

THE OTHER FEELSENOIS

A TWO-DAY CONFERENCE ON FORCED MIGRATION, HOSPITALITY AND RECIPROCITY

13–14 December, 2019
Franz Josefs Kai 3, Vienna, Austria

*Conference conceptualised and moderated by Isin Ömol
Organised in the framework of the exhibition *The Other is Oneself*, curated by Fiona Liewehr
Project initiated by Sébastien de Ganay in collaboration with Hilfswerk International*

The dichotomy between the collective self and other has been a defining dimension throughout the history of human civilization — in times of peaceful evolution, but especially also during crises, confrontations, and atrocities. The ever-shifting distinction between the self (us) and the other (them) can be read as the very definition of what merits the status of “human” within each society — and by consequence, who is entitled to which level of rights, and what is undertaken to guarantee those rights. Long before the modern Declaration of Human Rights, each tribe, city, people, nation and empire crafted their own versions of “human rights”, often explicitly stating who positively has rights, and taking for self-evident which genders, cultural, ethnic or social classes are to be excluded or ignored. An intriguing variety of pathways has been developed by which some of “them” can become “us” after having been occupied, or after having migrated.

In the contemporary discourse on exile, flight and asylum, a particular controversy and dilemma has emerged around the notion of the self and the other: On the one hand, the right to asylum is seen by many as an indispensable component of human rights, which in turn they see as the very foundation and essence of their collective self. What’s more, many people share the core social value of hospitality and insist to welcome “the other” unconditionally, without expecting direct or even delayed reciprocity for helping in need. On the other hand, the fear of losing power, prosperity and eventually the own cultural identity as a consequence of immigration has a strong impact on our democratic choices. There may be sufficient wealth to ensure peaceful lives for the current electorate, but is there enough to share with “the other”? Can our values and social contracts survive the advent of the other? How do the self and the other evolve throughout this encounter? Has the self-image ever been honest?

The conference *The Other is Oneself* accompanies and departs from the exhibition of the same title and expands on the far-reaching dialectic of “the self” and “the other” along several dimensions. It aims to span a space of thought that encompasses a diverse array of experiences, analyses, perspectives and approaches, articulated by artists, politicians, government and NGO professionals, and scholars across the social sciences, humanities and legal disciplines.

Many of the conference participants embody personal histories that involve around the always transforming, frequently humiliating and all too often traumatizing experiences of migrating, of seeking asylum, of being forced to flee. To be displaced from a familiar social fabric and to find

oneself dropped into the thin air of goodwill of an alien community amounts to a total existential challenge, individually and collectively. Under sufficiently positive circumstances, this challenge can lead to tremendous personal and collective growth and mutual learning — on all sides. All too often, however, this potential is drowned in a swamp of resentment, frustration, shame and fear, long before it has had a chance of unfolding. Looking into the long-term future of humankind, beyond acute crises and emergencies, it will remain a key determinant of our histories-to-come, how we collectively learn from past failures in averting the catastrophe of being forced to flee, and in understanding the tensions amidst both, the migrating and sedentary populations, that migration inevitably exposes.

The first encounters between the ones who newly arrive and the ones who are already there has many relations to the ancient roles of guest and host. Not only the social sciences, but myriad forms of teachings, debates and stories the world over have been drawn from the tension inherent to this constellation. How can a basis of trust be established from nothing? Can the awkwardness inherent to entering a stranger's private space be overcome, and how does it arise? Are the cultural vocabularies available to the two parties mutually compatible, can they understand each other enough to give what is desired and receive what is offered? — Hospitality, after all, is a double-edged virtue, in that it offers but also obliges, in that it gives respect but also demands it. To welcome a guest in one's home entails giving them access, but in a carefully limited and graded way. The elaborate scripts and highly calibrated ways of acting that have evolved around the tension of guest and host are a rich source for understanding what it may mean to be in a society of humans; and a botched encounter of guest and host is perhaps a “maximum credible accident” of the social.

While inter-personal hospitality may constitute a foundational social interaction and a necessary condition for meaningful migration dynamics, it is indispensable to understand the distinct emergent effects of migration and refuge on the scale of populations and in the evolution of our social fabrics. Beyond economic concerns of resource sharing, and fears of losing out, the process of migration tests the reach of solidarity and the limits of empathy. With debilitating intensity, any lack of sincerity, fairness and conclusiveness in the collective self-image and social “modes of operation” of both, the migrating and sedentary groups, get exposed. In host societies, the fear of losing the own cultural identity and social achievements under the influx of an incompatible group of aliens often articulates itself in outright racism and systemic rejection. In migrating societies, the dynamics may unfold in a strikingly similar way, albeit with reversed roles.

To overcome this self-fulfilling encrustation and accept the challenge of reaffirming what is worthy and necessary about the foundations of the self — and eventually mending what is untenable — must be our objective, and this conference aims to contribute. The multiple “selves” and “others” involved in such processes are to be exposed to scholarly and artistic examination; practical thinkers and theoretical doers are challenged to articulate their experiences. As a focal point, the conference aims to explore how the space of art can be opened to communicate individual experiences and to mobilize personal memories, in contrast to — but not rejection of — the more abstract, statistical accounts provided by government institutions and the media. To generate constructive confrontations across the disciplines and viewpoints, the format of the conference is designed to first allow for sufficient space to elaborate on a specific notion or dimension. Then it will activate “responders”, “sceptics” and “questioners” to challenge otherwise unquestioned, unconscious assertions along orthogonal lines of thinking and perceiving; For we must yet again re-invent ourselves, and “our others”, these two poles within our emotional, conscious and collective worlds that have always decisively fuelled the process of synthesizing who we are.

Isin ÖnoI

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Friday, December 13

- 14:00 – 15:00 – Introductions by Sébastien de Ganay, Fiona Liewehr, and Isin ÖnoI
 15:00 – 15:30 – Keynote Presentation by Stefan Fritz
 15:30 – 16:00 – Lecture by Khaled Barakeh:
 “The Presence of the Catastrophe and Absence of the Victim”
 16:00 – 16:15 – Livia Alexander in conversation with Khaled Barakeh
 16:15 – 16:30 – Coffee break
 16:30 – 17:10 – Lecture by Lewis Johnson:
 “Demanding Legibilities: Attesting Bodies Out of Place in Art
 from Van Gogh, Santiago Sierra and Since”
 17:20 – 18:00 – Sébastien de Ganay in conversation with Samar Yazbek
 18:00 – 19:00 – Music performance by Golnar Shahyar & drinks

Saturday, December 14

- 10:00 – 10:30 – Coffee and gathering
 10:30 – 11:10 – Lecture by Özge Ejder:
 “Ambivalence and Identity:
 Problematic of Migration in the Work of Ai Weiwei”
 11:10 – 11:50 – Lecture by Kilian Kleinschmidt:
 “People on the Move –
 Humanity from Lucy in the Cave to Humpty Trumpy on the Wall”
 11:50 – 12:00 – Coffee break
 12:00 – 12:40 – Isin ÖnoI in conversation with Nil Yalter, Ramesch Daha, Fiona Liewehr
 12:40 – 13:20 – Lecture by Thomas Schmidinger:
 “Yezidi Displacement in Iraq and Syria”
 13:20 – 14:00 – Lunch break
 14:00 – 14:40 – Sébastien de Ganay in conversation with Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi
 14:40 – 15:30 – Panel discussion and short presentations (in German):
 “Experiences of Exile in Austria”
 Participants: Sulaiman Mahmoud, Midia Amir, Berivan Aslan
 Moderator: Thomas Schmidinger
 Contributors: Stefan Fritz, Kilian Kleinschmidt, and Khaled Barakeh
 15:30 – 16:00 – Q & A

Short Biographies of the Conference Participants

Livia Alexander

Livia Alexander is a curator, writer, and Assistant Professor of Global Visual Cultures at Montclair State University. Her work is focused on examining the relationship between art infrastructure and artistic production, urbanity, cultural politics of food and art, and contemporary art from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. She is the co-founder of ArteEast, a non-profit organisation established in 2003 to support and promote artists from the Middle East, North Africa and its diasporas, which she directed until 2013.

Midia Amir

Midia Amir is from Rojava, Syria. Her birthplace is the city of Aleppo in 1986. There she completed her studies in Geodesy. During this time, she was already involved in the social sector, among others with the Red Cross and the FPA (Family Planning Association/UN) in Syria. After her studies, she worked in customer consulting in various companies. Due to the beginning of the war in her home country her next stop was the city of Istanbul, Turkey, where from 2011 she worked as a translator. After coming to Austria, she learned the German language and in 2018 trained as an integration coach with a focus on intercultural competences.

Berivan Aslan

Berivan Aslan was born in Turkey and is an Austrian lawyer and politician of “The Green Alternative”, a political party in Austria. Aslan was a member of the National Council from 2013 to 2017. She is considered an expert on human and women’s rights and migration issues. Berivan Aslan currently works as a University Assistant at the Institute for Austrian and European Business Criminal Law at the Vienna University of Economics and Business and is doing her doctorate there.

Khaled Barakeh

Khaled Barakeh is a Syrian artist and activist based in Berlin. His art often reflects different stages of his personal life, they are bound to undergo changes with the passage of time. Even though, Barakeh’s methods shift and change over time, visual preferences and themes such as freedom, oppression and censorship remain present in his work. Barakeh seeks for the viewer to challenge expectations and pre-existing assumptions.

Ramesch Daha

Ramesch Daha was born in Tehran, has been living in Vienna since 1978. In her multi-part work complexes, the artist works with a variety of media, including painting, collage, video and drawing, as well as documents from public and her personal archives. Based on extensive historical research, Daha, in her artistic work, connects biographical historical aspects, collective memories and historical-political events in new constellations. This involves extensive travelling and study visits to, among others, Vancouver, New York, London or Berlin. Daha has met broad international recognition with her yet uncompleted series Victims 9/11, in which she attempts to save the victims of the terrorist attack from oblivion by portraying every single one of them.

Özge Ejder

Özge Ejder is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul. She has teaching and research interests in the theory of art, architecture, aesthetics and continental philosophy with an emphasis on Husserlian and post-Husserlian phenomenology. She has published on the concepts of death, boredom, and representation. Her translation work includes Arthur Danto’s *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and she has edited a special issue on art and philosophy for *MSGSU Social Sciences Institute Journal*.

Sébastien de Ganay

Sébastien de Ganay was born in France and studied at Columbia University in NY. Ganay is co-founder and partner of Onestar Press which is dedicated to the production of books and films by artists. Sébastien de Ganay is currently one of the most innovative representatives of experimental painting and sculpture. With his work, he moves within the field between art and design.

Stefan Fritz

Stefan Fritz was born in Austria, he taught for several years at the University of Klagenfurt and the University of Innsbruck. Stefan Fritz was previously in charge of the finance department of Hilfswerk International from 2007 and has been Managing Director of Hilfswerk International since 2015. Hilfswerk International is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation which provides long term international development assistance as well as humanitarian aid for victims of conflicts and environmental disasters.

Lewis Johnson

Lewis Johnson is a historian and theorist of art and visual cultures, based in Istanbul. He has published widely on art, in particular the pictorial arts, across modern cultures in Europe, North America, South Africa and Turkey, in books, catalogues and academic journals such as Double Dialogues and Third Text. He edited Mobility and Fantasy in Visual Culture (Routledge 2014), foregrounding issues of mobility, migration and cultural belonging from the Renaissance on. His work explores problematics of identity and culture as communicated and contested through art and media.

Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi

Barbara Coudenhove is a Czech-Austrian journalist. After working for several major Austrian newspapers, she became a renowned writer in the 1970s for a series of radio documentaries she made on Eastern Bloc countries, above all in Poland and Czechoslovakia. She received a national award from Václav Havel for her work supporting democracy and human rights. Nowadays she writes for several Czech and Austrian papers.

Kilian Kleinschmidt

Kilian Kleinschmidt is an international networker, humanitarian and refugee expert with 30 years of experience in a wide range of countries, emergencies and refugee camps as United Nations official, Aid worker and Diplomat. He is the founder and Chairman of the startup Innovation and Planning Agency (IPA) which aims at connecting the millions of poor and disadvantaged with relevant and under-utilized resources and modern technologies of the 21st century through its project SWITXBOARD. He was known as the “Mayor of Za’atari” when he managed the refugee camp of Za’atari in Northern Jordan from 2013-2014 on behalf of UNHCR.

Fiona Liewehr

Fiona Liewehr is an art historian, curator and writer/editor based in Vienna. Her experience is based on both an institutional background and the art market. She worked for the Belvedere, Vienna and the MUMOK Museum of Modern Art Vienna as well as a gallery director of Georg Kargl Fine Arts. In her curatorial practice, Liewehr is concerned with the crossover of media and disciplines such as theatre, music, film and architecture and the phenomenology of perception and expanded forms of spatial existence as the result of social relations.

Sulaiman Mahmoud

Sulaiman Al Mahmoud is a Kurdish Cultural Manager from Syria based in Vienna since 2014. Mahmoud studied English Literature at the Al-Baath University in Syria. He is founding director of the Kurdish Cultural Institute of Vienna and works to promote Kurdish language and culture in Austria. Mahmoud is interested in Diaspora Studies and Linguistics.

Isin ÖnoI

Isin ÖnoI (1977 Turkey) is a curator and writer based in Vienna and New York. Her curatorial research primarily focuses on archives and oral histories to interconnect personal histories and collective memories as alternative histories to official narratives. She currently teaches at Montclair State University's department of Arts & Design. She is a member of the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University, the founding coordinator of Nesin Art Village, and currently a member of the board of directors at Roberto Cimetta Fund.

Golnar Shahyar

Golnar Shahyar is a European based Iranian/Canadian vocalist, composer, lyricist and music educator who specialises in combining her musical roots with jazz and improvised music. After getting her bachelor degree in Biology in Toronto, Canada, she moved to Vienna in 2008 to pursue her dream of becoming a musician. Within a short period of time, she entered the international stages and festivals while finishing her studies in voice performance and music education, minoring guitar performance, at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna.

Thomas Schmidinger

Thomas Schmidinger is a political scientist and Cultural Anthropologist based at the University of Vienna. He is co-founder and Secretary General of the Austrian Association for Kurdish studies. He is the author of Rojava (Pluto, 2018), which received the Mezlum Bagok award. He has written extensively on Kurdistan, Sudan, Kosovo, Jihadism, migration and Muslim communities in Europe. He is a board member of the Interessengemeinschaft LektorInnen und WissensarbeiterInnen, a platform for the preservation of policy concerns of lecturers and knowledge workers.

Nil Yalter

Nil Yalter, a Turkish-French artist, is considered as a pioneer of socially engaged art. Born 1938 in Cairo, she grew up in Istanbul. In 1965 she moved to Paris, where she expended her painting practice to multimedia installations dealing with migration, exile, the working class and the social position of women, all recurring themes throughout her carrier. She received the Outstanding Merit Award, PRIX AWARE 2018. Current museum exhibition: Nil Yalter. TRANS/HUMANCE. Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val de Marne (MAC/VAL), Vitry-sur-Seine, France. Recent exhibitions: Nil Yalter. EXILE IS A HARD JOB at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany and Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard, Annandale-On-Hudson, NY, USA; 2016 FRAC Lorraine, Metz, France and "OFF THE RECORD", ARTER – Space of Art, Istanbul, Turkey.

Samar Yazbek:

Samar Yazbek is a Syrian writer and journalist. Yazbek took part in the popular uprising against the Assad regime, and was forced to exile months later. She participated in the "Women's Initiative Organization", dedicated to the defence of women's and children's rights. In 2013 her book "In the Crossfire" was awarded the Pen OXFAM Novib award in the Netherlands. In 2016, "The Crossing" won "The Best Foreign Book" award in France. Her latest book "19 women: Tales of resilience from Syria" shares the stories of women who took part in the revolution but were silent or silenced actors.

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