



**BORDERLINE**  
*in the face  
of fear*

**OFF DERLINE**  
*laughing*

**BORDERLINE**  
**BORDERLINE**





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*unknown soldier:*

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# BO book Manifesto

What is dark, short, and knocking at the door?  
The migrant future\*

*unknown soldier*



## An Artistic Indiscretion Manifesto

A European Diplomat and a European Bureaucrat meet at a high-level meeting to exchange notes on European integration and its challenges.

— How are things in your country? — asked the Diplomat. The Bureaucrat sighed:

— Well, in my country the situation is serious, but not hopeless.

The Diplomat replied:

— Ha! In my country, the situation is hopeless, but not serious.\*\*

Humour = Creativity = Connection  $\neq$  Aggression

Humour happens when language and images are used creatively, in a way that interrupts the rational logic of what we experience: arguments, discourses, emotions, taken-for-granted truths.

Elements of surprise, contrast or absurdity make us change our interpretations of reality, provoking laughter, relieving tension, disrupting ordinary perspectives and ways of thinking.

Dark or gallows humour is about looking at the amusing/absurd in stressful, traumatic or life-threatening situations to cope with hopelessness and hang on to the joy and dignity of life.

The humour we fight for:

Affiliative: a means of developing relationships, to amuse others, and reduce tensions;

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\* *stolen and adapted from the internet, allegedly stolen from Romanian oral literature*

\*\* *stolen and adapted from the internet, allegedly stolen from Germanic/Holy Roman Empire oral literature*

Self-enhancing: to take a humorous perspective on life and its troubles, a mechanism to cope with stress.

The humour we fight against:

Aggressive humour: discriminatory humour to offend and belittle others for malign amusement;

Self-defeating humour: self-belittling humour to mock oneself, and laughing with others when mocked to fit in.

### **Notice of state of war**

Performing Article 1 of the Convention Relative to the Opening of Hostilities [Laws of War: Opening of Hostilities (Hague III)], entered into force on 26 January 1910, and ratified by the Plenipotentiaries gathered for the Second Peace Convention at the Hague, the 18th of October, 1907:

A state of war now exists between Borderline Offensive and the state(s) of Cultural Phobia and Phobic Imagination: a morbid irrational dread which prompts irrational behaviour, flight or the desire to destroy the stimulus for the phobia and anything reminiscent of it. Or as in layman's terms:

Fear (of Others, Dialogue, Uncertainty, Future, Peace, Creation, Change and Psychological Mindedness).

Borderline Offensive is an armed operation using non-violence, humour and art as weaponry to achieve its strategic goal of societal change, development and integration between intercultural communities within and outside Europe.

Borderline Offensive is not a sovereign state; it has no state border delimitation, capital, political ideology or chief of state established by a hereditary, elective or revolutionary process.

Borderline Offensive is a collective of cultural forces, mercenaries, idealists, double agents, demagogues, pedagogues and andragogues, cowards, heroes, outsiders and celebrities, without norms on gender, ethnicity, religious or scientific beliefs, age or ability constraints.

Borderline Offensive is a social imaginary: a potential for a new creative and symbolic dimension of our contemporary world, a dimension of creative collectivity through which human beings create their ways of living together. A special ops mission giving citizens direct access to the political life of their community and dialogue, without intermediation of populists, demagogues and cronies.



Borderline Offensive is strategically operationalised by its humouristic perspective on life: to seek laughter and joy as instruments of political warfare and peacebuilding when facing fear and hopelessness.

Whereas there is a state of war between us, the Borderline Offensive, and the state(s) of Cultural Phobia and Phobic Imagination;

And whereas it is necessary to specify the articles with which it is Our intention to conduct our operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war;

## **Aesthetic articles**

In order to serve, even in this extreme hypothesis, the interests of humanity and the ever increasing requirements of civilisation, the Borderline Offensive calls to arms: humour, art and joy.

Creative battle:

1. Guerilla art tactics are employed to fight cultural hegemony and fear.
2. Prudent risks are taken – with small tactical steps.
3. Common spaces for access and infiltration into each other's arms are created.
4. Dishonourable exfiltration from shared social realities is combatted with laughter and ideas.
5. National borders are offensively and humourously crossed, physically and in discourse, in a total war of ridicule.
6. Happiness and peace are encouraged as political needs, for which the employment of a Machiavellian strategy is a legitimate military strategy.
7. Discourses of isolation and scapegoating are invaded, broken and occupied to create mutual integration and disrupt the dynamics of polarisation;
8. Curiosity in other realities is provoked, to change approaches to encourage critical thinking.

## **Fearless humour.**

9. Providing alternative ways of making sense of reality which resist the distress and suffering borne down on people by unpleasant, serious and painful circumstances;
10. Inspiring perspective-taking from an emotional point-of-view to cope with stressful circumstances;

11. Mobilising in-group bonding and affiliation, when shared, unspoken knowledge about potentially deeper truths is the access point to understanding a joke;
12. Addressing the individual and collective salience of mortality to facilitate open mindedness, creativity, and a sense of humour;
13. Giving the threatened and the excluded a voice to joke and seek joy in dialogue with others and increase creativity via abstract thinking without elevating conflicts over personal perspectives and beliefs;
14. Countering extremist narratives and icons, which lose power once ridiculed;
15. Learning and experimenting to infuse the random chaos and suffering of everyday life with significance;

### **Joyful art:**

16. The notion in art of the virtue of gravity is challenged – in how we look at, talk about and make art.
17. Art and/or life are mocked and exaggerated to reveal how norms and conventions are constructed and then change attitudes;
18. Multiple and paradoxical perspectives are used simultaneously, suppressing discourses of normative, rationalised (hypocritical?) morality;
19. The imagination of the audience and the creator are mutually aroused in a dialogue about human existence, in a challenge to make us think more critically and creatively;
20. The heritages of humour (what is humourous, what is ridiculous, what mutual stereotypes exist and how they are perpetuated through humour) are challenged and negotiated;
21. Situations, ideas, stereotypes are ridiculed, but not real individuals or their experiences (physically present or not);
22. Old humour stereotypes are challenged and new humour heritages and stereotypes about European and global identities are created and explored;
23. Everything is criticised, by implying and not stating plainly;
24. The punchline strikes at our own fears, vulnerabilities, flaws, independently of who we are and where we come from: it is not them who need to be more like us or us who need to be more like them, it is we (together) who need to be better than we are now.
25. Others – these articles are preliminary, and subject to change/additions as more warriors join the cause.

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# Intro - Art as the micro level to critically question the macro level of EU integration policy and practice

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Borderline Offensive Festival is a transnational community gathering of creators, academics, cultural producers and citizens wanting to explore how art and humour can contribute to improving lives in society in Europe and beyond. As such a platform, Borderline Offensive has organised, staged and produced different forms of tools aiming to provide the answers to the key questions:

- How do humour and art promote dialogue and reflection about migration, fear, pain, identity and social crisis?
- How do arts and culture influence integration positively, and how does integration work diversify audiences and artistic discourse?
- How do populism, xenophobia, and global cultural conflict impact arts and culture, freedom of expression and the mobility of creators?

The research book that you are holding in your hands is one of the tools created that will help you to find the answers to the above questions. The research

book offers a multidisciplinary view on the projects as it analyses the processes of the artistic creations and art residencies organised during the project. It gathered the artists, citizens, cultural producers and academics in one place - where each individual was immersed in the process of dialogue, creation and observation. Those who were observing (academics) gave us an insight into the process explaining the initial aim and the result that was achieved. Reading their analysis, you will be able to return to the time when the artwork was made or when the artist was trying to make it - and will get a sense of the complexity of the process and transformation that occurs when creation is in flow. The findings, the conclusion, the take-home messages offered in the reports are the starting point for our future discussions, advocacy and policy-making within the context of integration and intercultural dialogue.

When reading the reports, you will be able to observe the concept of integration on a small scale - a micro level: where you have the artists as the “practitioners” trying to create connections between people and discuss humour. The outcome of their work reflects that of their micro integration policy created at a certain time and space in the project. If we step off the micro level and observe it on the macro level - the conclusions are similar. You have the policy makers (the project idea), the practitioners (artists that implement the project idea), the people included/the society (participants in the project workshop) and the policy outcome (the project idea outcome). Borderline Offensive used art as a social bridge to create integration practice and in doing so - it pointed to the most relevant questions of the EU's integration policy.

Small groups that existed within a society at the beginning of the integration path can merge into a big group if concrete activities/policy plans/practices are put in place - to foster social integration. These activities/policy plans/practices need to be a mix of formal and informal approaches to create a sense of familiarity. Familiarity is important - amongst ourselves and with the context where we perform. To build the sense of familiarity, it is necessary to win sufficient support from the environment. It is a process concerning the whole of society and not only the new members of the society. In that process people can be challenged to step out of their comfort zone - and that challenge can bring results. But it must include the entire society: not only one part of it. Each new member brings something new to the context and the sense of familiarity changes as a result - so in order to understand this change every member needs to participate. The context/society/policy must not be restricted but flexible and open to social changes and temporality so that can easily be adapted to the needs as they arise.

One must be aware of society's failings. That is the beauty of social awareness. An artist, a policy maker, a new member of society, an old member of society - everyone can fail. It is necessary to have an awareness of this and to enter the process knowing that you will fail, and that every failure you make will bring a better society. The awareness of failure lies in the flexibility and fluidity with which we need to live. The question is how quickly can we adapt and react to the failure that we recognise?

Our societies and our identities are fluid. This is why we need humour. Humour and laughter can bring people together and can divide them. Humour is a connector and a divider. Humour is our chance to recognise our failure. Embrace it as an intimate whisper of empathy. Humour not only has the strength to dehumanise but also change people for the better and question dominant positions of power.







# Redrawing the borders of “We” – Humour & Artistic workshops as a means of the formation of intercultural relations

*Ylva Svensson*

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*The following report has been informed by the observation of Borderline Offensive activities in Sweden, to which Ylva Svensson had direct access to.*

*The activities in Sweden started in an artistic residency that took place between 1st and 10th June 2018. The artistic residency was hosted by the Nordic Watercolour Museum, and produced in cooperation with the municipality of Tjörn. The initial question of the residency was: how can humour and art help us to amuse each other and build relationships?*

*The artists involved were: Abduljabbar Alsuhibi, an actor and cultural activist, living in Sweden, originally from Yemen; the anonymous group Creative Destruction, a street and guerilla artistic collective from Sofia, Bulgaria; Ivana Šáteková, a visual and new media artist from Bratislava, Slovakia; and Omar Abi Azar, a theatre maker and director from Beirut, Lebanon.*

*As part of the artistic residency, a 2-day creative workshop for local youth was organised, targeting both newcomers (asylum seekers or refugees) and native-born citizens.*

*The workshop included creative exercises (sometimes ridiculous, sometimes practical) involving drawing and writing, creating stories and acting them out, as well as asking participants to draft a message taken from their experience*

*and share it with society, posted on a memento designed by them: an original t-shirt.*

*Later on, between 9th-18th August 2019, the activities continued with an arts exhibition at Röda Sten Konsthall, that included the return of some of the artists who had taken part in the 2018 artistic residency, as well as new artists that were part of Borderline Offensive residencies in other countries: Abduljabbar Alsuhibi, Ivana Šáteková and Omar Abi Azar, with The Museum of Real History, Petko Dourmana, with Three Migrants on a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler), Darinka Pop-Mitic with The Long Heavy Road, as well as Škart, with Paper Puppet Poetry.*

*All the artists gave an artist talk and hosted participatory workshops as a part of the exhibition. Darinka Pop-Mitic and Škart even had the opportunity to mediate creative workshops with local children from Vänersborg – where Sweden's biggest accommodation centre for asylum seekers and refugees is located. These workshops took place in cooperation with Timjan Youth Culture House, as well as Grupp av Knoppar, a cultural association founded and run by asylum seekers. These workshops invited participants to work together on creating and drawing storyboards to make their own fanzine, and later on to direct their own paper puppet play and animated documentary.*

*Due to the ethical concerns of conducting research involving children, Ylva Svensson focused her observations on the project activities of 2018.*

## **Introduction**

A Swedish comedian once said that people on earth will not be united as one until there is an attack from outer space. The question is, what can we do in the meantime whilst waiting for the aliens? In this report, results from an integration project are presented in which people from different backgrounds interacted in an artistic workshop for one week in Sweden, the summer of 2018. The aim of this report is to explore whether interacting and laughing together can make people feel connected and integrated, and thereby redraw the borders of the in- and out-groups. If so, what aspects of the workshop hinder and what aspects facilitate these processes?

## **Theoretical background**

Several psychological processes can explain why intercultural relations do not just take place automatically. First, human brains are designed to categorize and we have a tendency to divide people we meet into in- and out-groups, for example based on cultural/ethnic background (Tajfel, 1969). Furthermore, we tend to judge people from the in-group and their behaviour more favorably,

and we overestimate how similar “we” are to “them”. This is referred to as the in-group bias (Tajfel, 1969). Secondly, contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than between dissimilar people. The homophily principle suggests that we have a tendency to associate and bond with others similar to ourselves, and that similarity breeds connection (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). As result, people’s social networks are often homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics, with homophily in race and ethnicity being the strongest divider. Thus, when given a choice we tend to select friends who we perceive to be similar to us.

To overcome these processes, we need to make active efforts. In- and out-group categorisations are fluid and can shift. We never only belong to one category, and the aspect of who we are that is considered to be most salient depends on the context, the situation and how well the others know us. Thus, in the right circumstances new in-groups might be formed. Furthermore, contact between people from different ethnical or cultural backgrounds is a necessary first step for meaningful relations to form, but it is not enough. The Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) suggests that contact should be repeated, be based on a shared aim, include intergroup cooperation, take place between people of equal status, and be supported by leading authorities in order to reduce prejudice against the out-group. Thus, cooperation and personal interaction, formal and informal, between group members would support learning about each other and the formation of cross-group friendships (Allport, 1954).

### **The function of humour in intercultural relations**

Allport’s Contact hypothesis has been the base for the most diversity and multicultural initiatives (Rocke, 2015), some of which have used humour as a component. For example, Rocke (2015) studied the use of humour by workshop facilitators in a classroom. Results showed that the workshop facilitators used humour to bridge differences between the workshop participants, to deal with conflicts that arose, to challenge a participant who made a derogatory comment by using humour (gentle teasing) without causing the individual to feel shame. Rocke (2015) then concluded that humour could be used to make the classroom more open and bring people together, as humour offered an opportunity to view differences as generative.

Interpersonal humour refers to the use of humour to enhance one’s relationships with others. Humour can have different functions depending on the type of relationship. In dyads, humour can be used to increase the other’s feelings of well-being, reduce conflicts and strengthen ties between individuals, and

increase one's attractiveness to the other. In larger groups, humour can also be used to raise the morale of group members, enhance group cohesiveness and identity, create an atmosphere of enjoyment, and to reinforce group norms (Martin et al., 2003). Humour often serves as "a function of regulating social interactions and maintaining social harmony and stability" (Martin, 2007, p. 116), and humour can be used to ease tensions and create a safe place for dialogue across cultural differences (Rocke, 2015).

However, while humour can bring people closer and create a secure environment, there is also a risk that people will feel humiliated and hurt (Martin, 2007). Thus, attempting to use humour might be risky. The successful use of humour can increase the sense of status in both new and existing relationships, but unsuccessful attempts at humour (e.g., inappropriate jokes) can harm this sense of status (Bradford Bitterly, Wood Brooks & Schweitzer, 2017). The use of humour could then be an issue of balance, one that is sometimes difficult to find.

### **The overall project**

Artists from 12 European and Middle Eastern countries explore issues of migration, sociological contact zones, intercultural conflict and dialogue, collective identity-building, and community cohesion in contemporary Europe. A humorous and participatory arts approach was employed to guide interactions, dialogue, and cooperation between the migrant and host communities in seven European countries. The overall aim was to use culture and art as resources to develop critical thinking, social wellbeing and peaceful inter-community relations, within and beyond Europe.

The overall project was supported by Creative Europe (the European Union's programme for the cultural and creative sectors, 2014-2020), and the local, Swedish part of the project was supported by Västra Götaland Regionen, and other national/regional sources, such as for the location of the project, the Nordic Watercolour Museum.

### **The Swedish part of the project**

The workshop took place in Skärhamn, Sweden, over two days in June, 2018. The workshop was situated at the Nordic Watercolour Museum, situated on the island of Tjörn, 70 kilometers north of Gothenburg on the Swedish west coast. The museum hosts, besides art exhibitions, art projects and activities for children and the youth.

The aim of the local part of the project was to create an opportunity for the newly arrived youth and local youth to meet through an art and humour

approach, facilitated by artists from different countries, interacting around issues of belonging, migration and integration.

Four artists were in charge of the current workshop; an actor and film director from Yemen, a visual artist from Slovakia working on nationalism and identity issues, a theater director from Lebanon who works with marginalized groups, and an artistic collective of two from Bulgaria.

The timing of the workshop was appropriate. During 2015-2016 Sweden, as did many other European countries, experienced an influx of a great numbers of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, due to the unstable situations mainly in Syria, Somalia, Eritrea and Afghanistan. In only 2015, 35,369 unaccompanied minors sought asylum in Sweden (compared to 1336 in 2017). Most of them, 88% were granted asylum (migrationsinfo, 2020).

## **The current report**

The aim of the proposed research project is to explore humour as a means of social integration and of the formation of meaningful and equal relationships. It is asked whether activities including an art and humour approach can change the boundaries of the in- and the out-groups and promote meaningful interactions, in line with the contact hypothesis. The specific research questions that guided the research project were;

- Can interacting and laughing together during a workshop make people feel connected and integrated, and thereby change the in- and out-group compositions?
- If so, what aspects of the workshop hinder and what aspects facilitate new meaningful relationships being formed?

## **Method**

### **Research design and procedures**

A mixed-method approach (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010) was judged to best fit the research aim. This included a survey that was distributed to all participants at the start and at the end of the project. All activities were observed and notes were taken about the processes and activities at all times, both formal and informal. The group compositions, and the way the participants positioned themselves during the workshop activities and during breaks were noted using “social mapping”. These included drawings of who sat next to whom, who talked to whom, and who laughed together with whom etc. in order to explore the social processes of the in- and out-groups. Finally, at some points throughout the workshop, oral recordings were taken and these

were transcribed and analysed for shared themes using thematic analyses (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The language spoken was English but an interpreter was present at all times during the workshop (Swedish/English). Three project leaders were also present at all times, and one moviemaker recorded with video the workshop and short interviews for the documentation movie, and all were present throughout all the activities.

Data was collected by one female researcher from a Swedish background and with an academic background in psychology (the author of the research report). The researcher was present at all times and did not participate in any of the formal activities but sat in the back of the room, observing and taking field notes. During informal breaks and lunch/dinner, the researcher walked around and observed, talked to the participants when appropriate, and made notes and drew social maps.

A description of the activities during the two-day workshop is presented in Table 1. In total, the first day consisted of interactive activities, both in the larger group and in assigned smaller groups. The second day mainly consisted of activities carried out by the participants individually. The workshop ended with a joint dinner.

**Table 1. Description of all activities, formal and informal, during day 1 and day 2.**

Day 1	Description of activity	Seating
Activity 1	Sharing circle, say name and one word to express current emotional state	Everyone in one large circle
Activity 2	Emotional Quire, expressing feelings and repeating together, being in "harmony" with each other	Everyone in one large circle
Activity 3	Three texts in different texts in different languages, re-write by marking some words, deleting others and changing the meaning of the text	Around a table, free seating
Lunch		Free, spread out in smaller groups

Activity 4	Frozen poses, mirroring each other	Dyads, free but in a dyad with someone you do not know from before
Activity 5	Drawing characters, one draws the head, folds the paper and passes to the next person who draws the neck etc. Naming and presenting the final characters.	
Activity 6	Write individual lists with 6 points – “things I hate”, “things I have forgotten” and “things that makes me laugh”	Around two tables, free seating
Activity 7	Create a scene based on the characters and lists in activities 5 and 6. Make a plot where one character dies in the end. Play the scene, max 1 min in front of everyone.	Groups of 3, assigned by the artists, new groups formed twice during this activity.
Activity 8	Informal break: strawberries and coffee	Free seating, one big group
Activity 9	Sharing circle, summary of day one. Everyone says one word about the day	All in one large circle
<b>Day 2</b>		
Activity 10	Sharing circle, one stands in the middle of the circle and says something while having eye contact with the others  Everyone is repeating what is said by the person in the middle, three times out loud.	Free positioning within the circle  Two new participants, two participants decided to not participate
Activity 11	Prints on t-shirts, one t-shirt each, told to write political, funny and ironic statements	Free seating, everyone is spread out everyone is working individually
Activity 12	Pizza dinner, final word by everyone	Informal, free seating, outside

## Participants

Participants were recruited through official channels, media and via youth workers in the specific community where the workshop would take place. Some were also recruited directly through the location of the workshop, The Nordic Watercolour Museum.

A total of 15 participant took part in the workshop, of which 11 were part of all activities over both days, and are subjects for the current report. The participants ranged in age between 14 and 70, and 4 self-identified as male, and 7 identified as female. When asked about their country of birth, 8 answered that they were born in Sweden, and of them 5 identified as being Swedish, 1 as Swedish-Greek, one as half Swedish – half Serbian, and one as “Swedish/European”. Of the three participants who were born in countries other than Sweden, two were born in Afghanistan and one in Nigeria. All of them had been in Sweden for 3 years, and one identified as being “Swedish/Iranian”, one as “brown, black hair” and one as “Nigerian”.

## Data collection

**Survey.** A survey was administered to all participants of the workshop at the beginning of the workshop and at the end of day two. The survey included measures about in- and out-group orientation, in the way that everyone was asked to describe the group, if they had known anyone from before, if they felt part of an in-group, and/or an out-group, and if so what these groups were based on (shared background, age, gender, same humour, common language etc.). The after-survey also included questions about changed group compositions, whether new groups were formed, and if so what these groups were based on, and questions about lessons learned about oneself, and/or others. Finally, questions about laughing during the workshop were asked and included aspects of laughing together, jokes, and being or watching someone being laughed at.

**Observations of the use of humour.** The use of humour, and laughter that was observed during the workshop. Also, the language aspect was also observed related to the utility of humour and notes were taken about the types of joke that were made, and what types of joke people laughed or did not laugh at, when people laughed, if they laughed together, with or at someone.

**Social network mapping.** Social mapping was conducted at six time points in the course of the workshop, in the structured, formal activities during the actual workshop and in the informal activities such as the breaks or lunchtime when participants were free to select their own peers and be seated



where and how they wanted. The researcher drew the positioning of all participants on a piece of paper, using markups based on the self-defined in-groups at the beginning of the workshop.

**Recordings.** One recording was made using the recording function on a smart phone. The recording was made during the sharing circle at the end of day one. It was transcribed and analysed using thematic analyses.

## **Ethical considerations**

Participants were informed verbally by the researcher orally at the start of the workshop about the aim of the research, what kind of data would be collected, how it would be used and stored, and that no results would be presented at an individual level to ensure their anonymity. Furthermore, they were assured of the confidential treatment of their answers and that participation was voluntary. No one declined to participate, and all the participants gave their active consent by filling out a contact information form, separate from the survey.

The participants were asked not to sign the survey questionnaires with their real names but to come up with a “nickname” and sign both the pre- and post- workshop questionnaire with the chosen nickname, making it possible to match the two questionnaires without identifying who had written what. Due to the small number of participants, background data was collected using a separate survey, thereby assuring that answers could not be matched to a specific participant.

Allmost all participants were above the age of 15, except for one participant who was 14. As this participant came along with some of his/her friends, it was not possible to ask for parental consent prior to the workshop. The participant assured that he/she had parental consent to be part of the workshop, and chose to stay in the study when informed about the possibility to not be included in the research project but to still participate in the workshop.

## **Results**

### **Survey Results**

**Group composition changes.** The participants were asked, both in the pre- and post-survey, a question on how to describe the group composition. In the pre-survey, 3 out of the 11 participants answered “as one big group”, 7 “as several smaller groups”, 1 as “two groups”. To the follow-up question of what these groups were based on, the participants answered that this is due either

to knowing each other from before, being of the same age, having the same interests or speaking the same language. In the post-survey, distributed at the end of the final formal activity and before the dinner, 7 participants answered the same question with “as one big group”, 2 with “as no groups at all, only individuals”; 1 answered with “as several smaller groups” and the other “as two groups”. Thus, comparing the pre- and post- answers, there seems to have been a shift as more participants perceived the group to be composed of one big group by the end of the workshop.

**New friends.** In the post-survey the participants were asked a question about new friendships formed during the workshop, and one question about feeling closer and more connected to the group. All 11 participants answered that they have found new friends, and nine answered that they felt closer to the group at the end of the workshop. Those who felt closer to the group were asked the follow-up question of why they thought that was the case and their answers mainly concerned the nature of the activities, doing things and spending time together, getting to know each other, and the openness of others. The example answer sums it up perfectly:

*“Because the activities we did forced us together and you had to cooperate”*

**Lesson learned.** that is what they learned about themselves: 9 participants answered that they had learned something new about themselves and 2 had not. Those who reported learning something about themselves mainly described lessons about daring and being brave, and about realizing what it is to be a social person, example answers being: *“that I can” “be more daring” “to be brave”* and *“that I love culture and social interactions ☺”* and *“that I like being part of a group”*.

Concerning lessons learned about others, 8 participants answered that they had learned something new about others, 1 had not, and 2 did not answer the question. Of those who learned something about others, the lessons mainly concerned new and different perspectives, ways of being and living, and the value of the others. The answers were: *“that we are very different shy”*, *“that everyone is so lovely”*; *“that there are extremely smart and nice people working with workshops”*; *“about others interests and lives”*; *“the interests and what drives others”*; *“how they look at the world and how they interact with others”* *“that everyone is super nice”* and *“to have eye contact”*.

**Laughing together:** 9 participants said that they had laughed together with others during the workshop, 4 participants said that they had laughed at someone, 2 that they had been laughed at, 7 participants said that they had made a joke. No one said that they had felt uncomfortable due to being laughed at, or when someone else made a joke, or that someone made a joke about something one should not joke about. One participant answered that

he/she had not understood a joke that had been made, and wrote that this was due to language differences.

## **Observations of the use and function of humour**

The use and function of humour were analysed based on the observations and notes taken throughout the workshop. The examples of jokes and laughter and the different functions they played in connection to the different activities, both formal and informal, will be summarized here.

One function that the use of humour played was to reduce tension during some of the activities, especially at the beginning of the workshop. Laughter could then be seen as the individual expression of insecurity, nervousness and of feeling uncomfortable, but laughing in the same way in an interaction with others could be seen as a way to connect and to share the atmosphere and the mood of others. Responding to insecure laughter with insecure laughter could be seen as one way of indicating closeness, like saying: I feel you, you are not alone, and thereby sharing responsibility for the situation. In that sense, humour functions to connect people in insecure situations.

Though the participants said funny things on many occasions, few actual jokes were made. One exception to this is from activity 7 during the first day, when the participants made short theatre plays in groups of three. One participant then said: "*Look at grandma, she is a pro*" when one of the older women in the group was acting like a youth. Everyone, including the woman laughed at this comment. Another example of a direct joke, one that failed, happened during the first day when one of the artists/leaders made a joke about his background being the reason why he is lazy. The joke was told in front of everyone and was followed by total silence and confused looks since no one seemed to understand it. The artist tried to explain it by referring to his background, but he gave up when no one still followed and said: "*that was a joke... never mind...*". This scene could be seen as an example of when humour functions as a divider due to cultural differences. At other times, some participants made private jokes to the person next to them at which they laughed, sometimes in a language not understood by everyone which could create a feeling of exclusion amongst the rest. Then humour functions as a divider due to language differences.

Another example of how humour was used, also concerning language differences again, comes from activity 7, the short theatre plays. At one point one participant said: "*I don't mob*" instead of saying "*I don't bully*" (bully in Swedish is "mobba") which made everyone laugh. This line was then picked up by the others and used several times afterwards outside of the activity by different participants, and always resulted in laughter from the entire group.

This could be seen as an example of humour functioning as a social reinforcement, and the line helped everyone to connect to something common and shared. It is however unclear how the person who originally made this mistake experienced this situation, but he/she laughed together with the others.

The workshop leaders/artists used humour in different ways. For example, they said things like: “we are not laughing at each other, we are laughing together” during the different activities. They also made jokes out loud in front of everyone, thereby seeking to include everyone and connect the group with a shared cause to laugh and moment of understanding.

Finally, humour was also used by the participants to reinforce and support one another. For example, encouraging laughter and remarks (such as: “*Haha, that one looks really funny!*”) were used when participants showed their results in the different activities, like the texts in activity 3, the made-up characters in activity 5 and the theater plays (activity 6).

## **Thematic analyses**

As presented in Table 1, day one ended with a sharing circle. Everyone, including the artists and the workshop organizers gathered in a ring, facing each other and one of the organizers asked everyone to “share the meaningful interactions that they had today, and if something had bothered them”. All answers were transcribed and analysed with thematic analyses (Braun & Clark, 2006). Three themes were identified based on the comments made by the participants at the end of the first day.

### **Theme 1: participation as a means of personal growth**

This concerned the personal development of the participants as a result of taking part in the workshop. Several of the participants mentioned stepping out of their comfort zones and described themselves as shy and introverted. Some also mentioned stage fright and others described feeling insecure about being with the other participants and what could happen, especially before the workshop started.

*“I liked most in the beginning when we started with the introduction and the voice thing... because I am a little shy, you know, so... I think it was difficult to do...”*

However, all of them also mentioned overcoming these feelings, resulting in a sense of pride and courage. Those who had talked about first being unsure about attending the workshop then felt happy that they had, or in the words of one young female participant;

*“... I was not sure I would come or not, like there are new people and you were not even sure what it would be and you know, and who would be there and ... but I am really happy that I came because all of you are super amazing people and it was such a good experience getting out of the comfort zone and just getting to know each other a little bit, it was really amazing.”*

## **Theme 2: the activities as a means of becoming one group**

The second theme included those experiences of the activities which had been fun, involved laughing and sharing funny moments. One female participant expressed it like this:

*“Especially I enjoyed laughing together today, I think that was great – thanks”*

Some also mentioned that the activities were successful in bringing them all together because as everyone participated and was engaged, not just the leaders, and since there had been a nice dynamic and feeling of generosity in the group. Many referred to specific activities to which they attributed feelings of connectedness and that there were certain aspects of these activities that brought them together. A male participant expressed it like this:

*“I really enjoyed all the exercises that we did, it really helped us to ... get together.”*

One thing that many participants seemed to enjoy was the group's diversity and how the workshop gave them the opportunity to meet different people, not only in terms of background but also of experience and of different ages. One male, a recently arrived participant ended the first day by saying:

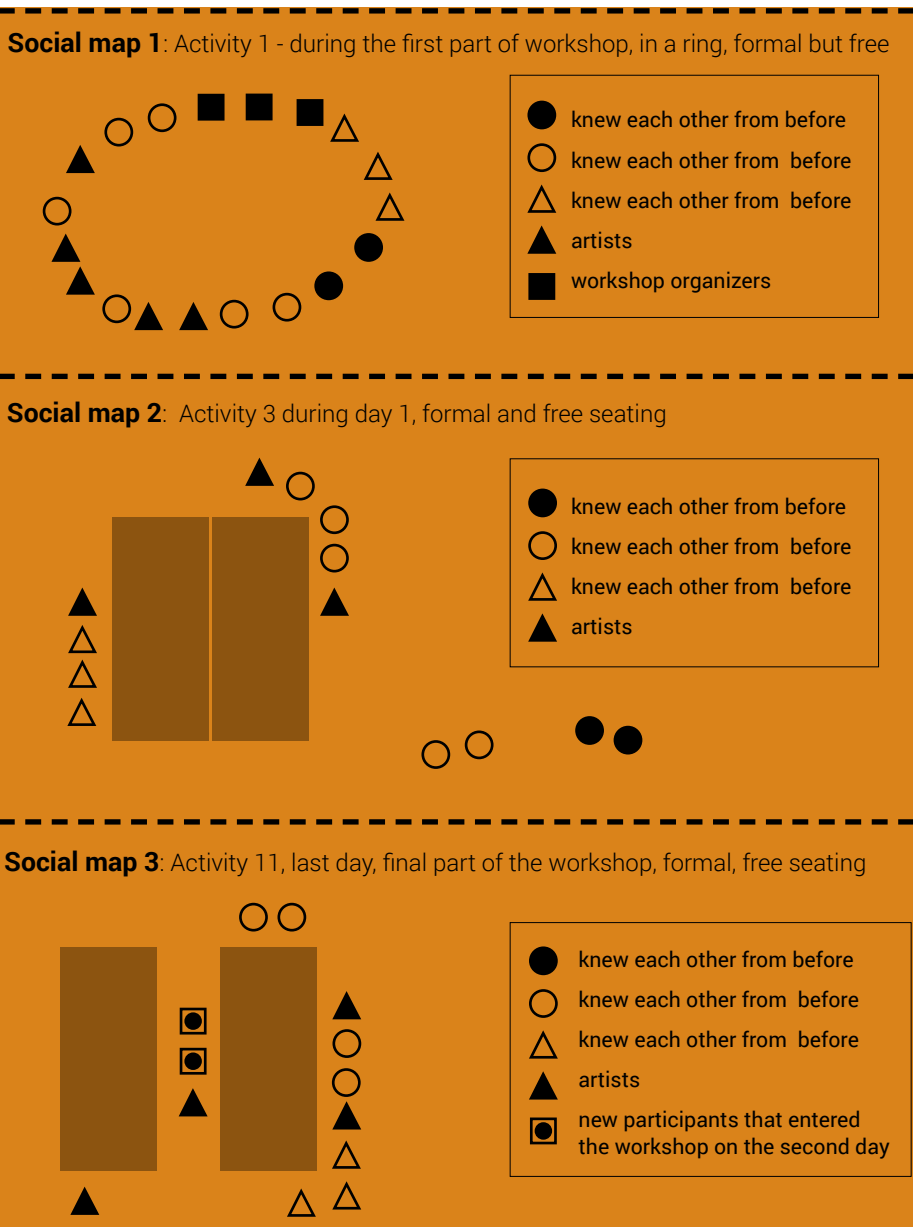
*“I really learned something from you, and I liked especially that we are from different parts of the world, and we are young, very young and ... a little older... (laughter) ...it was awesome for me.”*

## **Theme 3: political aspects**

The third theme included taking different views on the political aspects of some of the activities. Some participants did not want talk about such issues and said that doing so made them feel uncomfortable while others viewed it up as a positive aspect. One episode on day one especially highlights this ambiguity in which one of the young female participants and one of the artists started a discussion during the activity about political issues and continued it over lunch. This was mentioned by both the young woman and the artist at the sharing circle at the end of day one. The participant said that she was bothered by the fact that not everyone wanted to talk about politics, and the female artist replied:

“...I actually really enjoyed the conversation about politics (big laugh from the group). I was really surprised, I was not sure if you are only 15... you know so many things and you have your own opinion and your own statement, and it was great to have lunch with you ...”

## Results of the Social mapping



Social maps were drawn up at six occasions during the workshop, covering both formal and informal activities over both days. All six maps were analysed in terms of how all the participants and different in-groups (those who knew each other from before) seated themselves, and how the artists positioned themselves in relation to the participants. Three maps are presented as examples in the figures below, to illustrate the different in-groups and how they change over time.

<<< maps

Look at the social map of the last formal activity (map 3) on the second and last day of the workshop, when seating was freely chosen. The assignment was to print t-shirts and activities took place in different parts of the room. This map is from the seating arrangement when the activity was first introduced and even though the participants moved about during the activity, they returned to this same seating arrangement when sitting at the table. As can be seen, the various groups have returned to their original groupings again, visualized in Social map 2, based on knowing each other from before the workshop.

This was the common pattern across all activities during the workshop since most participants returned to their in-group when the chance arose as in the lunch breaks or when the participants themselves formed working groups. A few participants remained close to their familiar in-groups throughout the workshop, partly due to language difficulties.

Based on all the social maps, new and temporary groups were formed throughout the workshop, especially during those formal activities when the groups were assigned. These groups fostered a spirit of interaction and of “forced” collaboration and the interactions continued to some extent after the formal activity ended and the assigned groups were dissolved.

The social maps highlight the role of the leaders/artists, as it became visible that they functioned as “social bridges” throughout the different activities by positioning themselves between two out-groups and inviting both groups into the conversations, as is visible in Social map 3. Additionally, on several occasions in the workshop, the artists sought out participants sitting by themselves and started conversations with them, thereby including them into the group.

## Discussion

The aim of this report was to explore humour as a means of social integration and of the formation of meaningful and new relationships. This was addressed by the two research questions, the first being: Can interacting and laughing together make people feel connected and integrated, and thereby change the in- and out-group compositions? Based on the combined results of the collected data, the answer seems to be: to some extent. Results from the social mapping suggest that new relationships can be formed, at least temporarily, and that groups that are assigned during formal activities “spill over” into informal and less structured activities. Most interestingly, new friendships seemed to be sought and formed when in the company of someone from an in-group, someone whom one already knows from before. These results could be understood based on the homophily hypothesis (McPhearson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). We tend to stay in the company of those whom we perceive to be similar to us, and interacting with others similar to us is easier and smoother because of a common ground, a shared language and background. That is, interactions with in-group members require less effort, less explanation and lead to fewer misunderstandings. Thus, it requires efforts to step out of the known and one’s comfort zone. This was further supported by the results because many of the participants mentioned feeling insecure and hesitant before or at the beginning of the workshop. The rewards for overcoming these fears are clearly expressed in the formation of new friendships, personal growth, and increased knowledge about one’s self and others.

Further, the results from the surveys shows that group compositions changed during the workshop and at the end of the workshop the participants perceived themselves to be part of one big group as compared to a part of the more and smaller groups before it started. All participants answered that they had made new friends and all but two participants said that they felt closer to the group by the end of the workshop. This supports the idea that cooperation and intergroup contact can change group compositions and facilitate the formation of new friendships, at least temporality.

The second research question concerned the aspects of workshop which hindered and facilitated the formation of new and meaningful relationships. The results show that the connections that formed were closely tied to the activities of the workshop. On the first day, the activities were group-based and included aspects of cooperation and a shared goal which brought the participants closer together and the appearance of initial out-group connections can be seen. During the breaks on the first day, the mixing of the in- and out-groups could be seen and at the end of the first day, the participants expressed strong feelings of connectedness. At the end of the second day, the activities



were more individual in nature and required no interaction or cooperation with others. This seems to have affected the feeling of connectedness and the experience of some participants was that there had been no groups but only separate individuals at the end of day two. This suggests that the actual activity is important to the experience of a shared in-group (a “we”) and to the feeling of connectedness to the other participants. Thus, in line with the Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) choosing activities with a common goal and a shared aim which require collaboration seems to be one aspect that promotes the formation of new and meaningful interactions.

Another important aspect of the chosen activities seems to be striking a balance between co-operation or working together and wanting too much freedom of choice in terms of social interactions. When given a free choice, most if not all of the participants fell back on their pre-existing social relations and if new groups were formed, they were exclusively formed during formal activities in which the groups were assigned. These spilled over into informal settings such as the discussions continued into the breaks. Thus, a mix of formal and informal, free and assigned groups might foster the situation in which new relationships are formed.

The results also showed that the topic related to the activities of the workshop seems to be important and that a balance should be sought when selecting the topic. Some of the activities encouraged the appearance of political and more serious issues. For example, the texts in Activity 3, the writing list in Activity 6 on day 1, and the t-shirt printing on day 2 (activity 11) opened up these issues but were not limited to them. Only one or two participants chose to discuss these issues whilst the others argued against doing so and some others chose more neutral topics. As these can be sensitive topics, it seems important to leave them open to interpretation and give the participants the freedom to decide their level of involvement in discussing them. At the same time, many stated “stepping out of their comfort zone” and personal growth as being what they had gained from the first day and the main lesson they had learned, as reported in the pre-survey, was to overcome insecurities. Thus, the activities that challenge the participants seem to facilitate the emergence of positive feelings, both about the self and others. Sharing and overcoming insecurity together with others in the same situation and supporting each other seems to foster a spirit of closeness and connectedness.

Laughter seems to have a double role in that it brings people together and closer to each other, while some jokes can divide the group if the joke is not understood by everyone (due to language or cultural differences) or if it is at someone’s expense. Thus, it seems that understanding the dynamics of humour and the appropriate types of humour that should be used is an

essential form of knowledge and skill for any facilitator (Rocke, 2015), or the workshop leaders in this case. Furthermore, the workshop leaders/artists played an important role in facilitating social integration by seeking to include everyone, making jokes and talking to everyone, spreading the “word” and making sure that everyone has a say and in functioning as “social bridges”.

### **Conclusion: Take-home-messages**

- We stick to the people we know and feel safe with, if given the choice
  - mixed groups should be assigned if possible during structured activities
- The type of activity is crucial – working together in groups, not individually fosters social interactions, with a shared goal - laughing together at the same thing, not scattered laughter in small groups in one’s own language and other goals
- Humour can function as a means of social integration, bringing people closer and fostering a feeling of “we”, but can also function as a divider; this is due to language differences or cultural differences, and when a joke is only told to some, thereby excluding others.
- The workshop leaders/artists can foster a spirit of social integration by functioning as “social bridges” and they can actively use humour to bring the participants closer together and create a common, shared goal

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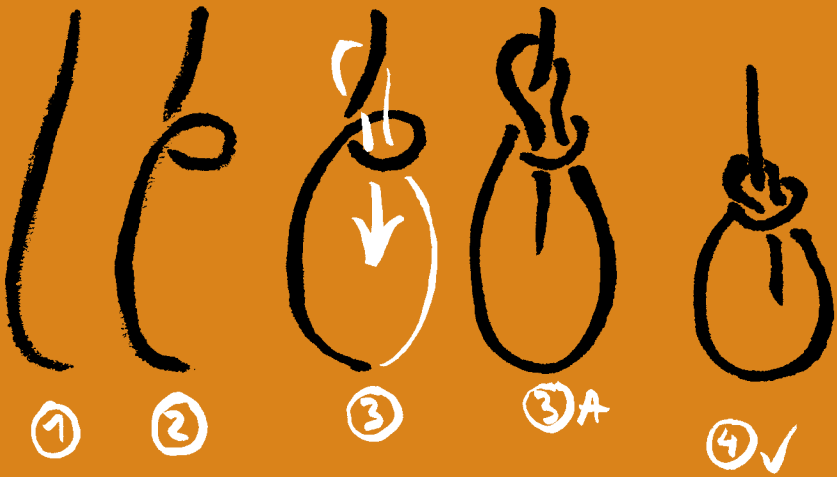
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# Borderline Offensive: how to overcome polarising propagandas

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*May 2021*



## Introduction

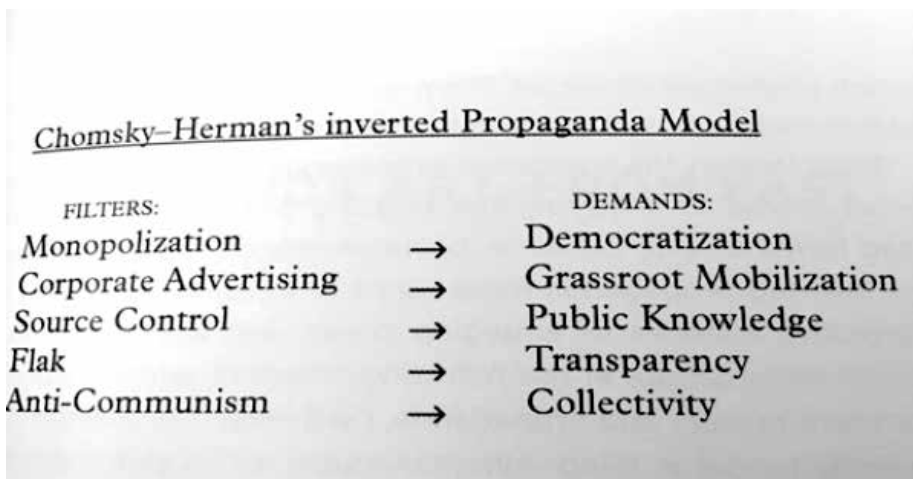
In this article, different theoretical approaches are offered to analyse the ways in which artistic activism deals with propaganda and to understand the role of humour as a strategy that seeks to undermine in general terms polarising propagandas. Written in the context of the platform Borderline Offensive, we will specifically focus on the outcomes of Borderline Offensive projects that took place in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Borderline Offensive is a transnational and transdisciplinary consortium of artists and artist organisations from numerous European countries. The platform received a grant for developing artistic strategies that use humour to counteract the way people become polarised in our contemporary societies. As stated in their own words: “We employ art, participation, and playful attitudes as tools for non-violent activism and creative transgression, in the fight against fear, populism, and existential anxiety”.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the role that Borderline Offensive’s projects can play in dealing with contemporary propaganda as the main cause for the polarised society that we find ourselves in today. These projects draw on laughter and playfulness as a means to bridge poles, to bring people together and to beat polarising propagandas. This article therefore poses the question how can humour bridge poles through artistic interventions? To answer this, we will examine polarisation and refer to some of the projects in the framework of Borderline Offensive – to picture what this can look like in the practice of contemporary artistic activism.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://borderlineoffensive.eu>

We will consider the following:

1. The propaganda approach of Jonas Staal, who thinks of popular propaganda as a way to combat elite propaganda. For Staal, every form of public communication is a performance of power. The emancipative role of art is to help grassroots propaganda in its struggle against state propaganda.
2. The dialogical approach of Vilém Flusser for whom dialogue is an important communication tool to counter the programming force of propaganda. For Flusser, there is no good 'grassroots' propaganda and bad 'state' propaganda, there is just a sound or unsound equilibrium between the programming force of propaganda and the dynamic force of dialogue. His approach exposes the intimate conversations that are instigated by artistic interventions.
3. By referring to some specific dialogical strategies that I pointed out in my PhD, strategies that are capable of unmasking propaganda, I will show how these strategies create awareness by alienating the dominant message.
4. The work of Sigmund Freud on humour and jokes not only to understand the value of laughter, but also the mechanisms that create laughter. Laughter can be an additional force in one of the mechanisms of alienation: that of exaggeration.



## 1. Through inverted propaganda

In 2020, the Dutch artist and theoretician Jonas Staal wrote a PhD on propaganda art in the 21st century. For him propaganda is the performance of power. He claims that all public communication is propaganda because it inherently involves power: the power to control the message and the way it is transmitted. Staal is interested in both the propagandistic nature of the public

message and the propagandistic nature of the infrastructure that makes it possible for a certain message to be spread and repeated. He writes: “it [the notion of performance] relates to performance as an enactment: the activation of infrastructures of power (...) with the aim of constructing reality after a specific set of interests.” When it comes to the transformations it sets in motion, propaganda functions both on a macro and micro level.

Let us take the corona crisis as an example. Here we are told daily to keep at a distance from others, wash our hands and avoid large crowds. This is propaganda that is intervening on a micro level in our day-to-day lives through actions; disciplining us until we are no longer aware of the disciplinary strategy. Television and radio campaigns train us to integrate these rules into our routines. At the same time, propaganda is used on a macro level to transform industries and transport companies. The same principles are applied to them, and they must integrate these principles into their business plans. Propagandistic narratives are also needed to explain why KLM, our Dutch airline company, has been rescued and perhaps also HEMA (the Netherlands’ most “Dutch” high street retailer) while the culture industry is only given a small amount of money; why KLM may still seat lots of travellers on its planes while theatres can seat only a few in their venues. Propaganda – being the power play to get things done by influencing the minds of the people – is present everywhere, all of the time. Staal speaks of the propaganda struggle: “What we understand as reality can be defined, to a certain extent, by the outcome of conflicting propagandas, by what I term as the propaganda struggle”. (Staal 2019: 45)

Staal’s definition of propaganda stems from the model of Chomsky and Herman from the 1980s. He uses their model to present a counter model of propaganda. For Jonas Staal, as an activist, there is an elitist propaganda that comes from a monopolized position and is based on lies, and there is a popular propaganda that is transparent, that comes from the people and is based on shared knowledge. The inverted model for popular propaganda lies at the heart of several of the practices he has developed or facilitated.

Staal 2019: 47

According to Staal, propaganda always has an artistic component. Propaganda as the power behind the construction of reality needs artists to make ideas visible and public. Artists can use several means to translate ideas into art: a painting, a graphic novel or architectural design, a theatre play, a film, or even a video game. (Staal 2019: 5)

New (hybrid) genres may also emerge as a consequence of propagandistic counter strategies that challenge the dominant propaganda. See, for example,

Staal's New World Summit, an artistic and political organisation that develops parliaments for stateless and blacklisted organisations. These parliaments are held in thoroughly well-thought-out environments designed by Staal in collaboration with fellow artists and architects. The settings provide a platform for repressed voices to speak, and to be heard.

Staal needed an inverted propaganda model to acknowledge, legitimise and analyse the actions in liberational, revolutionary and popular mass movements. He is most likely thinking here of the powerful and sudden rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, propelled by footage taken with a smart phone, showing George Floyd pinned to the ground with a knee to his neck; an act that ultimately resulted in his death. The footage quickly spread through the media and provoked much outrage, particularly amongst the younger generation.

Outlined below are five characteristics of the inverted popular propaganda model that are illustrated through the uprising of the Black Power Movement:

1. Inverted popular propaganda is a countermovement that challenges the dominant position of monopolized elite propaganda which wants to control a given structure of reality. "Popular power demands that we overturn and reorganize these conditions of ownership." (Staal 1999: 47) This ownership is transferred to the people. He calls this democratisation.

*Black Lives Matter is a popular mass movement that calls a stop to the elite propaganda of white supremacy, which is present in all layers of society.*

2. "From the filter of corporate advertisement, aimed at redirecting mainstream narratives through private interest, we move to the demand of grassroots mobilization, in which narratives emerge from an overt base rather than being covertly imposed upon them." (Staal 1999: 47)

*In response to the form of dominant public communication in which white supremacy is transferred and perpetuated, people bring their own texts and images to demonstrations in the public space, expressing their views and emotions.*

3. The knowledge is open to everyone and shared by everyone. There is no source control, no censorship.

*There are numerous websites, books and films that openly share all the knowledge there is on the discrimination of black people.*

4. "From the misinformation campaigns in the flak filter, we move to the demand of transparency in relation to the source and interests invested in the construction of a particular reality." (Staal 1999: 47)

*In these websites, books and films, the power structures at play that lie behind the discrimination of black people are revealed and made transparent.*



5. Collectivity challenges the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. Popular propagandas seek new, inclusive communalities based on collective interest.

*The Black Lives Matter movement is open to everybody and aims for an inclusive society.*

Borderline Offensive shares many principles with the popular inverted propaganda model. Although the programme itself does not come from the people but from Borderline Offensive, several projects:

1. give space to groups of people
2. to share their stories and perspectives
3. that are open to and shared by everyone who is interested
4. in transparent procedures
5. and in an inclusive way.

I will here elaborate on one of the projects – The Children's Canvas – developed in a brainstorming session by Sikko Cleveringa (CAL-XL) together with Rosa Damen (Home for All), Linda van der Knaap (Changing Stories), and the Dutch artist Ida van der Lee (Studio Ritual Art).

During an event in the Netherlands, which aimed to raise awareness on the problems in refugee camps such as Moria, a huge canvas was laid out on the ground in the public space. The canvas depicted small drawings made by children living in the camps, imagining a safe place to stay (based on an already existing poster project organised by Home for All). Next to the drawings were photocopied images of their real living conditions. The audience was asked to cut a figure out of these photos, to symbolically remove the child from a bad and dangerous situation. Only after drawing the child in the safety of their imagined housing situation, was the audience allowed to keep the cut-outs. This example illustrates all the principles of the inverted propaganda model.

1. It challenges the popular notion imposed by the government that the way in which things are organised in refugee camps is acceptable. It draws attention to a difficult reality.
2. The activity aims to mobilise the audience by not only showing the kinds of houses the kids in the camps dream of, but also by asking people to symbolically perform an act of help. The narrative emerges in a grass-roots movement out of the activities of the public.
3. Social media shows a multitude of images of the camps made by the refugees themselves. Sometimes (as was recently the case in the Greek camps) they are even forbidden to make these photographs public.

4. All the people who are investing and fighting for a better place for refugees to stay in do this completely not only openly but also out of a sense of humanity, not for financial or political gain.
5. This event tries to overcome the dichotomy of ‘us’ in the West and ‘them’ as fortune seekers or criminals. They show children who, like all children, simply want a proper house to live in and they motivate us to empathise with these children, as we should do with all children. In the drawing on the pavement, the houses drawn by the children are connected with the children drawn by the public.

Photos by Sikko Cleveringa, event in Arnhem, March 2021

Staal’s division of elitist propaganda from grassroots propaganda runs the risk



of becoming a way to discern between bad propaganda and good propaganda but not all grassroots movements qualify as being good. Think, for example, of the grassroots movement that was supported by Donald Trump and which ended with the violent attack on the U.S Congress or the bottom-up movements in the Netherlands and other European countries that deny the existence of COVID-19. Besides, it is disputable whether one form of propaganda can only be combatted by another form in the propaganda struggle, as Staal put it.

For the media theoretician Vilém Flusser, propaganda is not good or bad in itself. It just needs to be balanced by another form of communication which he refers to as the dialogue. Flusser works with the opposition between discursive communication and dialogical communication. There are some similarities between Flusser’s opposition and Staal’s opposition of elite and popular. Both seek a dynamic to counterbalance propaganda as a form of communication in which the masses are manipulated. For Flusser this is the dialogue. For Jonas Staal this is another form of propaganda. In Flusser’s case,

propaganda can and must be challenged, not by a form of counterpropaganda but by a form of communication that is not propagandistic but dialogical.

## 2. Through dialogical strategies

In my doctoral thesis '*Can an image say "I", the dialogical process of meaning of the public image*', I greatly relied on the opposition proposed by Vilém Flusser between two forms of communication which he called discursive and dialogical.

Discursive communication is a one-way-traffic communication, and it is sent from one to many through all kinds of 'broadcasted' public communication. It can come from a stage, from radio or television; in the 21st century it very often comes from Twitter and although Twitter provides the opportunity to respond and retweet, the platform is increasingly used for broadcasting alone – Donald Trump being the one who took the discursive (read propagandistic) power of Twitter to its maximum. The idea behind discursive communication is that the message should be understood as is meant. That is no response, no counterpoint is needed. We recognise these programming and disciplining forms of communication in the army, in certain educational regimes, in strong patriarchal families, and in advertisement and propaganda. The one who sends the message wants an obedient response and to have the thing done. All societies need this form of communication as it gives people direction, something to hold on to, and something that binds them together. Barak Obama's slogan *Yes we can* was also a form of discursive communication. In the Black Lives Matter movement, thousands of people could identify with the quote *I can't breathe*. In this very moment, Dutch and other societies are being flooded with discursive messages that programme us to keep our distance, to not shake hands. By constantly repeating a message, the message is internalised and programmes our actions. The simpler the message, the more likely it will do its job. Using the same strategies, extreme right-wing parties who thrive on spreading fear repeat messages that provoke polarising ideas. The most well-known Dutch example of this is Geert Wilders from the PVV who repeatedly refers to headscarves as 'kopvodden'. 'Kop' is the word for head, but really means the head of an animal. And 'vod' is a rag, a tatter. By repeating this word as much as he can, he brings it into our way of thinking and talking about the headscarves of Islamic women. We call this framing. At the other end of the Dutch political spectrum, the former leader of the Party for Animals concluded each speech by repeating that we need to put a stop to the industrial farming of animals. This is also discursive communication. Discursive communication helps us to change things for the better; it binds people together, but it can also bring about polarisation

when used to oppose groups to each other. Yet, there is one thing this form of communication never does: that is to stimulate the process of autonomous thought in the audience. Discursive communication is programming communication, and that is why it can also be called propaganda.

Flusser claims that a sound society also needs the opposite form of communication, the dialogue. In dialogical forms of communication, the dominant messages are questioned. Audiences think for themselves and a dynamic between people is created that we call a dialogue, a debate or a discussion. Dialogues not only evaluate dominant messages, they also help people to relate to each other. Through dialogues, people not only learn how to have an opinion of their own, it also helps them to question and develop this opinion.

It is worth noting how the dialogue was missing or not allowed at the beginning of the outbreak of coronavirus. It was of the utmost importance that we all acted as was requested of us. The threat of COVID-19 meant that we reacted as obedient citizens, listening well and acting accordingly but once the initial panic had subsided, people began to question the information and the regulations being imposed upon them. The most prominent example of this concerns care homes for the elderly which resulted in the elderly being isolated from their families for a period of months. During this time, people constantly sought new ways of seeing their relatives without spreading the virus. They met through windows, hired an aerial platform, built special cabins, created see-through masks that show the entire face. In addition to this, people also spoke up in the media about the price of isolation for those in the last stage of their lives. The general discursive messages were debated and translated into a creative solution. This is how the dialogue creates a sound society.

In Flusser's opinion, modern societies should possess the right balance between the programming, disciplining forms of communication and the questioning, dialogical forms of communication. He would be very much in favour of the recent debates that question procedures and allow people the scope to find their own way of dealing with the threat (of Covid). In its essence, a dialogue can only take place between people and we call each form of communication that is used to make people question the dominant narratives: dialogical communication. When it is solely used to control people's minds and lives, we call it discursive communication or: propaganda.

Let us zoom in on *The Children's Canvas*, reviewed in the first chapter, which aimed to create a dialogue on the situation of refugee camps and the situation of the children living in them. The intervention does not produce a new propagandistic image but performs a symbolic act, creating an experience that will help the audience to deal with future confrontations with propagand-

distic images spreading fear of the refugee. In the dynamic which is called 'dialogical', the communication takes place between people, not by talking but through the act of combining drawings. The drawings by the audience are a kind of dialogical response to the drawings of the children. The ritualistic event this brings with it is also dialogical because it makes people think. The dialogue was present in the huge drawing on the public pavement since it asks people to think of a better place for the children of refugee camps. People symbolically brought a child into a safer environment.

In the Borderline Offensive projects, the artists have responded to forms of propaganda that create polarisation. Flusser would have strongly supported the aim of this effort to develop forms of communication and strategies that oppose this propagandistic polarisation and create inclusion. Within Borderline Offensive, the arts are asked to create spaces, tools and images that playfully make people question the way propaganda states and affirms that we need to fear those who are not like us but still want to come and live and work with us. The project's target group is not people who already have a critical attitude (intellectuals, artists), but people who, for one reason or another, have decided to stick to their opinions. The more you yell at them that they are wrong and the more you give your own arguments as to why, the more inclined they are to stick to their original opinion(s). But how to approach them? What 'dialogical' strategies are used?

### **3. Through dialogical strategies**

To understand how polarisation is targeted by artistic activism in general, and specifically in the projects of Borderline Offensive, we will look at different mechanisms that unmask propaganda. Analysing these mechanisms helps us to understand how the propaganda that is used in public images can be unmasked and how a dialogical process of meaning can be instigated. Images in general and specifically technical images like photography and film are the most straightforward way to use in propaganda, according to Vilém Flusser, as they present themselves as reality. One forgets they are a construction, a message. The images of advertisements, the films of Leni Riefenstahl and Goebbels and also journalistic photographs such as those from major news agencies like Magnum, present themselves as the objective truth, even when we know that they are taken and selected by the photographer and that they can be subjected to all kinds of technical manipulations. They settle in our brains as little frameworks, nestling somewhere between our self and the real world. Revolutions have started with a photograph as the catalyst, as shown by the events that happened in the Middle East some years ago.

Name: Karam  
Gender: ♂  
Profession: Handyman  
Strengths:  
Can open locks, rewire cars and assist with other technical situations.  
Weakness:  
He has weaker persuasion and social skills and doesn't like to stand out as a person.

Choose your player.



A thousand miles in their shoes, see <https://www.gaminginthefaceoffear.nl>

Artists and designers can employ different strategies to turn asserting images into questioning images. They can work with exaggeration, they can bring in new elements that collide with familiar images, but they all result in a similar effect: alienation. Alienation is the basis of a dialogical process. In alienation, an image presents itself as unfamiliar and strange. The image, or part of the image, collides with familiar ideas in the viewer's frame of reference, their belief system. Alienation is mainly a matter of disturbed resemblance. Alienation may be used to question stereotypical images and to create alienation



Diaspora, see <https://www.gaminginthefaceoffear.nl>

one can employ many visual strategies. Let us examine how this has been done in some of Borderline Offensive's projects:

### **Gaming in the face of fear: simplification and reversal narratives**

In one of the trajectories, a group of game-design students developed prototypes for role-player games as a format to involve people in what it means to be a refugee – not only what it means to be implemented in a society that is not yours, but also what it takes to leave your home, to be on the run for a long time, confronted by lots of difficult and dangerous situations. Turning a situation which is so serious, complicated, diverse in its appearances and life-threatening characteristics into a role-player game instantly produces an alienating effect. A game simplifies. A role-player game is a game that asks the player to take on the position of a character within a narrative. To make the character easily identifiable, clear drawings are used and in that sense, this game develops and presents characters that are the opposite of alienation. One of the role-player games developed is called *In their shoes*. We immediately recognise the characters as refugees because of their skin colour, the clothes they are wearing, the attributes of the life jacket and lifeboat, and the background comprising water and coastline.

The game called *Diaspora* is the most interesting from the perspective of alienation because the team employed a reverse narrative. Instead of placing the action in a story in which people flee from the East to the West, the game developers created a reverse futuristic narrative. In this story, Syria is a safe place and the West is not. People are forced to flee to the East. *Diaspora* turns the familiar clichés of immigrants and refugees on their heads. The roles are reversed and one immediately understands what this kind of reversal – and therefore alienation – produces: players realise that it could also be the other way around, that perhaps at some point in the future, we may be dependent on them.

### **Hacking political campaigns: bringing in strange elements**

As stated before, in the run-up to the elections, actions were staged in the Netherlands to draw attention to the dire conditions of refugee camps. The Dutch illustrator Sanne Boekel hacked election posters with precisely this goal in mind. Hacking is a strategy in which one makes use of an existing phenomena. By bringing in strange elements, the meaning of the image is altered. In hacking the election posters, Boekel has alienated the image by combining the image of the politician with a reality that we do not associate those politicians with. She brought in new elements that collided with the familiar image.



A hacked election poster of the CDA by Sanne Boekel and the original





What is important in the above images is the text which, in combination with the background image, takes on a completely new 'alienated' meaning. The Dutch word "doorpakken" means decisively continuing what one has started. In the context of the elections it refers to the corona crisis, but connected with the image of the refugee camp it refers to activities to help refugees. Hacking can also produce a subversive effect as it undermines existing (political) communication. In this example, the Dutch political party of the CDA will not feel particularly threatened by the poster image because its impact was very much situational and did not affect the statement of the original poster but should it have gone viral, another situation might have occurred and the posters could have had a potentially undermining effect on the CDA campaign. The intervention not only altered the meaning of the original poster but it also unmasked the poster as being a construction. It deconstructed the poster by revealing its elements: a figure in the foreground who is making eye-contact with and looking straight at the viewer, a text that can mean many things, and the absence of a situational context. It shows how one reality can be made absent by bringing in another.

In addition to visual elements, these examples show that text and even narratives can be altered to create alienation. Very often this act of alienation questions the dominant ideas and ideology, but it can also create an awareness of the medium and the way in which it works, as we have seen in the hacking strategy.

### **An interim summary**

For Jonas Staal there are two forms of propaganda: elitist and popular. Popular propaganda is good propaganda because it comes from the people, it is shared by the people and it is transparent. Vilém Flusser introduced an opposition between two other forms of communication: from one to the many, and that between people. He states that we need both but that they must be in the right balance. For him there is no good propaganda or bad propaganda, there is only a good balance or a bad balance between discursive communication (which enhances propaganda) and dialogical communication. Flusser never conceived strategies to unmask propaganda and make people think. We have introduced the concept of alienation as the general effect of the different strategies that reveal and clarify how this process of unmasking might function. We have brought in some initial ideas to analyse the Borderline Offensive projects as forms of inverted propaganda, and we have looked at ways to analyse the strategies used as forms of dialogical communication that 'unmask' propaganda. As such, we have approached Borderline Offensive from both angles as a way to combat forms of propaganda that create polarisation. In the eyes of Staal, Borderline Offensive creates a counterbalance

to elitist propaganda in some of its projects by bringing in forms of popular propaganda. In the eyes of Flusser, these same projects deliver a balance by creating space for the dialogue. We have furthermore zoomed in on the 'unmasking' mechanisms of the projects by analysing the mechanisms of dialogical communication.

But what about the claim that laughter has the power to bridge poles? Where does humour come into it? What does humour do? What is its power and where does this come from? We must move towards psychoanalysis to really understand the dialogical procedures that can be called humouristic, and their specific appearance in artworks.

#### **4. Through humour**

If we follow the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, civilised human beings are controlled by their superego, which tells them how to behave and act in accordance with the rules and laws existent in their culture. Your superego is the part of you that forbids you to be sexist or racist; it orders you to honour your parents, to not be self-centred, etc. This superego is instilled by your parents, by your teachers, by television programmes, and by all the influential people you will meet throughout life. If your education has been a success, and your superego works well, you are able to suppress (or deal with) all the things that are not allowed. We often imagine this superego as a gatekeeper between your conscience and your sub-conscience. The superego is incredibly strong and not easy to fool. Only when you are asleep does your superego have less power and unconscious desires can come up in your dreams, giving rise to things and events that you would never allow to enter your waking mind. In your dreams, you are free. According to Freud, a joke works in a like manner during the day when you are awake. A good joke is able to open the gate for a short while, allowing suppressed energy to come out. That is why we say that laughter is a relief. The more taboo is the content of the joke, the stronger the repression, the stronger the gate, the better the joke needs to be to open this gate, and the greater the sense of relief. A joke works, for example, because it brings to the fore a comic character that represents somebody who is unaware of the rules: a childish or naive person, or a foreigner. Due to their ignorance, this character can do things that we ourselves can no longer do because we have become too disciplined. In real life, we are able to laugh at children and comedians. Some of cinema's most comic characters include Charlie Chaplin and Harpo Marx. Comedians make us aware of the rules because they transgress them and by transgressing them, they help us to do the same in our thoughts.

To better understand how humour in art projects can help to depolarise opinions, we will elaborate here on two different transgressions that are linked to the mechanisms examined in chapter 3: *The comic figure: exaggeration of the figure* and *The joke: the exaggeration of codes and rules*.

### The comic figure: exaggeration of the figure

In humour, some characteristics of a person or situation are exaggerated in such a way that you can no longer ignore them (which is what a civilised person would do). This exaggeration allows you to laugh at somebody (which you would normally not do). A well-known example is the Charlie Chaplin film *The Great Dictator* in which Chaplin plays the dictator Adenoid Hynkel (based on Hitler). He exaggerates the way a dictator speaks to such an extent that the effect produced is one of alienation and in this case it makes us laugh. It is important to notice that this film was released in 1940, the moment Hitler's 'career' as a dictator had just begun. Nowadays, we see how exaggeration is used to make us laugh at contemporary figures in power. Think of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson or the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte; the latter of whom has recently been accused of lying but says that his memory is to blame.



Tom Jansen  
<https://www.nhnieuws.nl/nieuws/259609/politiek-tekenaar-tom-janssen-vindt-mark-rutte-lekker-om-te-tekenen>

Exaggeration of the figure, or of some characteristics of the figure, reduces a person's power, sometimes even to the extent of dehumanising them. A figure can be played with by transforming features or characteristics. When this is done well, it results not only in laughter but also in a greatly increased awareness of these characteristics. From this point onwards, each time you see that very same person portrayed in a realistic representation, you simply cannot

forget their previously exaggerated characteristics. One must be mindful of the fact that in the same way that you can disempower and dehumanise powerful leaders, so too can you dehumanise and demonise entire groups of people by exaggerating some of their traits. Using exaggeration as a means of alienating can become a propagandistic weapon from the moment that it no longer makes people think. Humour only questions propaganda when it challenges the dominant narrative, *not when it affirms it*. The way humour functions in relation to propaganda has to do with the position or point of view it is coming from. Does it come from ordinary citizens who question existing power structures, institutes or powerful people? Or does it come from the people and institutions who hold power? Is it used to instill ideological ideas that help the powerful to maintain their power? Or does it help new ideas to enter into the public arena?

### **Super Refugee: exaggeration and upgrading**

In one of the games, the refugee is called a Super Refugee. Even without a visual representation of the Super Refugee, one can picture what such a refugee would look like. The qualities one requires to be a successful refugee need to be exaggerated to upgrade a normal refugee to a Super Refugee, and a comic figure arises out of this exaggeration. The interesting thing about this comic figure is that it makes clear that every refugee must have heroic qualities to be able to make the treacherous journey, and to integrate into a Western community. In this sense, the exaggeration does not denigrate the person but upgrades them. The game itself does not present visual depictions of Super Refugees but rather realistic representations of 'Eastern' figures, akin to the figures in *A thousand miles in their shoes*.

Citizens understand that it is not only their superego that tells them to act like a good boy or girl, they are also part of a society that has laws. They are brought up to understand that a society cannot function without laws which are the result of a democratic system. Living in and believing in democratic societies, a civilised person does is obedient not only for fear of punishment but because they also believe in a constitutional state. We have learned to follow the laws but we are simultaneously aware of the fact that they result from many dialogues and debates, and that they can be moderated by new debates and dialogues in parliaments that have been elected by the people themselves.

In non-democratic totalitarian societies, laws do not have such a solid and defensible ground. They are laid down by a small elite that wants to stay in control. In that case, citizens do not obey because they believe in the

constitutional state but because they fear the violent consequences of not doing so. In such totalitarian states, humour – as an opportunity to transgress the law in an imaginary way – is one of the first expressive forms that is forbidden. Making fun of Erdogan, Putin or Kim Jong-un is not allowed. When there is no opportunity for jokes, you know that you are shifting from a democratic society into a totalitarian regime. Let us see what this means for a second form of humour: the exaggeration of codes and rules.

### **The joke: the exaggeration of codes and rules**

An example: The activist artists called *The Yes Men* present themselves as salesmen at a conference aimed solely at rich capitalists wanting to find out how they can become even richer. At this conference, they made a demonstration of a tool that can measure how many human lives a new product might cost. Their presentation was secretly recorded and the resulting documentary, *The Yes Men*, shows that several people were very interested in the tool. Despite the artists exaggerating the system of capitalism by turning it into a device that legitimises the loss of life, they were not criticised by their audience. On the contrary, the audience proved that the system is so inhumane that no exaggeration could possibly add to its absurdity anymore. Watching the film, one's reaction hovers between laughter and shock. This shows us that in the same way one can joke about a person or situation, one can also make jokes about the rules themselves. "Subversive humour is more than fun, 'harmless' entertainment. Through the ridiculous we can gain new insights, which we might not be able to reach through other means." (Kramer, 2013)

### **Humour as subversive affirmation in The Museum of Real History**

One of the most interesting but also complicated projects within Borderline Offensive is The Museum of Real History. The project deals with conspiracy theories by exaggerating the role of the refugee as the instigator of practically every crisis in the Western world. The strategy is as follows: if you cannot dismantle the different conspiracy theories, the best strategy is to identify with the activity of remaking these kinds of theories in such a way for so they become absurd. This multi-layered project employs precisely this strategy. The first layer is the fictional narrative in which the central character is a time traveller with the capacity to influence every decisive moment in history. The narrative is brought to us in a performance in which the protagonist's story unfolds. His name is Abduljabbar Alsuhibi. He is a Yemeni-born citizen living in Sweden as a refugee. Two years of Abduljabbar's life are shrouded in

mystery. It is said that during this time, Abduljabbar was conducting research on a document leading to a Sumerian archaeological site that contains a gate which would allow humans to travel through time. It is believed that Abduljabbar Alsuhibi used this gate to time travel in order to change the course of history. The results of this have led to our current migrant crisis, natural disasters and economic problems. Abduljabbar Alsuhibi travels back as far as ancient Egyptian times where it is said that he led the first migration of Jews through the desert and then across the Red Sea; and he continued to initiate these acts of migration throughout history. He now lives in Sweden with his wife and two daughters as the family of an 'artist at risk', trying to start over again.



The character of Abduljabbar is an exaggeration of the refugee who can be accused of being responsible for all the bad things that are happening to us. The narrative that is needed to make this refugee guilty is based on an exaggeration of a conspiracy theory.

The second layer is an exhibition in 'The Museum of Real History' that shows the "proof" of his story by displaying all the documents necessary to a defence of the truthfulness of this conspiracy story. The documents are artworks – "fabricated" evidence of the protagonist's time travels, even if most of them do not specifically address the notion of migration itself. The performance is acted out and the exhibition provides the background scenography for it.

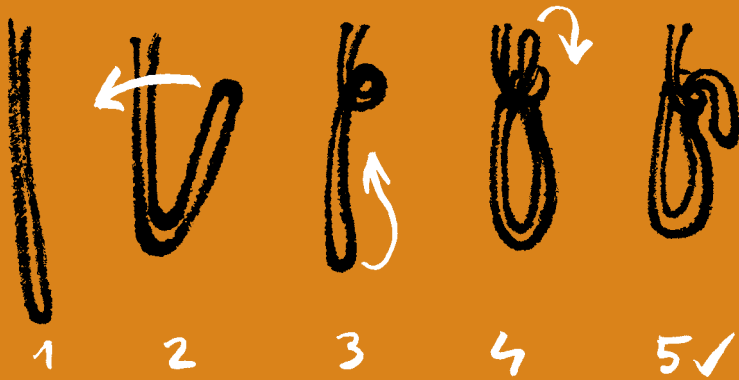
The subversive humour in this example criticises the powerful dogmas, concepts or institutions of late capitalism. Power is undermined by obeying the rules in such a way that they unmask themselves. This form of humour is also called subversive affirmation. It is a sort of strict playing-out of the rules. By affirming the rules and taking them too literally, existing power relations and convictions can be challenged. It is a type of humour that stays within the system it criticises. The rules are ridiculed, laid bare and made transparent, but only to the people who are still not totally immersed in the system. This highlights the problem: only if it is something that you are ready to see can you understand how extreme the rules are. The situation only becomes absurd for those able to see it. The people who do not understand that it is a joke feel their beliefs affirmed by it and the exaggeration becomes the new norm. The person in the film who approaches *The Yes Men* to know more about the tool is the one *not* grasping this moment of over-identification. This makes him a naive person (see *The comic figure*).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have employed a conceptual framework to better understand the added values of the playful and sometimes humouristic artistic interventions of Borderline Offensive in order to overcome polarising propagandas.

The Jonas Staal model has shown the importance of an inverted model in which grassroots movements are able to bring in their own performative public messages as a form of counterpropaganda. Vilém Flusser has helped us to understand that we should not fight propaganda with propaganda but that we need dialogues between people to deal with and balance these discursive messages. Based on my own PhD which centres on mechanisms of creating a dialogue, we have learned to understand the importance of alienation as the effect of intervening in existing visual frames. These interventions have the power to make the audience aware of the clichés, the stereotypes and the rules and codes that are dominant in communication. Finally, we have seen how humour has the strength to not only dehumanise but also upgrade the position of people and how we should judge humour based on its ability to question dominant positions of power.

Artistic interventions that rely on and make use of mechanisms that introduce play and humour bring a strong dynamic to situations in which people tend to stick to their opinion. The projects of Borderline Offensive show the richness of the approaches that artists use to open people's minds, to bring awareness and to make us think for ourselves.






# Affective alliances and the arts. The case of the Škart<sup>2</sup> collective

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The international collaborative project Borderline Offensive is the context of this essay: it set out a very clear path on which all protagonists were to lead a dialogue while knowing it would be difficult one. The poignant encounters and perplexing contexts embedded in the project dealt with the ceaseless waves of migrations, political unrest, outbursts of right-wing violence against the Other, but also the systemic measures taken by the democratic governments which revealed the conservative, patriarchal, nationalistic, misogynic and other sorts of intolerant policies still predominant in the major part of European societies.

The arts and culture are believed to play an indispensable role in social transformation. This project creators decided to employ this force to achieve their goals through “creative battles”, “joyful art” and humour as a subtle tactic to subvert negative mainstream narratives and ingrained prejudices.

“Borderline Offensive is strategically operationalised by its humouristic perspective on life: to seek laughter and joy as instruments of political warfare and peacebuilding when facing fear and hopelessness“ as it says in the Border Offensive Manifesto.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> /shka:rt/

<sup>3</sup> BO web page <https://borderlineoffensive.eu/manifesto>

The project gathered a number of artists from different corners of Europe and the Mediterranean who have manifested a sensibility towards the cultural and political implications of the migrant crisis in their artistic and activism practice. These artists from Bulgaria, Germany, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey, offered thoughtful but humorous art works about migrations and had created works with and for young migrants scattered throughout Europe. Their ways of art making and storytelling have shown us how difficult and sensitive a task it is to face the consequences of devastating political situations, but also how humour is able to form a “sublime criticism” (Munder, 2005) of such situations.

This text zooms in on one of the participants, the art collective Škart from Belgrade as a case study of artistic practice woven from empathy, humour and the affective quality of interactions with other people.

The collective has two members, Dragan Protić Prota and Djordje Balmazović, visual artists, designers, poets and activists. Their rich artistic practice has been developing since the early 1990's and is anchored in humanistic values and a tender humorous empathy with Wo/Man. The text showcases the work of Škart because of the specific affective quality of their work: it is seen here as a strong bonding force that gathers people together and boosts their capacity for empathy. The development of their artistic practice is here given through multiple examples in order to carefully unfurl the approaches used in their work with migrants from the Middle East and Africa in the frame of the Borderline Offensive project.

The workshops by Škart were organized in several episodes during the project - in Belgrade (Serbia), Košice (Slovakia), Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and Sweden, allowing them to share their practice of collaboration and collaborative creation with the migrants as well as with other fellow artists. Along the way, they worked with migrant children on their collective Paper Puppet Theater, a kind of “refugee theater” (Jeffers 2012), transformed into short video clips. While working with those children, the interactiveness and playfulness introduced by Škart to these small temporary communities allowed the children to share their small stories, episodes from their (migrant) experiences and glimpses of the life they dream about. This collective work succeeded in creating temporary affective alliances with all the participants, fulfilling the goal of the project: art can defeat fear and state of exclusion.

Škart collective started its art practice in the early 1990's in Serbia in which the wars, immigration, massive and rapid pauperization, political unrest and traumatizing social disintegration were taking place. Their artistic work was a poetic and emotional reflection on the internal, personal plight of migrants



"Let's forget about the festive mood  
Coronela's waiting in the hood"

by Lenka Zelenovic, NONpractical Women, 2020

who were struggling to understand the devastating processes going on around them.

During those early years, they teamed up with the initiative Women in Black<sup>4</sup> whose main engagement was to support and work with the migrants from all over Yugoslavia (raged by conflict and forced migration), inhabiting the migrant camps and provisional housing. They were trying to economically empower those apatrides, especially women, in the new circumstances. The initiative created the infrastructure for the women immigrants to produce handmade products and sell them in order to earn their living and emancipate themselves economically (they were mostly widows, supporting their families and depending on humanitarian aid). Such a type of work had a therapeutic effect, creating a shared space among these women to reflect on their experiences, living conditions, psychological transitions and perspectives for the future.

In this context the artists from the Škart collective started to reshape their own art practice previously focused on auto-poetics and inner responses to external desperate and traumatic events. They identified with the methods of the Women in Black who were trying to avoid making interpretations of the events and experiences, choosing to make "direct actions". In a series of small actions, the artists made the women write and draw what they thought, felt and saw. They created a personal space for their voices. It was a counter-action to the mainstream discourse about the consequences of the war: there was no personal place for the voice; there were only anonymous and abstract numbers and empty signifiers, susceptible to all sorts of manipulat-

<sup>4</sup> [www.zeneucrnom.org/About](http://www.zeneucrnom.org/About)

ons. Self-esteem and trust in others had been lost. This is why those women were given the space to talk about themselves, to tell their stories, even in a naïve, unarticulated, non-essential, sad way.... What mattered was telling the stories. It was one of the most essential lessons for the art collective: "...we have to use our artistic platform as privileged artists who can travel, work and present the work (in any way possible) and give it to those who don't have anything similar and available. This is fair play! We used to be deprived of such means, but through defiance and resistance and utopias we acquired this position."<sup>5</sup>

After this breakthrough in the practice based on giving a voice to the voiceless, the collective continued to imagine and realize different formats of co-working and working-together with various groups of the population that were marginalized, socially invisible, politically silenced etc. Their primary strategy as an art collective gained another dimension and their artistic projects grew to be increasingly based on the process of collective creation with other people, professionals and non-professionals, establishing a form of "relational art" in which the sphere of human relations becomes the site and the object of artistic production.

In 1993 they started a series of artistic cooperations in homes for elderly people resulting in the formation of a choir. The first choir organised by Škart chose to sing two widely known songs for children, changing and turning the texts into foolish and absurd poems with a frivolous melody and a Dadaist effect. The awkward songs sung in official institutional contexts (such as the Faculty of Architecture, the Faculty of Chemistry on the occasion of their PhD thesis defence, different exhibition spaces...) were a clear act of institutional critique, but also a statement of resistance against the dominant social and political discourse which reduced the public sphere to images of despair, poverty, fear, limiting one's mental concerns to daily survival. Elderly people singing children's songs additionally materialised and amplified the affective quality of the music and songs, of being together in a joyous collective action. The choir members, usually closed within their small peer-to-peer communities and daily routines, suddenly had a chance to step out and to come into contact with very different worlds, environments and places, to communicate with new people and speak up about their own world.

These examples of the collective's early art practices are important to their approach to working with contemporary migrants crossing the Balkans and heading to the West: "We understood the power of the direct work with groups or collective bodies that have their own inner dynamics and that we

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<sup>5</sup> From the interview with Dragan Protić Prota, one of the two members of the Škart collective.

cannot and must not subjugate to our artistic needs, our ideas, projects; on the contrary, we need to adapt to each other gradually, with care and sensitivity.” Out of these often non-functional relations new values could arise and materialize.

One of the key elements of their working method is a subtle sense of humour. They produced a way of storytelling where humour is intertwined with melancholy, again one of the most dominant characteristics of their work. Such a fine and subtle form of communication is based on forming emotional relations with collaborators – the participants of the artistic actions and programs emphasized the affective quality of those encounters. The sense of humour coloured the vulnerable moments of being on unknown territory (when non-artists enter the space of art for the first time) producing a sense of togetherness and belonging to these temporary collectives. Their network of affects and affective relations produced a kind of truculence, a resistance to the difficult circumstances (war, migrations, personal loss, isolation...). Singing a Dada-like children’s song in a choir of old people in a nursing home adds a humorous flavour but also accentuates discord with self-passivation, with self-pity, with predictable naming and labeling, with exclusion. Actually, it creates a space for a shared experiment, playfulness and caring. It connects all the participants in this temporary space of mutual interdependence and even more – it creates an “addiction”, a strong driving force, to be and to create together.

These artistic strategies have been employed in a large number of situations, social settings and contexts and the Škart collective was able to seed the small communitarian projects that continued to grow and branch out and change the lives of people.<sup>6</sup> The Škart artists dug below the surface and made all predictable forms, relations and situations unusual. This can be only done in a dialogue with others together with whom they would be constantly stepping outside their comfort zones. With their sensitive approach and by using the language of the arts, they were able to leave behind the places of fear and trauma and propose in place of them trust and playfulness. This always resulted in long-term actions, small communities and collectives bound by affective alliances.

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<sup>6</sup> The most famous case is the case of Lenka Zelenovic, the woman who escaped the war, lost her home and family, but who was introduced to the art of creating traditional female witty and humorous embroideries called “kuvarice” (kitchen decoration). An ex-worker, she was supported and helped by Skart to gain the official status of artist and to receive a pension. Her works are in several European art collections.



Paper Puppet Poetry Theatre by Škart in Plovdiv, 2018

The youth choir called Horkeškart was created in 2000 as a part of a series of larger civil anti-regime actions<sup>7</sup> initiated by Škart. It started as an ad hoc group of trained singers, amateurs and “talentless” people who recognized the power of collective work, singing and music activism. Horkeškart just celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2020 and now has several new families, newborn children and many songs that have become classics. As Prota said, “it is a living organism that rejuvenates itself”.

After Horkeškart, there were other choirs including children’s choirs with orphans that empowered those children to feel strong, self-confident and loved. They have been invited to sing, cheered and celebrated around the Balkans. The affection they developed towards the Škart artists and their collaborators is eternal. They have been making songs together, singing about their own lives and turning their weaknesses into verses that many people memorised, sang along to and carry in themselves.

The chain of solidarity has transmuted from a visible art form into a shared collective; it has spread into other formats of sociability, to other people who are not very familiar with the art context... This is the core of Škart’s understanding of art: the art practice is able to transform itself into a collective and

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<sup>7</sup> The civil and political actions against the regime of Slobodan Milošević intensified after the NATO bombing campaign during 2000 until October 5th when he was finally removed from power by large civil protests.

affective engagement in a traumatic situation. It mobilizes people through the invisible force of affects, inviting them into the art realm not as temporary participants, but as “radical amateurs”<sup>8</sup> (Hofman, 2016). These “radical amateurs” are radical because they refuse to be just “consumers”, but rather employ joy, humour and playfulness in a collective work, leading usually to the emergence of long-term communities.

## **Škart’s work with migrants**

The previous examples of the art projects of the Škart collective were used to show the genesis of their specific understanding of the function of art in a social context. The collective sees art as a privileged space and practice and an artist’s moral duty is to share this with those who are underprivileged in certain circumstances and to share the resources the artists might have to expand the space of sociality and solidarity. In this approach they go beyond the idea of participation as the key priority (and mantra) of the dominant cultural policies. They are not interested in including ever more “participants” in their own artistic endeavour or in the exposure of their own artistic ideas. They are interested in producing ideas through interaction with other people. True interaction happens only if there is trust, and trust is gained by giving the time needed to everyone to understand the sense of these encounters. The element of time is very important in Škart’s work because what they create is a process-based temporality in which relations are established through the physical, creative and affective activation of all the participants. The aspect of time is crucial in establishing alliances that become the cohesive force for a group becoming a community (a choir, a band, an art collective, a network...).

The Škart collective has found a great challenge for their work in this aspect of time when engaging with the migrants since the beginning of the migrant crisis. The temporality of the migrants’ presence in the transitory routes and places obviously does not allow long-term relations to be established. Their careful approach had to be adapted because they had to accept this restraint and find other ways to build the trust upon which their artistic process may be constructed. In limited time frames, with people who were permanently in motion, both physically and emotionally, the Škart collective realized several art encounters. These encounters again were motivated by affective exchange but included more “actors” to support these affective exchanges such as

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<sup>8</sup> The term is used for the members of the recent phenomenon of choirs in the Balkan Region elaborated by Ana Hofman in her book *Novi život partizanskih pesama* (The new life of partisan songs).

the artist migrants whom they already knew and collaborators from other projects. They found a way to preserve the element of time in which human relations persist and are grounded for further growth.

Their work with the migrants from the Middle East and Africa started through a collaboration with the Group 484,<sup>9</sup> an organization that was among the first to mobilize forces to respond to the rising migrant crisis in 2013. Škart visited the migrants in the migrant centers in Serbia, “observing their attitudes, hearing their stories, and thinking about what could be shared with them, in such conditions and under such suspense”.

They sought to “open the door” by stating making it an invitation to play<sup>10</sup> together, but also by making it clear that the rules and conventions of the game could be changed and transformed. This enabled a “certain amount of freedom” from the start and this was possible through a subtle use of humour, a gentle and relaxing emotion which eases the pressure and inviting and warming. In the process of establishing relations, the choir ceases to be a conventional choir, the elderly home turns into a playground, women who are war victims become superwomen, the migrant camp turns into a road to a reachable horizon. For the artists, the act of crossing this border empowers each person, gives them the necessary strength for real-life battles, but in a group, collectivity, commonality. They say that every person is important. They fine-tune their instruments of artistic, creative engagement, of playfulness that embodies joy, challenge and a fine sense of freedom. Then the miracles happen. The experience of joy in a collective becomes the glue that in Škart’s projects holds the collectives together and ensures their endurance. Doubts, imperfections, weaknesses are seen from a distance and as acceptable elements of each human being. Speaking out loud about them releases the pressure they put on each human being.

Because of this ability to work with people in difficult situations, the collective Škart has been invited to work with the migrants in different institutional and non-institutional frames, including the Borderline Offensive project. The topic of Middle East and African migrants in the European political context is very important for their practice because it is a continuation of

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<sup>9</sup> The organization Group 484 was established to advocate and educate about the migrations <https://www.grupa484.org.rs/en/>

<sup>10</sup> Škart managed to map a real game that the migrants in one of the camps in Serbia really created and played. It was called “The border is closed”. It was presented at the homonymous exhibition held in the Museum of African Art in Belgrade, 2015. For more research on migrations and this project see: Interkulturalnost No.18, Zavod za kulturu Vojvodine, Novi Sad, 2019



their work in post-Yugoslav context with its own migrations and post-war traumas.

In spite of the limited time - because the migrants are permanently on the road - the collective has been searching for new ways to further produce the affective alliances at the core of their artistic and social engagement.

They decided to invite other artists, migrant-artists they had met in Serbia, to the workshops with young migrants and the children in migrant camps. They made the communication easier and the migration experiences were retold with humour and playfulness, and thus seen from a different perspective.<sup>17</sup>

This situation has led to creation of the puppet poetry workshops in which the participants' stories are transformed into simple, technically imperfect, DIY paper puppet performances and videos. The workshops took place in the migrant camps and centers, engaging the children and also their parents and friends. The unconventional art procedures and techniques and their realization in a trusting, playful and convention-free context resulted in collective celebrations. The performative quality of these workshops and the final presentations of the results increases the emotional breadth and purposefulness of all the participants; they all understand the meaning of such an endeavour and they want it to continue. The festive and the affective charge of such events nourishes the children with the will to continue to dream in spite of the gloomy reality of being a migrant.

In all the workshops with children held throughout the Borderline Offensive territories (Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden), the children's experiences, retold and reimagined in paper puppets, live performances and videos, magnified the the power of the collective work employed by Škart. Experiencing a dedicated community in the making, even if it is temporary, empowered the children to accept the lessons of migrant life and to creatively turn them into stories that can be shared and spread. The power of the working method of Škart is visible in the creation of a space where everyone is in the main role and can use their own voice. The affective net woven from tolerance, love, courage, persistence, passion and humour is captivating and addictive.

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<sup>17</sup> Prota talks about an artist from the Middle East, Reza, who told a small story about his visit to one of the big city's stores: the saleswoman approached him suspiciously and said "I am afraid this is too expensive for your pocket"; he replied: "I am not afraid of empty pockets, I am afraid of empty heads". This story was among those, which were used for the puppet poetry performances and videos where the saleswoman is turned into Europe that says "I am afraid this world is not for you"...



Paper Puppet Poetry Theatre session in Plovdiv, 2018.

Such artistic practice is an example of the social turn in art (Claire Bishop, 2005), which becomes collaborative and focuses on constructive social change, anti-commercial and non-object-based (two things that are seen as elitist and consumerist). The conceptual frame for the art production within the Borderline Offensive project is set in accordance with such principles and it gave the Škart collective as well as the other participating artists the tools to establish relations with real people while speaking about migration experience. The method, approach and communication Škart introduced into such a frame is diametrically opposite to those that use the overproduction of imagery of the refugee crisis (such as the work of Ai Weiwei with the images of the Idomeni camp, *Human Flow*, 2017, or *Laundromat*, 2018): in the latter the crisis is integrated in the spectacular world of media. This way is also instantly effective because it gets an immediate reaction, influences public opinion and stirs large public debates. On the other hand, the approach of Škart is tuned to being an intimate whisper, to a quiet one-to-one communication using empathic mechanisms. So, the empathic image here is much more functional because it invites the participation of the “viewers”. They take part; they don’t just consume the exhibit, as art “touches very essential emotions, a way of judging ourselves. Those are very important human activities” as Ai Weiwei sincerely put it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Loos, Ted. “Who Needs Another Show? Ai Weiwei Says He’s Over the Whole Museum Thing and Is Moving to Connecticut.” *artnet*. 15 November 2018. <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ai-weiwei-moving-to-connecticut-over-museums-1396012>>. Accessed 21 January 2021

But we want to emphasize that the method Škart uses in their artistic practice is based on the creation of an affective alliance. The affective alliance creation is here seen as an artistic method that is based on an intensive interaction and collaboration with non-artists (not the audience, but the participants in the artistic process) and involves emotional and affective exchanges whose main products are the feelings of belonging, of interconnectedness and emotional security; in this method the artistic product is less important and is a derivative of this affective exchange.

Here we can look at the affects employed and produced as a “substance of politics” (Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015) because of their substantial role in producing the conditions for an action. In the case of the Škart artistic collaborative actions, it produces the condition for a change – personal, communal or social. Here the “affective labour” of the artists is channeled through the use of humour and joy, and used against the capitalist imperatives of fragmentation and isolation to create collective process-based works and actions. Interpellations of personal experiences with the group’s creative endeavour lead the actors (artists and non-artists) in this process into the strong affective and emotional states that are recognised as the driving forces of “activism, triggering and catalyzing advocacy pursuit of, and claim to, policy and culture change” (Ahall, 2018, 34).

Such experiences produce Spinozan micro powers, the individual’s capacity to enter into relations of affecting and being affected, and strengthen their affective capacity. For children, it can be a formative setting in a difficult life experience, consolidating the emotional capacity that is precious to every individual. For Spinoza, affective alliances are related to freedom, while freedom or autonomy is “a social process, that is, an effort to build and maintain mutual, reciprocal relationships with others that support and foster this striving for all concerned”<sup>13</sup>

The use of arts and artistic strategies to strengthen affective alliances and, therefore, to secure the sense of freedom is the ultimate goal of an artist. Škart’s artistic practice of creating temporary or long-term communities that are grounded on understanding and solidarity belongs to this very special class of art practice. It highlights the social role of art, a form of collective political engagement through the sensible experience of the anticipation of a future community (Rancière 2000).

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<sup>13</sup> See: Political Affect, Jan Slaby and Jonas Bens, in: *Affective Societies. Key Concepts*, Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, eds., London, New York: Routledge 2019, p. 345

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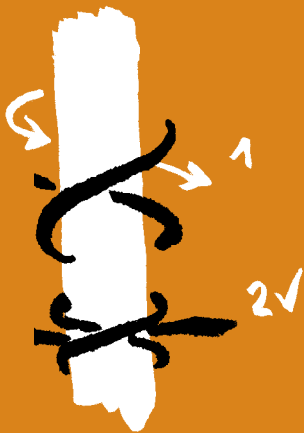
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# Borderline Offensive socially engaged art related to migration and integration in Bulgaria

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(Multi Kulti Collective 2020)



## I. Introduction

International migration and its various forms such as labour migration, forced migration, climate migration, irregular migration have increased in size and relevance in the last decades to a global scale due to various factors such as economic and social inequalities, armed conflicts and climate change, amongst others. These topics are not new to Europe which has been increasingly attractive to various migrant groups since the Second World War. However, the European Migrant Crisis of 2014-2019 put the issue to the top of the European agenda both on the EU and its member states level (King and Lulle, 2016, p. 10). For several years, Europe was in a state of political and humanitarian crisis which highlighted some deep divisions between its member states and their values and approaches to a common challenge. As a response to these events, the EU-funded project Borderline Offensive: Laughing in the Face of Fear (2017-2021) was designed as a civil society platform for artistic research and art-based exchange between European and Middle Eastern artists from various fields. They participated in a series of immersive art residencies and created new socially engaged art to explore contemporary issues such as migration, otherness, collective identity building, intercultural dialogue, and local integration in contemporary Europe. In particular, humour (aesthetic approach) and participatory arts (methods) were employed to foster interaction, dialogue, and cooperation between the newcomers and host communities, inviting its members to get to know each

other, share knowledge, experiences, ideas and laugh together – at the same things and at themselves.

## II. Objectives of the research

The following paper aimed to explore the role of socially engaged art related to migration and local integration in two Bulgarian cities with low levels of immigration – Plovdiv and Gabrovo.

The objects of the study were three Borderline Offensive artistic works realized in Bulgaria in 2019-2020 as part of the programme of the European Capital of Culture Plovdiv 2019 and Gabrovo Game Jam 2020:

- The Long Heavy Road by Darinka Pop-Mitic and Nalan Yirtmaç – a one-week workshop on creating a DIY fanzine on the topic of migration<sup>14</sup>
- Paper Puppet Poetry by ŠKART collective – a one-week workshop on creating a series of short videos with handmade paper puppets on the topic of migration<sup>15</sup>
- Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) by Petko Dourmana – a multimedia immersive installation where participants turned into migrants trying to reach the EU by boat and debated on migration in a dark room<sup>16</sup>

In particular, the paper aimed at shedding light on the following research questions:

- What is the role of art in understanding the migration phenomenon in a location with a low level of immigration? What is the specific role of humour?
- What is the social awareness of the artists when dealing with this sensitive topic? How do they understand their responsibility?
- What is the social impact the artistic projects made in the local community?

## III. Methodology

The research used several qualitative research methods. First, desk research was conducted which explored documents and studies related to the broad Bulgarian context, various materials developed by the Borderline Offensive

<sup>14</sup> The Long Heavy Road 2019, Darinka Pop-Mitic and Nalan Yirtmaç, Borderline Offensive, <https://borderlineoffensive.eu/portfolio-thelongheavyroad>

<sup>15</sup> Paper Puppet Poetry 2019, ŠKART, Borderline Offensive, <https://borderlineoffensive.eu/portfolio-paperpuppetpoetry>

<sup>16</sup> Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) 2019, Petko Dourmana, Borderline Offensive, <https://borderlineoffensive.eu/portfolio-threemigrantsinaboat>



team and documentation and products of the socially engaged artworks created in the framework of the project. Second, field research was conducted which included nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with several groups – two interviews with local hosts/organisers of the art workshops/performances (Museum House of Humour and Satire and Plovdiv 2019 Foundation), three artists (Dragan Protić from Paper Puppet Poetry, Darinka Pop-Mitic from The Long Heavy Road and Petko Dourmana from Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)), three with seven direct participants in the workshops/performances who remained anonymous. Finally, one participatory observation was realized in relation to Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) installation during Gabrovo Game Jam 2020.

## IV. National context

### 1. Population

Currently Bulgaria has a population of about 7 million inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> This has dropped by 22%, or 2 million, since its peak in 1985 when the figure was about 9 million.<sup>18</sup> The United Nations has listed the country as one of the ‘fastest shrinking nations’ and predicted that its population will drop an additional 23% to about 5.5 million by 2050 (UN, 2019). On average Bulgaria has been losing about 62,000 inhabitants every year in the period 2010-2019.<sup>19</sup> The reasons for this trend are negative natural growth combined with high emigration rates caused by unfavourable factors such as the poor economic situation, high corruption, poor education, and poor media freedom, amongst others.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup>

Although Bulgaria has been increasingly attractive to immigrants, it still has an emigration profile in terms of both its flows and stocks. Emigration still exceeds immigration and in 2019 net migration remained negative (Kras-

<sup>17</sup> National Statistical Institute, Population as of 31 Dec 2020, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6704/population-districts-municipalities-place-residence-and-sex>

<sup>18</sup> Census, National Statistical Institute - <https://www.nsi.bg/Census/SrTables.htm>

<sup>19</sup> National Statistical Institute, Average annual population by districts, municipalities and place of residence, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6712/average-annual-population-districts-municipalities-and-place-residence>

<sup>20</sup> Eurostat, GDP per capita in PPS, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tec00114/default/table?lang=en>

<sup>21</sup> Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/bgr>

<sup>22</sup> Reporters Without Borders, 2020 World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

<sup>23</sup> OECD, PISA 2018 results, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm>

teva, 2019). On 1 January 2019, about 80,000 non-EU foreigners were living in Bulgaria, which was about 1,15 % of the total population.<sup>24</sup> The biggest immigrant groups came from Russia (about 25,000), Turkey (about 16,000) and Syria (about 13,500).<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Migrant integration

The Bulgarian economy's need for a migrant labour force is outlined in the current National Strategy in the Field of Migration, Asylum and Integration (2015–2020). However, the Bulgarian government has failed to develop, finance and implement a successful integration policy for third-country migrants, including beneficiaries of international protection. The latest edition of the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX 2020) ranked Bulgaria 43rd out of 52 countries from all across the world (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). The only group which is effectively supported constitutes foreign citizens with a Bulgarian origin (Vankova and Ivanova, 2020). What is described as a paradox is that in post-communist Bulgaria, a country with little experience of migration and absolutely no experience of democratic migration policy, there are high levels of immigrant integration in terms of labour market participation, and linguistic, cultural, and social integration (Krasteva, 2019). This successful self-integration is the result of the migrants' personal efforts, often supported by local NGOs.

## 3. European Migration Crisis (2014-2016)

Bulgaria is an external EU border and during the European Migration Crisis it experienced a sharp increase in asylum application numbers - from about 1,000 in 2012 to about 20,000 in 2015 and 2016 respectively.<sup>26</sup> It is important to highlight that the National Program for Integration of Refugees in the Republic of Bulgaria was terminated in 2014 when the numbers of asylum seekers increased. This marked the first “year of zero integration” for refugees (Vankova, 2014). Regardless of the adoption of two new policy instruments (the Ordinance on the terms and procedures for concluding, enforcing and terminating the integration agreement of beneficiaries of international protection from 2016 and 2017), up until the present day refugee integration hasn't

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<sup>24</sup> Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship, last update 11.03.2020 - [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_pop1ctz&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_pop1ctz&lang=en)

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship, last update 11.03.2020 - [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_pop1ctz&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_pop1ctz&lang=en)

<sup>26</sup> Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data, last update: 12.03.2020 - <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/19a863b4-6516-485c-ad2c-d2bef1c37c07?lang=en>

been properly funded and implemented.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, due to its socio-economic profile and lack of a functioning national integration support, the country kept its profile of a transit country. In 2017, 2018 and 2019 the asylum applications dropped respectively to about 3,500, 2,500 and 2,000.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Public attitudes towards immigrants

Despite being one of the EU countries with the lowest numbers of immigrants, Bulgarians tend to exaggerate this number the most. A 2018 Eurobarometer study found out that even though the immigrant population was below 2% of the total population, Bulgarians believed that this figure was 11%.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Bulgarians showed one of the highest hostility rates towards immigrants. The same 2018 Eurobarometer study found out that only 15% of the respondents replied positively to the question if they would accept a migrant as a colleague, doctor, neighbour or family member.<sup>30</sup> In comparison, the EU-average was 57%.<sup>31</sup> This paradox could be explained by the xenophobic anti-immigrant political discourse and wide spread fake news that have been intensifying in recent years (Krasteva, 2019). About 50% of the respondents believed that migration created problems while only 6% believed it could create opportunities.<sup>32</sup> In comparison, about 70% of the EU citizens believed that migration was boosting the EU economy.<sup>33</sup> All these factors resulted in 70% of the Bulgarian respondents fearing that migrants might become a burden on the social security system and might increase the crime rates. At the same time, more than 90% of the Bulgarian respondents in the 2018 Eurobarometer survey said that they did not personally know any migrants nor had they had spoken with them and or seen them.<sup>34</sup>

The latest UNHCR report on public attitudes towards refugees in particular showed that awareness among Bulgarians of refugee-related issues decrea-

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<sup>27</sup> UNHCR Bulgaria, 2018 Age, Gender and Diversity Participatory Assessment Report, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/2018-unhcr-age-gender-and-diversity-participatory-assessment-bulgaria>

<sup>28</sup> Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data, last update: 12.03.2020 - <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submit-ViewTableAction.do>

<sup>29</sup> Eurostat, special Eurobarometer survey 469 on "Integration of immigrants in the European Union", [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/results-special-eurobarometer-integration-immigrants-european-union\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/results-special-eurobarometer-integration-immigrants-european-union_en)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

sed significantly (7.2% in 2020 compared to 23% In 2018) (UNHCR, 2020). The decline in awareness of refugee-related issues and the lack of first-hand information led to attitudes being based on well-established stereotypes and information shared by the media (UNHCR, 2020).

## **V. The role of art in understanding the migration phenomenon in a location with a low level of immigration. The specific role of humour.**

### **1. The migration profiles of Plovdiv and Gabrovo**

Both cities observed in this paper – Plovdiv and Gabrovo – have low and very low numbers in terms of the immigrant population compared to other Bulgarian cities. There are no reliable statistics on their immigrant populations but according to an expert estimation these are much lower than cities such as Sofia, Varna, Burgas, Harmanli, amongst others.

Plovdiv is Bulgaria's second biggest city with about 350,000 inhabitants in 2020.<sup>35</sup> Traditionally it is a city with a well-known traditional ethnic diversity, mostly the Turkish, Greek and Armenian communities who have lived there for centuries. In more recent times, it has not developed as an immigrant destination. It is interesting to point out that the only state-funded refugee integration center in the country – the Center for the Social Rehabilitation and Integration of Adult Offenders and Refugees is located in Plovdiv. However, according to an expert interview, the number of refugees who have participated in the Center's programmes is very low, about 10-15 beneficiaries in total in the last few years. In 2019 Plovdiv was European Capital of Culture and realized a rich cultural programme which was divided into 4 thematic parts. One of them (Fuse) was dedicated to the integration of ethnic and minority groups and aimed to bring together different generations and social groups and overcome the borders of the isolated territories and zones.<sup>36</sup>

Gabrovo is a town with about 50,000 inhabitants in 2020.<sup>37</sup> It is located about 20 km from the geographical center of Bulgaria – Uzana. During the Socialist period, it hosted immigrants from Socialist countries such as Vietnam and Cuba but after the democratic transition most of them left. There is no reliable information about the numbers of the immigrant population at the

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<sup>35</sup> National Statistical Institute, Population by towns and sex as of 31.12.2020, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6710/population-towns-and-sex>

<sup>36</sup> Plovdiv 2019, Fuse - <http://plovdiv2019.eu/en/platform/fuse>

<sup>37</sup> National Statistical Institute, Population by towns and sex as of 31.12.2019, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6710/population-towns-and-sex>

moment but these are estimated to be very low and immigrants are basically invisible in public life. Several of the installation participants in Gabrovo pointed out that their town is “clean” which means that there are no Roma, refugees or immigrants. The town is nationally famous for the one of its kind Museum House of Humour and Satire. It is the only Bulgarian institution specifically dedicated to humour and it has a very strong theoretical foundation and understanding of the practical aspects of humour.

## 2. Local public attitudes towards migration in Plovdiv and Gabrovo

According to Plovdiv 2019 Foundation’s project manager Stanislava Tasheva, public attitudes towards immigrants in Plovdiv are often extreme.<sup>38</sup> However, the participants who attended the workshops the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry were very open-minded – they were mostly young people who did not “carry the burden of heavy stereotypes”.<sup>39</sup> After the workshops, the team presented the newly created artworks at a public event which also attracted a positive audience consisting mostly of people who were familiar with the topic and were very curious in the artistic process.

According to the Museum House of Humour and Satire’s director Margarota Dorovska, there are no refugees in Gabrovo and the topic is not present in the local community.<sup>40</sup> Due to its cultural and historical background, however, public attitudes in Gabrovo towards the Others (foreigners, ethnic minorities such as Roma, etc.) is very closed-minded and favours isolation.<sup>41</sup> This was confirmed by several interviews made during the presentation of the immersive installation.<sup>42</sup> The Museum’s team soon realized that the migration topic can be very challenging at the local level because of the lack of understanding and dialogue which paralyzed the chances of a positive action.<sup>43</sup> The installation *Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)* was presented in the framework of Gabrovo Game Jam 2020 but it was not publicly announced or advertised.<sup>44</sup> This shows how sensitive the topic of migration can be on the local level and how many concerns and fears it can evoke.

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Stanislava Tasheva, project manager, Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, 20 December 2019

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Margarita Dorovska and Galina Boneva, House of Humour and Satire in Gabrovo, 9 December 2019

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Margarita Dorovska and Galina Boneva, House of Humour and Satire in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 9 December 2019

<sup>44</sup> Participatory observation, 1-2 February 2020

### 3. The role of art in understanding migration

The role of art, and participatory arts in particular, can be seen in several aspects of the Borderline Offensive artistic works realised in Plovdiv and Gabrovo:

#### 4. A platform for dialogue

Several Bulgarian interviewees emphasised that the opportunity for a dialogue on migration in Bulgaria had been lost and stakeholders and citizens with different opinions were unable to discuss the topic freely. “People in Bulgaria are extreme”, Dourmana said.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that all three artistic works realised in Plovdiv and Gabrovo were able to address this issue and offered a space for reflection and dialogue between the participants. This was possible thanks to the good facilitation skills of the artists. Work in small groups allowed the building of trust and the creation of a “safe space” which enabled a more open and relaxed discussion in comparison to traditional public debates. This is the added value of the participatory arts, especially when working on a challenging topic in the context of a politically correct environment.

On the one hand, the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry offered a whole week of creative collaboration. The open and playful co-creative process, led by the professional artists and workshop facilitators Darinka Pop-Mitic, Nalan Yırtmaç and Dragan Protić, was able to foster a spirit of cooperation and discussion. The fourteen participants, mainly young people, had the chance to share their own real-life and authentic stories related to migrants in Bulgaria and re-create them in an artistic form – a paper fanzine and a series of short videos with handmade paper puppets. In order to realize these artists products, the participants had to combine their skills and develop the stories together which was based on a respectful conversation. “We were free to discuss anything”, one of the participants acknowledged.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, the immersive multimedia installation and performance Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) realised by Petko Dourmana in Gabrovo also created a safe space for dialogue but in a different way. The installation was located behind a black door in the Museum House of Humour and Satire. The participants did not know what to expect when they were given night vision glasses. Once they had entered a completely dark room and looked around as classical observers, they were invited by the artist, wearing a black cape, to sit in an inflatable boat. The artist presented himself as the smuggler who was going to help them reach the EU.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Petko Dourmana, 8 March 2020

<sup>46</sup> Interview 1 with anonymous participant in the two workshops in Plovdiv, 21 January 2020

The installation started as a role-play with information about what to do and what not to do during the dangerous one-way trip but soon shifted to an open discussion about the participants' personal experience in relation to living abroad, their opinions on Bulgarians' migration to Western Europe, the local integration of migrants who have come to Bulgaria, etc. Still a little bit frightened by the complete darkness and not knowing who is sitting right next to them, the participants were able to dive deeply into an informal and open debate. The role of the artist was to set the mood and provide the space while avoiding the role of a moderator or an expert. This unusual setting opened a space for the airing of various opinions – sometimes liberal and conservative people who did not know each other were seated in the boat and they enjoyed an open discussion, sometimes concluding with a “let's agree to disagree” attitude while in other cases, they started to fight and left angrily. However, without the art installation such a dialogue would not be possible in Gabrovo where it was risky even to announce the event on the social media and not attract negative reactions so this event can be treated as a success.

## 4.2. Hearing another point of view

In addition to the previous point, the three artworks offered something valuable in the polarised contemporary world – hearing another point of view.

The creative process of the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry was designed so that the small personal stories were to be shared with the group and then, using storytelling methods, they were transformed into something new and funny. This very task already served the purpose of looking at the stories from another perspective, not necessarily that initially held by the participant. According to the workshop host, both Serbian artists were sensitive and delicate and managed to stimulate the exchange without imposing their own views.<sup>47</sup>

Pop-Mitic reflected that “the Borderline offensive project is mainly about the inclusion of different voices in the public space. Through different approaches in contemporary art - dance, theatre, film etc., one can get a better and more beautiful picture, a picture that, in fact, is very complex. Each approach helps to complete this picture”.<sup>48</sup> The participants interviewed confirmed that they felt enriched by participating in the artists projects because they gave them another point of view towards the migration phenomenon.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Stanislava Tasheva, Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, 20 December 2019

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Darinka Pop-Mitic, 26 February 2020

<sup>49</sup> Interview 1 with anonymous participant in the two workshops in Plovdiv, 21 January 2020; Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4 with anonymous participants in the immersive instal-

### 4.3. Walking in someone else's shoes

One of the key effects in participatory arts is the emotions they can evoke. In particular, empathy can be experienced which can lead to a long-term change of one's opinion and views.

This effect was very strong in the case of the immersive installation *Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)* because of the very nature of the artwork. The mysterious setting, complete darkness and natural river-like sounds intensified the strong emotions most interviewees felt such as fear, confusion, surprise, stress, cosiness.<sup>50</sup> They had to act like they were migrants who wanted to cross the EU-Turkey border in a boat. In the beginning, the artist asked questions such as "What personal belongings did you bring?", "Which skills of yours would help you survive the dangerous journey?", etc. Then the key point of the dialogue came when the artist abandoned the role-play and started to gently pose questions about the personal migration experience of the participants, about migration stories from their families and friends and their personal opinions on integration and migration, multiculturalism, otherness, social cohesion, etc.

As previously explained, Bulgaria has faced many large waves of emigration over the last 25 years so in almost every family there is some history of migration, including that for seasonal work. At this moment, the participants' perspectives were challenged to switch thinking from "them" to "us" and to seeing the issue from another point of view. A participant noted that "as we were joking, we entered a very serious topic which affects many Bulgarians. Many of them want to go abroad".<sup>51</sup> This is the self-reflective moment which was sought by the artist. „I have tricks. And the most brutal one is to share my own personal experience. When you exchange personal things, people do not perceive you as someone who is trying to deceive them. You give them your things and at one point they try to give you theirs", Dourmana said.<sup>52</sup> Another participant acknowledged that she was led to think about the migrants' experience as if it was her own: "It provoked me to really think what I would bring on such a one-way trip – a knife, a notebook with phones and addresses, photos, dictionaries. The main goal is to survive – I experienced this fully! [...] One should think about these people – it is not easy for

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lation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>50</sup> Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>51</sup> Interview 2 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Petko Dourmana, 8 March 2020



them”.<sup>53</sup> This short immersive experience gave the participant a completely new insight unlike that of the dehumanized picture she had learnt from the media and thus this can also be considered a success.

#### **4.5. Empowerment**

The participatory arts can often be empowering because their participants are not a passive audience but active co-creators who can influence and change the narrative and the artistic outcome. This is particularly clear in the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry workshops which were designed around a strong co-creative process which aimed at developing joint artistic products.

Protić noticed that the migration topic was not a new one for the participants in Plovdiv, although there were not many migrants in town. “This topic was present but simply nobody asked them [the participants] about it. What the workshop did was to raise the subject. As a result, they created funny, bizarre and sharp things”.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Protić pointed out that “through puppets you can hide yourself but also you can be much braver than you normally are, and even more humourous. It kind of has a therapeutic effect. It is a liberating method”.<sup>55</sup>

Learning new skills about storytelling and creating artistic products can be used in other civic activities and in this regard the workshops increased the possibilities of the new generation of active citizens.

### **5. The specific role of humour in understanding migration**

Humour was used in various ways in the three artistic works both in their creative process as well as in the stage when they were presented to the external audience.

First, humour was a key part of the whole co-creative process of the workshops the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry. One of the participants highlighted its importance and described it as a background - “an almost “invisible” but supporting element was the joyful laughter and relaxed vibes which were present during the whole week”.<sup>56</sup> Not only did it inspire the

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<sup>53</sup> Interview 3 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Interview 1 with anonymous participant in the two workshops in Plovdiv, 21 January 2020

participants to be creative and playful but it made discussions and common work lighter and safer.<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry used humour as a tool to twist the narratives and change one's perspective. All the stories which the participants worked with in the workshops had on the whole been unpleasant for the people who had directly experienced them<sup>58</sup>. However, through storytelling methods, these stories were re-examined and deconstructed and something funny was found in each of them<sup>59</sup>. Even if the line between hate speech and free speech can sometimes be very thin, it is important to stress that the workshops observed that political correctness can be the enemy of humour. Pop-Mitic noted that "political correctness is actually killing the opportunity to think about the migrant crisis in an objective way. If we cannot make jokes about our differences, we are in a way blind to understanding those differences and problems".<sup>60</sup>

Thirdly, telling stories using humour can open them up to a wider audience and it can serve as a weapon against polarisation. Protić stressed that: "nowadays the world is very polarised. One of the goals of the Borderline Offensive project is to step out of the safety zone and try to enter all of these ghettos that are around us. That is why humour is one of the tools that is welcomed everywhere and you can communicate through it with different sides in an unpredictable way".<sup>61</sup> After the workshops, the team hosted a public event in Plovdiv to present the newly created artistic products. The topics of migration, integration, otherness, etc. were discussed in a very light and playful manner with a bigger audience. In particular, humour was used to address issues related to fear and prejudice in the local community which opened these up to a broader discussion. According to Protić, humour can be seen as a revolution in political language. "If one uses it, it is easier to reach the goal because the doors are open for the messages. If you don't use humour you will fight in the political mud with the others - stinky and contaminated".<sup>62</sup>

Last but not least, humour has a well-documented therapeutic effect and it can provide relief and improve one's wellbeing, particularly in very tough life situations.<sup>63</sup> Some of the participants in the installation *Three Migrants* in a

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Darinka Pop-Mitic, 26 February 2020

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Margarita Dorovska and Galina Boneva, House of Humour and Satire in

Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) admitted that they had laughed as a defense mechanism in order to reduce their sense of discomfort and even fear in the dark space.<sup>64</sup>

## VIII. The artists' social awareness and responsibility

All the artists interviewed had a solid background in socially-engaged art, as well as on the topic of migration, amongst others. Škart collective, for example, was very socially active in Serbia in the anti-war movements in Yugoslavia in the 90s. It co-founded Group 484, an anti-war and socially engaged group which has been dealing with migration for the last 25 years. Škart has a long track record of activities aimed at making society more sensitive to this topic, including working in migration centers, various activities in schools, etc. Pop-Mitic has been active since the early 2000s as a visual artist in Belgrade. She has always been sensitive in her work about particular issues and pinpoints those instances of problematic ideological mismatching and disturbance in society.

From the very beginning of the 90s, Škart felt that it was their personal obligation to be a part of the political changes and movements in and beyond the former Yugoslavia and now Serbia – it was not a decision but their destiny.<sup>65</sup> The collective has always been open and sensitive to local needs and conditions and embodies various artistic tools such as graphic design, poetry, music, puppet theatre and performance, amongst others. In Serbia, the European Migration Crisis provided the occasion for nationalists to mobilise around unresolved issues regarding the heritage of the former Yugoslavia and the conflict with Kosovo and to self-organise militias to hunt and drive migrants out of Belgrade – polarisation, xenophobia and racism were on the rise.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, Pop-Mitic felt obliged to contribute to the public debate expressing a different kind of opinion to those presented in the media to show people a diversity in opinions and encourage them to think differently.<sup>67</sup>

In the contemporary world where the media in serving political purposes leans towards one side or another, Pop Mitic saw her role as that of telling the truth.<sup>68</sup> According to her, artists have the space to express the truth and they

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Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 9 December 2019

<sup>64</sup> Interview 4 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Darinka Pop-Mitic, 26 February 2020

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

can investigate and tell the people what is really happening<sup>69</sup>. She recognised the urgent need to teach children how to analyse the news in order to get to proper information.<sup>70</sup>

Dourmana took a very different approach in his project *Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)* where he chose to play the role of a catalyst and also a clown who remains at a distance and unbiased.<sup>71</sup> He saw himself as Charon, the ferryman of Hades who carries the souls of the newly deceased across the river Styx to the world of the dead. He refused to take responsibility for the participants and instead insisted that he was only “taking” them and it was the participants who had accepted the role he was offering to them.<sup>72</sup>

Another aspect recognised by Škart was the empowering of the participants of the workshop to continue their own civic participation. Protić noticed that: “the people who came [to the workshops] embraced their role of being conscious about the migrants and fighting for their rights. They used their skills for a collective political fight”.<sup>73</sup> The role which Protić saw for himself was to offer the skills which the participants can use to spread their own messages. In his workshops, the teacher-pupil or audience-performer divisions did not exist – they all learned from each other.<sup>74</sup>

## **X. Social impact on the local community**

The social impact on the local community of the three artistic works is difficult to measure for various reasons. Firstly, they all had a very limited number of participants. Secondly, the research methodology did not allow the taking of a bigger survey and follow up. However, here we will try to highlight some of the impressions of the interviewees which may indicate if such of the projects might have an impact on the local level.

All the artists agreed that the artistic works had a limited social impact due to the low number of participants and the short period of their involvement in the projects (for the *Long Heavy Road* and *Paper Puppet Poetry* it was a week while for the *Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)* it was about 20 minutes).

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Petko Dourmana, 8 March 2020

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Dragan Protić, 23 January 2020

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

However, several points were mentioned. As explored in the previous chapters, an open dialogue was particularly valuable, especially given that it took place in polarised local communities where this is very difficult. The immersive installation made people step into the shoes of the migrants and reflect on what would they do in their place. Some participants felt empathy and arrived at the conclusion that these people had really risked their lives, that their situation was not easy and that they needed our support.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, Pop Mitic reflected that even if it is difficult to measure the effect of a workshop, she is convinced that every such experience changes us a little bit and has the potential for a long-term impact.<sup>76</sup> All the workshops she personally attended changed her as a person or her approach to work, or simply gave her a better understanding, improving her communication skills and making her more able to express her thoughts and ideas and articulate certain problems.<sup>77</sup> Often, such workshops could provide new knowledge and values which were difficult to measure and analyse because they are about the pure human experience.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The research aimed to explore the role of three migration-related socially engaged artistic works in two Bulgarian locations with a low immigrant population – Plovdiv and Gabrovo. The workshops the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry and the immersive installation Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) were developed in the framework of the Borderline Offensive EU-funded project. The research was based on the desk analysis of the relevant documents, nine semi-structured interviews with the various stakeholders as well as one participatory observation.

The local contexts of Plovdiv and Gabrovo can be characterized as being polarised and discussions on migration, integration, social cohesion, etc., can be challenging. However, all three artistic works were able to create a safe space for reflection and dialogue in the context of participatory arts where participants were active co-creators and had the power to influence the artistic results. Immersive art was conceived as a powerful tool to foster a spirit of solidarity, empathy, acceptance and care towards migrants.

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<sup>75</sup> Interview 2 and Interview 3 with anonymous participants in the immersive installation in Gabrovo, 1 February 2020

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Darinka Pop-Mitic, 26 February 2020

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

One of the central topics of the Borderline Offensive project was the use of humour and its various faces. The three artistic artworks benefited from its effects – during the development of the artistic works as well as when presenting them to an audience. Some of the most important insights gained were that humour can make make complex, sensitive issues easier to understand and to talk about as well as serve as a weapon against polarisation and open up a debate even among people with different opinions about migration.

The artists' social awareness can be particularly important when it comes to participatory arts as it can change public narratives about a certain topic. The three artists examined in the paper had a solid track record in socially-engaged art, as well as in forced migration. They invested effort into sensitising the society, telling the truth, showing people other points of view and empowering active citizens.

The paper demonstrated that participatory socially-engaged art can foster social change if it is scaled accordingly. Therefore, the paper recommends developing and realizing similar projects and measuring their effect and social impact on the European, national or local levels.



## Appendix

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted for the research:

1. Margarita Dorovska, Director and Galina Boneva, Head of Information Services & Archives Dept., House of Humour and Satire in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 9th December 2019
2. Stanislava Tasheva, Projects and Programs Manager, Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, 20th December 2019
3. One anonymous participant in the Long Heavy Road and Paper Puppet Poetry workshops in Plovdiv, 21st January 2020
4. Dragan Protić, Artist, Paper Puppet Poetry, 23rd January 2020
5. Darinka Pop-Mitic, Artist, The Long Heavy Road, 3rd February 2020 and 26th February 2020
6. Two anonymous participants in the Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) performance at Gabrovo Game Jam, 1st February 2020
7. One anonymous participant in the Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) performance at Gabrovo Game Jam, 1st February 2020
8. Three anonymous participants in the Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) performance at Gabrovo Game Jam, 1st February 2020
9. Petko Dourmana, Artist, Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler), 8th March 2020

In addition, one participant observation took place:

1. Three Migrants in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Smuggler) @ Gabrovo Game Jam 2020, 1st - 2nd February 2020 in Gabrovo, Bulgaria





# Perils of artistic creation and collaboration within socially-engaged artistic projects: case study of Borderline Offensive artistic residency in Košice

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## Introduction

In the last week of June 2018, group of four artists met in the city of Košice in the eastern part of Slovakia. Not knowing each other before, they were brought together by an international artistic project Borderline Offensive (BO) and came to Košice to spend their time as artists-in-residence. A playwright and transmedia artist from the Netherlands, a visual artist from Palestine, a self-proclaimed poetrying rebel and experimental practitioner from Serbia, and, as the only local, a theatre director and actor from Košice—it was clearly not the style of their artistic practices that had brought them together. What the four artists nonetheless shared was their declared interest in humor, migration, and participatory art—three topics that constituted the main frame of the project for which all four of them had successfully applied.

The primary aims of BO were to create a “transnational and transdisciplinary artistic platform” and explore “how art & humor contribute to intercultural dialogue, social integration, and peace within and beyond Europe” (Borderline Offensive n.d.). Adopting a slogan “laughing in the face of fear”,

BO intended to employ “art, participation, and playful attitudes as tools for non-violent activism and creative transgression, in the fight against fear, populism, and existential anxiety” (ibid.). The artistic residencies that took place also in three other European cities besides Košice and hosted altogether 19 artists from Europe and the Middle East represented the first stage of the project. They were meant to initiate a creative journey of the artists by giving them an opportunity to collectively explore the potential of participatory art in making people laugh in the face of fear of the “migration crisis” that was at the time “creeping” all over Europe. The task of the four artists staying in Košice was thus seemingly clear: explore the local migration-related fears and tensions in Slovakia, think of possible ways of reacting to them artistically and with humor, and come up with an idea for an artwork whose production could later be supported and realized within the frame of BO.

Yet once in Košice, the four artists encountered a number of difficulties that hindered their creative processes and threatened their capacity to fulfill the task in a manner they would find both internally meaningful and externally justifiable. In this paper, I will focus on two major difficulties that also produced the most significant tensions in the group and were directly related to the organization frame of the residency and of the project as such. First, although the artworks produced within BO were meant to draw inspiration from local environment and react to migration-related fears and tensions, the opportunities of the artists to explore the local migratory context of Košice turned out to be limited. The planned meeting with the local migrant support group got cancelled, and no alternatives were found within the limited timeframe of the residency that would allow the artists to get in touch with migrants living in Slovakia or get into a direct contact with the local “migration reality” in any other way. Up until the last days of their residency, some of the artists felt that they had nothing substantial to hold on to that could inspire their art and make it locally relevant. The second, even bigger tension that shaped the artists’ creative process during the residency stemmed from the negotiation about whether to work individually where each would develop their own idea for an artwork or work together as a group and develop a common idea for a collective artwork. Although BO organizers presented both options as equally legitimate, they were not equal in their consequences: the BO budget was limited and only one project per residency was likely to be supported and produced later on. The artists thus faced an uneasy choice between their individual interests—present in the prospect of having a full creative freedom and developing their own idea for an artwork—and what came to be understood as the collective interest of the group, present in the prospect of developing a collective artwork that would combine the creative input of all four artists

and foster collaboration instead of competition. Even though at some point of the residency all artists recognized the worthiness of a collaborative approach and committed to try to work together, their attempts never translated into a joint artistic proposal and their attempts at collaboration ended in vain.

How can we analytically make sense of the two tensions that occurred during the BO residency in Košice? And what do they tell us about the complexities of artistic creation and collaboration within socially engaged artistic projects—such as BO—that have recently become a popular instrument of fostering tolerance and intercultural dialogue in European societies?

I will answer these questions by relying on rich ethnographic data acquired through participant observation at the residency, individual and group interviews with the artists and analysis of documents produced by BO. I will offer a close interpretative reading of the two tensions through the analytical lens of the French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Thévenot 2007, 2014). This theoretical perspective will allow me to closely trace artists' attempts to coordinate themselves with the requirements of the residency both as individuals and as a group. I will show that tensions occurred in situations in which the artists' preferred mode of coordination were not sufficiently sustained by the organizational frame of the residency but also when they conflicted with each other.

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## **Social embeddedness of artistic practices**

Instead of seeing art purely as an expression of an individual creative capacity of the artist, it needs to be understood also as a form of social practice. Such is the proposition of Tasos Zembylas (2014) in his edited volume *Artistic Practices: Social Interactions and Cultural Dynamics*. By introducing the concept of practice into the sociology of art, Zembylas wishes to bring attention to the social embeddedness of artistic creation. He defines practices as “configurations of cohesive activities that establish coordinated and collaborative relationships among members of a community”, simultaneously covering actors, objects, and institutional arrangements in the artistic field (Zembylas 2014:1). In other words, even if many works of art are completed individually, become subjects of strict authorship rights, and result from processes that many artists describe as personal or even intimate, the process of artistic creation is inherently social and is always shaped by artists' interactions with their external environment. This proposition resonates with an earlier argument of Becker (2014 [1982]), who explored the complexity of “art worlds” and argued that their different human and non-human constituents, including artists' support personnel and collaborators, artistic conventions, funding opportunities, and opinions of art critics, always leave an imprint on the artwork.

This line of thinking about art has several implications for this study. First of all, it contextualizes the research focus on the dynamics of artistic creation and collaboration taking place during the residency rather than on the presentation of completed artworks at the very end of the project. Although the residency represented only the first step of BO, it was in many ways crucial--the residency was meant to provide opportunities to artists to do artistic research, establish collaborations, and develop ideas for artworks that could later be produced within the frame of BO. The residency thus set the direction for the artists' overall engagement within BO and defined the contours of artworks that were later produced.

Second, Zembylas's emphasis on social embeddedness of art is highly relevant given the complex institutional arrangements within which each BO residency operated. The basic format and requirements of the residency were decided upon in advance by the BO project team and functionally aligned with its overall aims. The residency was further developed by local BO partner organizations who hosted the residency and prepared the program, adding activities that were in their view meaningful in the specific context of each city and formulating their own set of expectations from both the residency and the artists. Finally, the residency was also actively co-created by the artists themselves through their interactions with the local environment, with one another, as well as through their expectations, ideas, and overall agency. All these complex decisions and interactions thus informed the creative work of artists in a crucial manner and created, on the one hand, a sphere of opportunities for the artists and their creative work but, on the other hand, also a sphere of limits.

Third, if all artistic practices are socially embedded, this is particularly true of the so-called socially engaged art, for which social intercourse represents the main factor of its existence (Helguerra 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Socially engaged artists often inhabit spaces between art (as conventionally understood), social work, and political activism. Even though there are multiple ways of being a socially engaged artist--each of them reflecting a slightly different position in this imaginary triangle--socially engaged art is often subjected to judgement other than purely aesthetic. Even though BO was officially presented as a project with the focus on "participatory art" and not necessary on "socially engaged art", with its ambition to react to a specific societal malady (fear of "migration crisis") and address it in a creative way (through participatory

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1 Socially engaged art represents a very diverse set of artistic practices that can assume different forms and entail a varying extent of participation and collaboration. What is, however, integral to all forms of participatory art is "a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas" (Bishop 2006).

art and with the help of humor), BO certainly could be understood also as a socially engaged artistic project. Examining artists creative work during the residency thus provided a valuable opportunity to observe how artists make sense of different and often conflicting evaluations integral to socially engaged artistic practice, such as the negotiation between the aesthetic, political, and community implications of their work (Bishop 2012).

In order to disentangle the tensions observed during the residency, I will utilize the theoretical framework of French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Thévenot 2007, 2014). This framework is called “pragmatic” primarily for its attentiveness to the evaluative competence of social actors. Developed as a critical response to the structural determinism of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), pragmatic sociology sees action as an expression of the actors’ capacity to take part in social life in ways they find meaningful, delicately balancing between their own agency and conditions of the wider environment that they are part of. The conceptual and analytical tools of pragmatic sociology help to bridge the divide between the focus on the individual will and social structures and study both a) different *regimes of engagement* that social actors rely upon when they seek coordination with themselves, trying to find a way how to maintain their dynamic identities when responding to the conditions of the external world as individuals and b) different *grammars of commonality* that social actors rely upon when they try to coordinate their actions with other people as members of community. This dual focus of the framework on both the individual and the community allows us to capture different ways in which people establish commonality and manage conflicts (Table 1). The most intimate, engagement in familiarity builds on attachments to common-places and makes it possible for people to coordinate their actions by relying on shared emotions and habitual knowledge, conditioned they share an attachment to the same common-place. The project-oriented engagement in a plan builds on a functional means-end oriented logic and makes it possible for people to coordinate their action by freely choosing from equally legitimate publicly available options. The argumentative-based engagement in justification builds on a requirement of relating one’s concerns to one of the publicly recognizable orders of worth (Table 2), which makes it possible for people to coordinate their action by voicing criticism and establishing compromises. Finally, the sensory engagement in exploration which is often understood as crucial impetus for artistic practice builds on the temporary exaltation caused by novelty. As the only regime of engagement, it does not facilitate any collective coordination in a corresponding grammar of commonality—if people want to make their sensory experience, acquired through exploration, accessible to others, they first

have to translate it into one of the three grammars of commonality by either translating it into an emotionally charged common-place that can be shared with others (as when doing the exploration together), an individual plan (as when deciding to explore a particular community, object, or a situation), or a form of justification grounded in the inspired order of worth (as when defending one's artistic proposal molded upon one's own exploration by referring to its creative potential and capacity to inspire others) (Table 1).

<b>Regimes of engagement</b>	<b>Engagement in familiarity</b>	<b>Engagement in a plan</b>	<b>Engagement in justification</b>	<b>Engagement in exploration (Auray 2007)</b>
Evaluative good	Ease, comfort, personal convenience	Accomplished will	Order of worth (qualifying for the common good)	Excitement by novelty
Information format	Usual, congenial	Functional	Conventional	Surprising
Capacity, power	Attached to	Autonomous, willful	Qualified, worthy	Curious, explorer
Mutual engagement	Close friendship, intimacy	Joint project, contract	Legitimate convention of coordination	Play
Corresponding grammar of commonality	Grammar of common-places	Liberal grammar	Grammar of plural orders of worth	-

Table 1 Regimes of engagement and grammars of commonality, based on Thévenot (2014) and adapted by the author

<b>Orders of worth</b>	<b>Market</b>	<b>Industrial</b>	<b>Civic</b>	<b>Domestic</b>	<b>Inspired</b>	<b>Opinion</b>
Mode of evaluation	price, cost	efficiency	collective welfare	esteem, reputation, tradition	non-conformity, singularity, creativity	renown, fame
Grounds for critique	market competitiveness	competence, reliability, planning	equality, solidarity	trustworthiness	passion, enthusiasm	popularity, audience, recognition

Table 2 Orders of worth, based on Thévenot et. al (2000) and adapted by the author

What is also important for the argument in this paper is that none of the four engagements and their three corresponding grammars of commonality are from definition superior or inferior to the other. They all capture different modes in which individuals relate to their external environment and each other in their everyday life. Nevertheless, it can happen that specific situations will be more welcoming to a single form of engagement at the expense of others or that mutual coordination in a specific grammar would even be temporarily impossible. For instance, artists who have never seen each other or worked with each other before and meet in a city which is for most of them new will likely not be able to immediately coordinate their actions by relying on the grammar of common-places as it takes time to build familiarity with each other and with their external environment. Similarly, in some situations, the liberal grammar that respects individual will and personal projects might come into conflict with the grammar of plural orders of worth, which requires all decisions to be qualified in relation to some form of a common good (Table 2). In other words, the conceptual framework of the French pragmatic sociology makes it possible to study situations of tensions and conflicts by paying attention to modes of coordination rather than to one's character features or structural position in the social field, determined by nationality, ethnicity, race, gender or any other characteristics.

## **Research methods**

This paper results from my cooperation with BO in the capacity of a researcher. Together with three other researchers, we were hired to follow BO activities over a period of three years, starting with the residencies. Given the geographical dispersion of the project and the fact that its activities often took place simultaneously in different countries, each one of us was assigned to follow BO activities in a single country, in my case, Slovakia. My main contact point during the period of my research was the association KAIR (Košice Artist in Residence) that acted as the Slovak BO partner and organized all project-related activities in Slovakia. The residency itself was hosted by Šopa Gallery—a small independent gallery in Košice that cooperates with KAIR and regularly hosts artists-in-residence from various countries. My initial research aim was to study the role of art and humor in shifting the symbolic boundaries between the locals and the immigrants. However, the fact that the artists did not have an opportunity to interact with any migrants and include them into their artistic practice prompted me to alter my research focus. Witnessing multiple tensions that accompanied the artists' creative process during the residency, I decided to turn my attention toward the process of artistic creation and collaboration within socially engaged artistic projects. I

tried to understand how the how the organization structure of the residency shaped artists' creative process and how the artists responded by trying to find a coordination both with themselves and with others.

The present analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork performed during the BO residency in Košice in the summer of 2018. The residency lasted ten days, with the first four days devoted primarily to exploration of Košice and artists' networking and the remaining six days to creative work, group discussions, artists' presentations, and organization of a cultural event for the public. As per the arrangement with the Slovak BO coordinator, I arrived to Košice on day five to be present at the "work part" of the residency. During my stay, I utilized a combination of qualitative research methods including individual and group interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of project-related documents. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with all four artists and the Slovak BO coordinator. I asked the artists about their motivation to apply for BO, past artistic projects, preferred style of artistic practice, and opinions on the role of participation and humor in art. I asked the Slovak BO coordinator about her motivation to participate in BO and about the development, aims and structure of the project. I performed participatory observations of all artists' formal meetings and group discussions as well as observations of some of their informal activities. At the end of the residency, I prepared feedback forms and organized a group discussion in which I invited the artists to reflect on the residency and on their experience of working together. All interviews were transcribed and, together with the artists' feedback forms, fieldnotes, and other project-related documents, analyzed with the help of qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. The data were subjected to two rounds of open and thematic coding.

My research presence at the residency requires some reflection. Even though the Slovak BO coordinator assured me that the artists were notified about my arrival to the residency in advance, I sensed that--especially in the beginning--my presence was not without problems. For all four artists, it was an entirely new experience to be accompanied by a researcher who was observing their creative process. While some of them initially reacted to my presence with suspicion, others wanted me to join their discussions more actively and give opinions on conflictual issues or assume the role of a facilitator. Only once I sufficiently clarified my role in the project, particularly my intention not to intervene into the artists' creative process or group dynamic, I sensed that my presence got accepted and I was able to develop a relaxed relationship with all four artists and gain their consent to conduct observations and interviews. However, a question remains whether the artists would have agreed to participate in a research if they were asked about it in



advance and if my presence was not merely introduced to them as a part of the overall ‘project package’. Therefore, I would like to emphasize the necessity of a full consideration of ethical aspects of research even in projects in which the research represents a seemingly minor part of the activities and to gain informed consent from all parties in advance, preferably prior to the start of the project.

### **The peril of getting to know the local migration context in mere ten days**

One of the main requirements of the BO residencies was that the artists should conduct artistic research into the local contexts of migration in cities (or countries) where the residencies took place and find a way of reacting to it in their artistic practice, relying on humor and participatory art. Such a requirement of local embeddedness of artistic practice is not unusual for socially engaged artistic projects, many of which develop in response to specific local issues and in cooperation with communities to whom such issues are of immediate relevance (Bishop 2012). Nonetheless, this requirement has important implications for artistic practice, as it presupposes that when the artists themselves are not ‘locals’, they will acquire at least some understanding of local conditions and find a way to posit their artwork in relation to the living realities of people to whom it should appeal. In other words, that they will have sufficient opportunities to not only engage themselves in exploration but also to establish at least some extent of familiarity with the local environment. Otherwise, they risk that their artwork will fail to resonate with the local audience and be considered superficial at best, or an utter misrepresentation of the local reality at worst.

All artists attending the residency in Košice reflected on the implications of this requirement of their artistic practice and took it rather seriously. Given that three of them came from abroad and have never been to Slovakia before, they thematized their position of “being outsiders” to the local context and expressed their interest in “learning something new” (fieldnotes). The question of how to gain understanding of the local context became a frequent topic of artists’ discussions and emerged as an important theme in individual interviews and in the final feedback round. It was the visual artist in particular who was the most articulate about the importance of thorough exploration of the local context when doing socially engaged art. Coming from Palestine, he openly reflected on his position of being an “alien” in Slovak cultural environment and insisted that without a thorough understanding of the local context, an artist can easily fall into the trap of being disrespectful to the local people and orientaling their culture, something which he wanted to avoid. He pointed out that while in a new cultural environment everything might

seem exotic, the artist should nonetheless strive for a deeper understanding that can be best achieved by spending time with locals.

To understand, I try to be with locals. I try to be with people who have opinion on the situation, because I'm not going to be like an alien to come here as an artist, I will do this and this and this, but this could be (pause) in a year, this could be like disrespectful for the people because you don't know their culture. So it's not just about the language, it's also about the culture, appropriation of something, and I don't want to fall into the trap of orientalism. Because wherever you go there are exotic things and you come as a human and different culture is exotic, different food, different music, so I need to be aware also before I'm [getting] into somebody else's life, I need to understand these people, I need to understand their thoughts, their needs. (Visual artist, interview)

It has to be noted that not all artists present at the residency conditioned their ability to come up with an idea for an artistic project with the same extent of "deep understanding" and contact with the locals. The transmedia artist, for instance, introduced himself as someone who usually does not work directly with communities and prefers to work at a "more abstract level", enjoying the perspective of an outsider that makes it possible for him to "assume a different perspective". Nonetheless, all artists agreed that it is necessary to understand the local context to at least some extent and expressed a wish to understand it better. The primary question for them was thus not *whether* to draw inspiration locally or not, but *how* to do it. How can one gain a sufficient understanding of the local context in mere ten days?

The organizational team of the residency tried to support the artists in their engagement in exploration. However, as the Slovak BO coordinator admitted, the limited time-frame of the residency also presented a challenge for them as they are used to organizing much longer residencies of 2 to 3 months. She further explained that during their usual residencies, they would typically reserve the first 10 days solely for artists' exploration. In the case of the BO residency this was, however, clearly not possible as they had to fit the entire program into just 10 days. Therefore, they had to find a compromise that would make it possible for the artists to get to know the city effectively in a short period of time.

The compromise was made by introducing a number of officially organized events into the program that were aimed to facilitate artists' encounters with the local environment and its people. The official program of the residency thus started with four days of organized urban tours that enabled the artists to visit major cultural institutions of the city (day 1), city center (day 2), Levoča, a small UNESCO town an hour's drive away from Košice (day

3), and city's panel-block neighborhoods, considered to be a post-socialist landmark (day 4). This format certainly allowed the artists—particularly the three international artists—to gain basic awareness of the physical and social landscape of the city in a quick and effective manner. However, it remains a question to what extent it provided them with the opportunities to gain the kind of a deep understanding of the local realities of people that the visual artist was talking about. Rather than getting immersed into the daily life of the city, the artists were merely guided through it, their social contacts largely limited to the residency organizers and guides who accompanied them on the tours.

What is more, the guided urban tours did not offer the artists many opportunities to explore the part of the local context that was meant to be of utmost relevance for their artistic practice within BO: the local context of migration. The opportunity to learn more about the situation of migrants living in Slovakia and local migration-related tensions was scheduled only later on into the residency, on day 6, when the artists were invited to attend a picnic organized by a local NGO for its clients, a small community of asylum seekers and refugees living in Košice. The artists were looking forward to this meeting as they hoped that personal encounter with immigrants will help them grasp the local migration context better and get some inspiration for their artistic practice. However, the picnic got cancelled due to bad weather and no alternative was found that would allow the artists to meet the immigrants living in Košice in the few remaining days of the residency.

At this point, a short introduction of the local migration context is useful. Like other European countries, the topic of migration has experienced a growing salience in the public debates in Slovakia since 2015, with migrants predominantly portrayed as a cultural and security threat (Androvičová 2015, KISSOVÁ 2018).



Figure 1 One of the main slogans of the Slovak social democratic party SMER SD in 2016 parliamentary election campaign was “We are protecting Slovakia”. This slogan reacted to then ongoing ‘migration crisis’. The picture features the political leader of the party and former long-term prime minister of Slovakia, Róbert Fico. Source: strana-smer.sk

The discourse of securitization and anti-immigration rhetoric was readily embraced by the entire spectrum of political parties, ranging from the far right to social democrats, and it represented one of the top issues in the 2016 parliamentary elections. In stark contrast to the visibility of the migration issue in the public debates are, however, the actual numbers and public visibility of immigrants living in the country. Slovakia's approach to asylum policy is notoriously strict, and even at the peak of the 'migration crisis' during the years 2015 and 2017, Slovakia granted asylum to altogether 204 refugees (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic 2021). The country does not have a long history of being an immigrant receiving country and the proportion of its residents with a foreign citizenship is still among the lowest in Europe, albeit constantly growing<sup>2</sup>. Approximately 50% of all foreigners living in Slovakia are citizens of other EU countries, with three largest groups coming from Czechia, Hungary, and Romania. The other half are citizens of non-EU countries, with the three largest groups coming from Ukraine, Serbia, and Russia. The largest population of foreigners live in Bratislava, where they constitute around 8% of its total population of (Kadlečíková 2018). Even though the city of Košice is, with its approximately 240,000 inhabitants, the second largest city in the country and, as the locals proudly say, the 'metropolis of the East', the population of foreigners living there is much smaller, representing only 3% of its total population (Luptáková and Medľová 2018). In most day-to-day encounters, the presence of immigrants in Košice is not visible and becomes noticeable only at specific places such as the university, some of the city's cultural hubs, and a handful of restaurants in the city center serving ethnic food.

It is only natural then that the local migration context also impacted the artists' ability to conduct their artistic research into this issue: Losing the opportunity to interact with the immigrants directly during an organized event, they found it difficult to grasp the local migration context well enough to be able to react to it artistically. Even though the theatre director, as the only local in the group, assumed the role of a "cultural translator" and tried to initiate the visiting artists into the local migration debates--talking to them both about the recent populist misuse of the migration issue as well as about the historical context of ethnic Othering in the country--his attempts appeared to be mostly lost on the visiting artists. The reason was not that they would not want to listen but that listening was not enough. Mere description of the migration context in Slovakia and its cultural roots did not substitute

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2 According to the statistics of the Slovak Office of the Border and Alien Police from 30<sup>th</sup> June 2018, the number of foreign state nationals living in Slovakia was 109,233 and represented approximately 2% of the total population of the country.

the sensation that stems from a direct experience and failed to transmit the emotion that could spark the artists' creative response.

The visiting artists did not remain passive in the face of these developments. Once it became clear that the planned meeting with the migrant support group will not take place, they started to proactively look for other opportunities that would allow them to get a more direct experience of the local migration context. Finding out about an abandoned asylum center that the Slovak government wanted to sell on the pretext of having “too few asylum seekers in the country” (Sme.sk 2015), they expressed their wish to go see it. However, this plan was turned down almost immediately for logistical reasons—the center was far away from Košice and guarded by a security service. The second proposal came from the visual artist who found out that a group of Afghani soldiers was being trained at the aviation training center in Košice and expressed his wish to visit the center and meet them. This plan also turned out to be unrealistic—even though the Slovak BO project coordinator contacted the center and tried to negotiate access for the artist, the request was turned down. Finally, acknowledging the evasiveness of the migration situation in Slovakia yet still searching for an opportunity to obtain a direct experience with the local context of prejudice and differing, the poetrying rebel came up with an idea to visit Luník IX, Košice's largest socially-excluded neighborhood, inhabited by ethnic Roma. Although the suggestion to focus on the situation of Roma instead of migrants *de facto* represented a shift from the original BO topic, it can also be read as an expression of the artist's adaptation to the local context—while the local migration context remained evasive to the artists, the symptoms of social exclusion of the local Roma population had been visible to them from the start. Yet even the plan to visit the neighborhood turned out to be unfeasible. Given the shortage of time, the residency organizers did not manage to find anyone who could accompany the artists to the neighborhood and ensure that their visit would not appear to the locals as mere “slum tourism” (Frenzel and Koens 2012) and contribute to further stigmatization of the local Roma.

Partial catharsis with respect to merging deeper into the local context came only on the second-to-last day of the residency during an event that the artists organized for the public. The event was held in *Tabačka*, an old tobacco factory turned into a popular center of independent culture in the city. The artists prepared a number of short activities, including a rhythmic game, poetry reading, discussion with the audience about their roots and experience of migration, and shared dinner consisting of a Lebanese dish prepared by the visual artist with the assistance of the residency team. Even though the event was attended mainly by the community surrounding the

Šopa Gallery and not by immigrants, it provided the artists with the long-sought opportunity to interact with the local community and attune themselves to the local conditions of the city, which visibly sparked their curiosity and interest. During the concluding group discussion, several artists pointed out that the event finally helped them to better understand some of the previously discussed issues and get connected to the local community. However, as the visual artist sadly remarked, it perhaps came too late as they were already leaving the city on the next day.

### **The peril of deciding whether to work together or each on their own**

The second major tension that arose during the residency in Košice revolved around the question of whether the artists should work together as a group and develop a single idea for a collective artistic proposal or whether they should work individually, each developing an idea for an artistic proposal on their own. The guidelines of the project did not offer any clear guidance: they simply stated that “artists participating in the same residency may submit proposals individually or collectively”. It was thus left to artists to decide for themselves. Yet the collective nature of the residency—and particularly the fact that the artists spent most of the residency together as a group and were sharing their ideas on a daily basis—made it difficult for them to approach this question as a mere matter of individual interests. Even though they were repeatedly assured by the local BO coordinator that both options were equally legitimate with respect to the BO guidelines and that they could freely decide for either of them, some of them felt that to spend their time together in Košice would not be worthwhile without at least trying to come up with a joint artistic proposal. The question of whether to work together or each on their own thus became reframed as a moral question. This effectively led to a shift in the dominant grammar of commonality that the artists relied upon to coordinate their actions during the residency: the liberal grammar was replaced by the grammar of plural orders of worth, prompting the artists to address the question on how to work together and qualify their positions in relation to one of the orders of worth, speaking to the common interest of the group.

Among the loudest voices calling for artistic collaboration was the poetrying rebel, who repeatedly said that he would “consider it a huge pity” if they “would not at least try building on all the ideas and all the potential that was there in the room and make something out of it together” (fieldnotes). In his view, the worthiest way of proceeding with the task would be if all four of them found a way of working together, even if it meant that they would have

to leave behind their original ideas with which they had arrived to Košice and find a way of integrating their perspectives and skills into one project that would involve each of them equally. Prioritizing collective spirit over particular interests, his proposal was firmly grounded in the evaluative logic of the civic order of worth.

However, this proposal was not met with an immediate approval in the group. Some of the artists were reluctant to abandon the prospect of developing their own project and make artistic collaboration their one and only goal during the residency. This position was most clearly articulated by the transmedia artist, who came to the residency with a more or less clear idea on what he wanted to do—a transmedia artistic production that would likely include a theater play and a card game—and that he wanted to develop further. Although he indicated both his openness for others to join in (if they wanted) as well as his interest to actively take part in developing any other ideas that could potentially lead to a group project (if there was enough collective will for it), he made it very clear that he was not willing to drop his original plan even if this meant that he would be involved in two projects simultaneously. He thus managed to negotiate a compromise with the others. On the one hand, he complied with the evaluative logic of the civic order of worth: If others wanted to work together, he would not be the one to break the party for the sake of his own interest. On the other hand, he succeeded in making his decision to work on his own project justifiable to the others by qualifying it within the order of inspired worth—as artists, the others should certainly understand that it is not only the collective spirit that breeds art, but mainly inspiration; thus, when one has it, they should better follow it.

A similar strategy was initially also attempted by the visual artist. However, contrary to the transmedia artist, the visual artist did not arrive to Košice with a clear idea for a project, as he hoped to find the inspiration while engaging in the exploration of the local context. At the time when the collective discussions started, he was still in the process of looking for an inspiration, which was further complicated by limited opportunities to establish meaningful contact with locals and the general lack of time. Trying to justify his interest in pursuing his own plan by also relying on the inspired order of worth, his justification seemed less legitimate to the other artists who instead saw in it a lack of commitment to the shared interest of the group.

The call for collaboration grew stronger once the artists learned that due to the budget restrictions of BO, only a single project per residency was likely to be funded and produced later on. This information was new to the artists, who were not informed in advance about the details of BO's budget and the selection process that was meant to take place in the latter stage of the pro-

ject. This finding thus partially reframed the discussion, as the artists realized that if they decided to proceed individually, their projects would enter a mutual competition, the idea of which threatened the solidarity in the group. If they decided to work individually, only one of them would likely get the financial support necessary for the production of their project. Suddenly, it was no longer only the appeal to the collective spirit of the group that spoke in favor of the collaborative approach, but also the appeal to equal redistribution of limited financial resources or, in other words, a compromise between the evaluative logic of the civic and market orders of worth. This compromised logic was most strongly embraced by the theater director, who repeatedly appealed to the others to be aware that if they decide to “do a thing on their own”, they might “not get any funding”, or they might “compromise the chances of getting the funding for the others” (fieldnotes). In his view, the artistic collaboration represented not only the most democratic, but also the most financially sustainable solution for all.

At some point of the collective discussions—which have evolved in the course of several days—all artists signaled their openness to participate in the collective brainstorming that could potentially lead to a joint group proposal. However, it remained clear that the success of a collective endeavor was conditioned by their ability to come up with an idea that would artistically speak to them all (inspired order of worth), which was, for various reasons, not easy. First of all, the artists found themselves in the situation in which they were trying to work together creatively without knowing each other well. Although the common program at the beginning of the residency made it possible for them to establish some extent of familiarity in the group—they for instance developed a habit of taking turns in fetching the coffee for everyone—when it came to the knowledge of each other’s style of work they were still complete strangers. Absence of shared common-places required a constant process of translation through which they were trying to explain to each other the important aspects of their artistic practice. Such translation was, however, costly both in terms of time and energy and often did not bring desirable outcomes—the artists found it difficult to share with others the aspects of their artistic practice which were important to them by merely talking about them. Second, the artists were also discovering how much their judgment were shaped by broader cultural repertoires (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) typical for the cultural environment from which they came. During the discussions they would, for instance, commonly refer to what has been done or what has not been done in their country of origin when evaluating a specific creative idea of other artists. Third, the artists’ discussions were marked by a constant time pressure that reflected not only the limited time-frame of



the residency but also the fact that they also had other obligations during the residency --such as preparing their personal presentations for the Open Studio Night (day 5) or the program for the public event (day 9). The artists thus constantly juggled different tasks and wanted to make the common discussions more effective, a quality characteristic for the industrial order of worth. However, in the absence of a facilitator and without any clear structure of the discussion to hold onto, efficiency was hard to achieve. With each passing day without a workable idea, tension during the common discussions grew as the artists were getting more and more aware of the approaching end of the residency and a necessity to present a project proposal.

The tipping point came when the visual artist decided to skip on the discussion meeting. Realizing that his participation in group discussions effectively prevented him from carrying on his exploration, he grew visibly restless, communicating to the group that he “felt disconnected from the local reality” and that he “was not used to working as a studio artist”. Unable to combine the engagement in exploration with his presence in the group discussions in a functional manner, he eventually had to make a choice and decided to prioritize a path that could potentially lead him to a creative idea, indicating his withdrawal from the commitment to the collective project.

This turn of events did not sit well with the rest of the group. Despite the general struggle to come up with a creative idea that would appeal to all, the three remaining artists were still determined to keep trying to work together and continued to cultivate a sense of group solidarity. Therefore, they were reluctant to see the decision of the visual artist as a legitimate choice. Instead, they viewed it through the evaluative logic of the civic order of worth, which made it seem more like an expression of a betrayal of the collective commitment. This further aggravated the tensions that were already present in the group and produced a tense working atmosphere.

The other three artists eventually managed to come up with an idea which, at least for the time being, all of them found promising--an interactive guide for immigrants coming to Košice that was meant to prepare them for the life in the city. This idea appeared to meet all the evaluation criteria that the artists tried to weave into their creative process during the residency: it had a relevance to the local migration context of Košice (domestic order of worth), it offered enough space for creative self-realization and utilization of different skillsets that the artists possessed (inspired order of worth), it resulted from a collaboration among several artists (civic order of worth), and it would mean that each of them will receive some budget for the artwork production (market order of worth). However, given that this idea emerged only during the second-to-last day of the residency when they were already busy with the

preparation of the event for the public, the artists had almost no time to elaborate on it further. Although all three of them presented this idea as something they were genuinely interested in and wanted to develop further, it was apparent that the idea was only being developed and the end of the residency cut their collaboration short.

In the concluding discussion, the artists displayed ambivalent opinions about their experience of working together. They openly talked about their difficulties to work together without knowing where they came from, both in terms of cultural contexts of their countries of origin and their professional background and styles of artistic practice. Although all of them were inclined to see the attempts to work together as a good learning experience, they nonetheless pointed out that clearer information regarding the aims of BO, its budget, overall expectations regarding the style of work during the residency, more support during the process (e.g., in a form of a facilitator of group discussions), and especially more time would make it possible for them to work together more efficiently. While each of the four artists had something important to say about their overall experience from the collective process, the theater director managed to capture best what seemed to be the overall emotion.

## **Conclusion**

Artistic residencies always mark a break from established routines of artistic practice and bear a promise of encountering something new, whether in the form of new places, new people, new cultures, new artistic styles, or simply new inspiration (Badham et al. 2017). Residencies can also help artists acquire new skills, develop professional networks, get feedback, gain a sense of recognition, build audiences, or acquire funding (Lehman 2017). However, the extent to which artists can benefit from these opportunities depends both on the organizational structure of the residency and the overall dynamics of interactions that unfold once artists arrive to the new environment. Therefore, we need to pay attention to both: the conditions of the external environment and the artists' coordination with it.

Through the close interpretative reading of two tensions occurring during the BO artistic residency in Košice, I was able to reveal and sociologically interpret some of the complexities that accompany artists' coordination in the specific setting of an artistic residency taking place within an international socially engaged artistic project. In the first part of my analysis I showed that a lack of opportunities to engage in exploration of local context can

produce significant tensions in the process of artistic creation, particularly if local embeddedness of artistic practice is both required by the project and deemed meaningful by the artists. What is more, I also showed that in the context of socially engaged artistic projects mere exploration is often not enough as artists feel a need to not only explore but also to build some extent of familiarity with the local context, establishing connections with the locals and their lives. This finding has important implications for the planning of socially engaged artistic projects as it lays requirements on their organizers to actively create opportunities not only for artists' exploration but also for their familiarity building—a process which requires both time and close contact with the local environment. In the second part of my analysis I elucidated some of the challenges accompanying artistic collaboration in international and interdisciplinary settings, which also constitute a common feature of many socially engaged artistic projects. I showed that a relative absence of shared common-places among the artists both when it comes to the familiarity with each other's artistic style and cultural background required them to coordinate themselves primarily through the grammar of multiple orders of worth, having to justify their ideas and translate even those aspects of their artistic practice, which they took for granted, to a publicly accessible format. Such translation is costly as it requires both sufficient time and support of the external environment. However, the organizational frame of the residency impeded artists' efforts at coordinating themselves in this grammar as both the limited time they had for group discussions and the relative lack of support they received when trying to work together made it difficult for them to find possible compromises. It is only symptomatic that once the artists managed to come up with a workable idea, the residency was almost at the end, leaving the artists unable to further develop it into a plan.

All in all, my findings speak to the necessity to open a discussion on how to organize artistic residencies taking place within socially engaged artistic projects in a more responsive manner, so that they could respond more flexibly to the needs that emerge once artists encounter the complex social context with which they should interact instead of merely following a “project-oriented logic” typical for neoliberal capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). My analysis revealed that socially engaged artistic practice is sustained by complex engagements and their corresponding grammars. The organizational structure of the residency should thus ideally create sufficient opportunities for the artists to develop different forms of engagements, whether this entails more flexible time-frames, ability to incorporate artists' own suggestions into the residency program, assistance of a facilitator, or sufficient opportunities for artists to not only get familiar with the local environment but also one

with another. Otherwise the socially engaged artistic projects are in a risk of stimulating artistic practice that will be detached from the local environment and far from the collaborative ideal of the socially engaged art.

I would like to conclude by once again giving the voice to artists themselves, this time to the poetrying rebel who—true to his self-positioning in the field of art—described his overall experience from the residency in a truly poetic manner.

These were just drops, all the time drops, drops, drops, drops, drops and you were just wet, and you don't know why you are wet and what is happening to you. You're feeling actually protected and unprotected, like this rain is falling all the time, it's warm rain, it's beautiful, it's summer rain, but still you are attacked. So yeah, [...] each second day it's raining, and my shoes are constantly wet, because I have no time to actually dry my shoes. So it's the same with my somehow state of mind. I am constantly attacked and there is no time to "digest", to somehow see, where you are. To... at least to decide where you'd like to go. We're like a group of kids [...]. Kids who are just taken everywhere and try to be actually informed. But then they do not understand. (Poetrying rebel, concluding group discussion)

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# Borderline Offensive Revisited

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Since the media's portrayal of the perceived 'refugee crisis' in Europe reached its peak in 2015, images of bodies on boats, crowded camps, securitized border walls and masses walking across continents have come to dominate the public imaginary, as well as public art installations and exhibitions. During this period, European citizens have consistently heard the term 'refugee crisis' used to define the arrival of a large number of non-Europeans who have fled persecution, countries at war and the violation of human rights, as the media and governments have tried to make it increasingly difficult for asylum seekers to be seen as people in real danger, regularly portraying them as lying or exaggerating in the best case to gain entry to the European Union member states. At the same time though, activists and artists have created counter-narratives to these official discourses seeking to bridge the gap between the audiences and refugees or asylum seekers whose life stories are often concealed by the media.

How is the refugee subject framed within broader political, social and historical discourses centered at once on notions of hospitality, and exclusion? The violence of borders and the related production of 'crisis' narratives have also been prevalent in the agendas of large metropolitan museums as well as smaller-scale, grassroots-organised art galleries and community centres. Initiatives such as the Borderline Offensive bring to the fore the core questions of how we understand and how we envisage population movements, migration, integration, exclusion, living and working together. The project showcases the value of dialogic approaches to the issues of migration, citizenship, participation and art, emphasising that arts-based approaches are particularly suited to public engagement in the migration challenge because they give an opportunity to sidestep and avoid established, simplified and polarised discourses on migration. Most importantly, artists themselves have often engaged in the co-production of initiatives, breaking down stereotypes and borders

such as 'locals', 'migrants', 'refugees', 'foreigners', sharing resources and hope. Frequently using humour, they critically reflect on visual and artistic representations of refugees and migrants, as well as on contemporary moments of the border and migration 'crisis'. Artists and cultural managers even suggest an intercultural dialogue mediated by aesthetic humour as an open process for anticipation, empowerment and even therapy in the integration processes, for both newcomers and 'host' societies.

Their works discuss, but are not limited to, discourses on refugeeness, displacement, and rescue; representations of the pain and suffering surrounding refugee lives; acts of hospitality towards the stranger; acts of solidarity, resistance across borders; 'crisis' narratives; border policies, border zones, borderlands, 'welcoming' or 'border' cities; walls, fences, bordering technologies; as well as the positive or negative consequences of the humouristic approach in mediating an interaction between migrant/refugee and host communities. Do such approaches promote meaningful interaction and in which way?

We see BO as an initiative of intercultural dialogue mediated by aesthetic humour as a genre, a form of activism, and as means of artist-led societal development; whose aim is to collaboratively encourage ways of seeing, making, doing, and preserve, mobilise routes of cultural critique and engage audiences in a conversation about their own practices and visions for community building through the arts. As suggested by Alison Jeffers (2012: 60), 'putting yourself in the shoes of the refugee', an idiomatic expression for developing an empathic point of view, as if one were the other person, is a common way to encourage those who are not refugees to consider the experience of those who have been forced to leave their homes to seek asylum. Used in refugee advocacy, this approach allows for the work of the imagination and empathy. Its full potential can be explored in the arts, with the possibility of a somatic replacement of the refugee body with that of the citizen.

Finally, it is of interest to follow whether the Borderline Offensive project impacted, and in case it did then how, on participation and transformation, namely short-term institutional changes, and on the capacity to imagine something more radically different. Recognising that the negotiation of fear and borders is not just about mending what is wrong but is also about imagining something better, the project proposed several "beautiful experiments", in which artists, host societies and refugees can imagine spaces of transformation, can decentre notions of 'Europeanness', 'whiteness' and 'citizenship based on blood/jus sanguinis', and imagine through art and humour a more liberating version of what inclusive embodiment and society can be.

## **Art crossing borders & borders crossing art**

In 2020 Dubioza Kolektiv and Manu Chao sang in *Cross The Line*,

Bloody, bloody border

Here we cross the line!

I will jump over fence

And climb up any wall

Movement of the people

You cannot control

I will walk over desert

And swim across the sea

Like a sand through your fingers

I will slip and be free

Above my head

I hear buzzing of drones

While border patrol

Is crushing my bones

Is it so wrong to be born

In a danger zone

I'm just looking for a place

I can call my home

Bloody, bloody border...

So how do art and cultural production engage, critique, and shape our understanding of contemporary migration, borders and the 'refugee crisis'? When exploring the ways artists and artistic practice have been developed in such processes, we have for example: Ai Weiwei's photographic depiction of Alan Kurdi on the Greek island of Lesbos; Jason deCaires Taylor's sculpture, 'The Raft of Lampedusa' found in Europe's first underwater art museum; and 'Angels Unaware' – a migrant sculpture in St Peter's Square, Vatican City. Humans travel because they are either forced to or they are seeking something, transmitting their culture, borrowing elements from other cultures and finally composing, transmitting and then transmitting again the offspring of this cultural composition. This happens constantly, sometimes consciously but usually unconsciously. Especially in a time when technology is galloping ahead and art is seeking to keep up with it, perhaps even overtake it, what is of great interest is the use of a common language, such as visual language or theatrical language. From the moment the question of the relationship

between art and globalisation was raised, art started to be interpreted more and more often within the scope of an intercultural discussion of concepts and contexts.

The place for establishing a creative intercultural dialogue is described as being one of the respect and protection of cultural, social and religious principles, both ours and others, where no one culture is prevalent. A more xenophobic and dogmatic conception of intercultural dialogue carries the risk of cultural assimilation, proselytism or even scouring. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the interpretation of art began to increasingly focus on the intercultural discussion of concepts and contexts. As the conventional ways of representation fade away and the form and visual immediacy acquire the leading roles in relation to the content, painting, sculpture, photography and the visual arts become a means of communication between people who do not speak the same language.

Artists realise that there are many parallel worlds and that history does not evolve in a linear way but intermittently and branches out, while art often hurries to overtake the fast pace of modern life in an ambiguous state of constant interactions and overlaps, which often creates a dynamic creative field of possibilities. This can confuse the participants in the art process who have their personal experiences, aspirations and are confronted with previously formed stereotypes. Still, artistic expression in the visual arts of painting, sculpture or/and the performing arts of theater, dance or the performing arts offers different practices and approaches to a wide-ranging dialogue around intercultural/multicultural creation.

Through art, individuals and groups also actively express ideas and propagate various opinions about citizenship, stake claims to rights, denounce atrocities, influence public opinion and encourage collective action. Art is used to educate, to animate, to stimulate solidarity and to foster community wellbeing. Artistic expression is often used as a tool to better understand otherness and to communicate with the Other, while imagination, creativity, humour and problem-solving are intertwined in the creation of art.

Without undervaluing the aesthetic dimension of art, Borderline Offensive highlights its communicative dimension and cultural pervasiveness, seeing art as a manifestation of intentionality, personal will and social significance, while trying to answer the questions of how art can contribute to sustaining or promoting social cohesion in communities and in society. In the current political environment, conditioned and constructed by a wider politics of denial and by the alienation of humanitarian needs, the work of BO explores the inclusion of perspectives that have been systematically ignored by mainstream media and official narratives, puts a focus on people's everyday

and the aspirations of the oppressed and minorities, as well as on the strategies and good practices of an intercultural dialogue and understanding of the Other. The artistic interventions challenge the prevailing conviction that immigration is a social peril even in those societies where the desideratum was once inclusion in society and where the dilemma between social homogeneity or diversity is often present in the public sphere.

Identities are something fluid, thus the concept of identity is a situational potentiality that can change or acquire successive layers. The emergence of stereotypes is set in action in to preserve national purity and its expedient reproduction. Social institutions, such as the school, yet also art, are called upon to preserve and reproduce the national cultural heritage, marginalising the "dangerous foreigners" or even assimilating them into a fictitious uniformity, which simply retains its endogenous non-uniformity. Could it be that *Borderline Offensive* might actually offer a further nuance through the representation of the refugee who is consistently concerned with his/her human rights? Does BO tackle the potentially damaging hypocrisies of the liberal responses both to forced displacement and migration in broader terms?

Why the emphasis on humour? Humour in art has a repertoire of visual-textual-performance strategies that can be deployed to consolidate a much-needed empathetic solidarity between audiences in Europe and arriving refugees, foregrounding their humanity so as to emphasize their rights as human beings. Yet humour simultaneously emphasises the 'strangeness' of the refugee and the incomprehensibility of their traumatic experience. This has implications for the universalism assumed by multicultural liberalism and for several commentators who are in part responsible for the failed attempts at empathy in the refugees' host communities. Multiculturalism has 'become the container into which Western European nations have poured anxieties whose origins often lie in social and economic changes that are considerably wider than those stemming from the consequences of immigration and multiculturalist policies' (Rattansi, 2011: 5). In turn, the intercultural/multicultural society, provides 'a site on which the ontological parameters and political rhetorics derived from the "new" racisms have been laundered' (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 16). For others though, 'the privileged way to reach a neighbour is not that of empathy, of trying to understand them, but a disrespectful laughter which makes fun both of them and of us in our mutual lack of (self) understanding' (Žižek, 2016: 79).

## **Performing (the)border**

The Euro-crossing "Three men and a boat" performance presents the border transgressors' act of travelling by boat with all the losses involved, somet-

hing which challenges and potentially reorientates conventional European mobility regimes. Boats have played a significant role in movement and migration historically, from WWII to the Vietnamese boatpeople and the Australian incarceration islands and on the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. “Three Migrants in a Boat”, a video installation, role-playing, and investigative performance that paraphrases scenes from the comic classic “Three Men in a Boat” by Jerome K Jerome, but now concerning three migrants being smuggled across a border river in a pitch black night, is the BO ‘beautiful experiment’ investigating the crossing the water. It can be only observed with night-vision devices used by border patrol guards. The performance, an active and deadly orientation carried out in often-dispersed interventions within a seemingly flat space of water, investigates the very presence and movement of ‘un-river/un-seaworthy boats’ in this actively navigated space of the water. The engaged actors/audience interact, bringing to the fore the many strategies and techniques that have been employed to make the water border a space of European control, including the humans transgressing the material borders of national/EU sovereignties and of the actors/audience distinction. It poses the questions of the ways in which the specific design and materiality of the artefact of the boat, as well as the various material, visual, artistic and aesthetic practices at work in the southeastern European border periphery(ies), as demarcated by sea and rivers, navigate a specific space and produce a selective politics of seeing, saving and framing of bodies on the move.

As Michael Walzer put it, political modernity has excelled at the “art of separation”, creating borders, boundaries, and other lines of division, be they spatial, political, social, ethnic, racial or linguistic., while borders are spatialities that stage encounter as much as they intend to separate. Investigating intersections between borders, performance and performativity, geopolitical, cultural and ideological borders are brought into being through iterative, embodied practices. Protests led by border communities often use creative practices to resist the state, while creative practices are employed in ceremonies and rituals that work to maintain the legitimacy of borders. The BO artistic projects opens ways to conceive performances that either take place in border zones or that take place in traditional (or alternative) theatre and performance spaces but take borders as their subject.

### **Strips beyond the bounds of language and migration**

Borderline Offensive attempts to focus on making sense of known and unknown migration practices, recollecting migration narratives that are ordinarily “lost in translation,” and giving space to sensations that cannot be

fully known or adequately expressed. Voices, even in comic strips and Fanzines, betray a sense of place. The use of language in migration is linked to boundary creation and differentiation from different others (Pritchard, 2008). Approaches seeing language as something mobile, hybrid and constructed, highlight the ways in which migration is named, portrayed, and betrayed in communicative practices. New meanings and grammars are developed through the mobility and mutability of codes, and elements of different languages are assembled to make visible different identities and contexts in migration (Canagarajah, 2017). Problematizing the existing borders of cultural and linguistic communities concerning the relationship between hosts and guests, locals and migrants, the 'crossing' of different languages contributes to the plurilingual nature of migrants' experience (Rampton, 2008).

By representing refugees in a mediated form, comics and Fanzines actually cut against the grain of self-consciously humanizing narratives. Visually, refugees are reduced to drawn caricatures, despite the intricacies of the narratives that are related, yet the corresponding effect is not to strip them of their human rights. Despite the visual 'strangeness' of the characters, the narrative of their 'perilous journey' is conveyed, so the narratives are able to emphasize the refugee's difference while simultaneously encouraging host readerships to welcome them as neighbours. Liberal audiences are invited not simply to contemplate their own location in relation to the arriving asylum seeker, but to work through the limitations underpinning the stifling binary political debate that dominates mainstream-media coverage of the crisis and discourse around migration - open borders or racist nationalisms. One of the BO 'beautiful experiments', the "Museum of Real History", a mixed media exhibition and lecture-performance presenting the ridiculous conspiracy theories by racists and populists as if they were the absolute truth, aspires to be "An insult to society's collective intelligence", quoting the terrorist-refugee-artist curator and his accomplices (you included).

Borderline Offensive reinstates the call to create a simultaneity of reading experience that encourages cross-border solidarity - or cross-national empathy - through the acceptance of the stranger (Azoulay, 2008: 114). In recognizing the humanity of the refugee while also respecting and accepting their difference, the reader - as 'citizen' of the host country - is encouraged 'to break away from his or her status as citizen and exercise citizenship - that is, to turn citizenship into the arena of a constant becoming, together with other (non)citizens' (ibid.: 111). In BO's "Gaming in the Face of Fear", video game prototypes are co-designed and co-created in an intercultural process. Single- and multiplayer, focusing on strategy, role-play, and social deduction, you will be asked to deconstruct stereotypes and make hard choices as an

unaccompanied minor, a smuggler, or a European migrant fleeing to the Middle East. The emphasis on the acceptance of the non-citizen counters which Bauman describes as modernity's liquid 'reality', whereby 'strangers are such people with whom one refuses to talk', and which has led to a 'united front' against "'immigrants", that fullest and most tangible embodiment of "otherness"' (Bauman, 2000: 109; 2016).

Fanzines' multifaceted, 'inherently multicultural form, given that the modes of representation that it has available to it implicate both cultures of images and cultures of words' (Ayaka and Hague, 2015: 3), offer a further insight into the cultivation of a borderless citizenship as it is constructed through images (Davies, 2018). Comic strips and Fanzines not only reconstruct the rights of the refugee but also reveal that 'the stranger, with a mixture of naivety and knowing, might be in a position to tell us the truth about ourselves, since he sees more than we know' (Kureishi, 2016: 30). The "Long Heavy Road", another BO 'beautiful experiment' presents the laugh-out-loud, laugh-not-to-cry, ironically-sad (or just sad) anecdotes from the road told by migrants, with migrants and for migrants. Through collectively-made low-fi street fanzines, stencil and alternative e-publishing, these stories are shared with the European readership in a publication continuing the great Western tradition of street newspapers.

## **Puppets telling stories**

How do puppets tell stories and who is the puppet? Stories about refugees and migrants often depict them as either pitiable victims or unwelcome intruders. Those arriving in search of a better life are often required, in a hostile environment, to tell their stories in the intimidating contexts of an asylum or visa interview. Their words then become burdened by the potential weight of determining a visa to stay or being forced to leave. The possibilities of arts-based and participatory forms of storytelling with forced migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, often with the intention of opening a space for participants to tell their own stories, through the (co)creation of graphic comics, poems, or biographical maps, have been recognized (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2018). These methods have been seen as allowing for more ethical and sensitive approaches, as well as having the potential to open up counter-narratives that challenge the prevailing anti-migrant rhetoric, thus opening space for autonomy and collaboration among participants.

Whilst stories and storytelling are broadly used, even by the mainstream humanitarian agencies, there is still a tendency to see migrant stories in terms of their content and less attention is focused on the practice and process of storytelling itself as form of knowledge co-production, as well as the role of



the listener or the receiver of these ‘moving’ stories. How might storytelling practice with migrants and refugees form the basis of new knowledge (co) production with and by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, yet also with and by host societies? What is the potential of story sharing to break down barriers and create alternative narratives within an increasingly ‘brutal migration milieu’ (Hall 2016)? In its BO ‘beautiful experiment’, the Paper Puppet Poetry, a collective story-making experience for young audiences, this is to create and perform their own stories of migration by crafting paper puppets. Through DIY improvisation, done whenever and wherever, the experience can expand into animation documentary, self-publishing, activism and stage magic;)

In what ways can a closer engagement with the politics and poetics of storytelling and story sharing open new possibilities for inhabitation with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers? Borderline Offensive could in the future critically interrogate the possibilities and pitfalls of storytelling and humour, putting these in visual, digital, and dramaturgical forms, as a way of breaking down barriers and allowing new knowledge and action for much needed change to be produced.

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# Laughing in the face of fear

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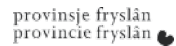
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