjects out there, regardless of their provenience, compete in this kind of statement-dropping, who will utter the most momentous, prophetic, immortal forecast, yet none of them make it past Andy Warhol's catchphrase about the "fifteen minutes of fame", something they so passionately yearn for. The only tragedy is that in doing so, they topple down a country or two, and provoke the whole world following the principle of "after me, the flood". If Francis Fukuyama was all about the end of history, it is clear that the world will not end with his own death. We learn nothing from history. People are just numbers, victims, trophies (**Jan Macko**), what matters are territories and natural resources.

The difference between science and art is that science chooses different paths to obtain the same, unambiguous, common result, while in the arts, different paths lead to multiple results; personal, individual, unique. This is why the junction between them is contradictory, yet at the same time it can be very inspiring and highly creative. Both envision themselves as being humane, as acting for the benefit of humanity, and as being progressive. Undoubtedly, progress is a common feature of both. But unlike science, which uses increasingly sophisticated, high-tech and rarely accessible tools, art still employs the materials and forms that are available to the everyman. Sometimes it even flirts with science, and toys with reality, but at its core it remains something that inspires us to think outside the box, which in turn often encourages us to act upon something. Life is an autonomous, personal, own journey through space-time. Since we are not alone, we share it with others. We are all basically migrants, travelling underneath the same big sky.