

„To Remember Differently...”

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Erich Auerbach, Otti Berger, Gustave Courbet, Traugott Fuchs, Alfred Heilbronn, Susanne Lachmann, Conlon Nancarrow, Kurt Schwitters, Ivi Stangali. These are the names of some of those who are remembered in the exhibition *The Futureless Memory* conceived by artist Dilek Winchester and curated by Katja Schroeder at Kunsthau Hamburg. The exhibition takes on the question of exile, of migration and the search for refuge, and perhaps, a new home of those who have been propelled away, displaced by fascism, by forces unleashed by violence and persecution, by war and genocide. The exhibition, gently yet forcefully, brings to light how exile – although formative for many artists and ultimately for the art world itself – presents an experience that knowledge production on art has thus far have had a difficult time to “hold.” Exiles of different temporal scales are often erased, subject to amnesia,¹ or (partial) silencing. Experiences of exile are sidelined in archives that are unable to capture their memories and recollections, indeed they are designed not to do so. When and if exile is accounted for, such accounts rarely go beyond diagnosing the workings of trauma. It is against this background that *The Futureless Memory* carefully teases out that – by itself – the label “exilic” does little to mediate the multitude of experiences that exile and its conditions have engendered in artists’ lives and works.

It is worth pausing on the question of why exile and displacement have long appeared as brackets, that is as interludes of different degrees of formativeness, in art historical narratives. Or why, at other times, exile has remained a blind spot altogether, a blind spot that ultimately reproduces the erasing logic of the violence that causes exile. There might be two interconnected reasons for such silences and obscurations. We tend to think of art in its modern manifestation as a globalized practice – and for good reason. And yet, it is important to remember that the modern conception of art (and of the artist) is intimately connected to the rise of the nation-state, not least

¹ This amnesia was also highlighted by Burcu Doğramacı in her talk “*Riss der Zeit – Künste im Exil und die Vergangenheit der Zukunft*” that took place in the framework of the exhibition (November 12, 2020), see <https://kunsthauhamburg.de/en/lecture-riss-der-zeit-kuenste-im-exil-und-die-vergangenheit-der-zukunft/>

through the market of art, through copyright and notions of authorship.² It is also connected through the centrality of artistic expression as a legitimizing tool for nation-state building and the construction of “a people,” that is, an ostensibly homogenous population that warrants the nation-state form. Connectedly, it has been part of the myth of the nation-state that it is free of war, violence, discrimination and persecution. Indeed, it has been held up as *the* modern political institution that prevents such violence and (in its “liberal” inflection) promises to further pursue democracy, equality, and justice. Within the dominant narratives of contemporary Europe, that is within its self-representation, its very own history of war and violence (be it religious warfare, colonialism, two World Wars, and fascism) can only be conceptualized as overcome, the workings of its foundational violence in the present continue to be largely disavowed.³ Exile, its conditions and experiences, sit uneasy in such a narrative that is triumphalist at heart and that continues to be reproduced in dominant art historical narratives. This unease deepens when the implicatedness of art in some of these violent processes, its regimes and power struggles comes to the fore: In *1943* (2012) Francis Alÿs remembers struggles against fascism as well as different forms of exile and possibilities of (im)mobility. He thinks of “Beckett joining the Resistance in occupied France” and “Hannah Höch painting the *Totentanz* triptych in Nazi Germany,” in something, that would later be called inner emigration. But, he also thinks about “Leni Riefenstahl filming *Tiefland* with extras from concentration camps” and of the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who supported Mussolini and volunteered to fight at the Eastern front. He recalls these (hi)stories returning from Kabul, Afghanistan, a site of “endless” war for which European powers bear responsibility, in which they are complicit.

The exhibition brings these historical examples together with contemporary positions of artists who are experiencing varying forms of exile in the present. In dominant cultural policies and politics in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, when a place is given to the “exilic,” it is done so through the ubiquitous and fraught category of

² For a detailed analysis of the economic and intellectual shifts that have contributed to understandings of art as a commodity that originates in the “individual genius” of the artist from the 18th century onwards, see Martha Woodmansee, *Art, the Author, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

³ Banu Karaca, *The National Frame. Art and State Violence in Turkey and Germany* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

“diversity” and all its trappings. As a preferred mode of positioning exile, discourses of diversity notably fail to address exile’s underlying reasons, that is, violence in its different manifestations. They also fail to address the inequalities that structure arrival elsewhere, including racism. As such, discourses of diversity have not only served to displace or even replace terms like equality and social justice to which diversity is offered as solution, as Sara Ahmed has suggested.⁴ They have also positioned exiles (and other migrants) as mere as additions to an otherwise more or less homogenous national frame “without,” as Rinaldo Walcott so aptly notes, “attending to foundational institutional arrangements” that create and sanction violence and injustice.⁵ Diversity is thus a promise of inclusion (not belonging, however), into existing structures, the very structures that produce and reproduce disenfranchisement and exclusion rather than the fundamental transformation of these structures.

The Futureless Memory stakes a different horizon of belonging in the here and now, poetically posed as an open-ended question in Samara Sallam’s “Four and a half hours” (2015). In this video work the temporal demarcation of four and half-hours (re)sketches biographic itineraries of the Palestinian artist – a set of movements between Damascus and Algier, the desert and Oran. The work contemplates the (im)possibility of movement – and arrival – through the absurd and life-threatening materiality of walls, that is boundaries and borders.

Similarly, conceptual artist Khaled Barakeh is represented in the show through sketches and paintings that gesture to his classical training whilst in Damascus, Syria. Barakeh’s practice defies categorization within the confines of “artist” and “activist” and transcends both. A “Practice of Necessity,” as he calls it, guides all his endeavors, be they individual artistic practices or collective. His engagements range from exploring ways to respond to the needs of displaced, i.e., exiled, cultural producers⁶ to interventions such as *MUTE* (2020) on the occasion of the first international criminal trial on war crimes and torture in Syria in Koblenz, Germany. *MUTE* consisted of about 50 inanimate figures dressed in clothing of artists and activists from across the

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012)

⁵ Rinaldo Walcott, “The End of Diversity,” *Public Culture* 31/2 (2019): 398.

⁶ For details on the association CoCulture e.V, which Barakeh founded, see <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/biography>

Syrian diaspora, that “stood in observance of the trial,”⁷ as witnesses so to speak and as stand-ins for those killed, unable to travel or to attend due to the Covid-19 related restrictions.

Those who are remembered in the exhibition are not objects of these artistic engagements but *subjects* of memory, remembrance and recall through the presented artistic positions. “Emerg[ing] from a social field of forgetting, repression and marginalization,”⁸ their traces are *made to matter*, both discursively and figuratively, that is both in terms of narrative and by translating those traces into new artistic works. Rather than reintegrating them into already existing (art) histories these new works engender a mode of *artistic accompaniment*.

In *You have got a letter from Ivi Stangali* (2015) Hera Büyüktaşçıyan and Dilek Winchester trace Stangali’s experience of exile after being displaced from Istanbul in 1964 by putting passages from Stangali’s letters to her art professor together with excerpts from *The Iliad*, which Stangali illustrated. The text is accompanied by designs and sketches that Stangali made for the *The Iliad* and for Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Together they speak to displacement and the wish to return “home” but also to the urgency to remember Stangali’s life and work. Composer Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997) is present with his *Studies for Player Piano No. 4 and 49c* (ca. 1950/60s). In his case too, it was other artists, the musician John Cage, the choreographer Merce Cunningham and the composer Györgi Ligeti, who sited Nancarrow’s body of work anew in the history of music – after years of forgetting. Nancarrow had been sidelined due to his Mexican exile having faced harassment upon returning to the U.S. after fighting the fascist regime in Spain. That Kit Armstrong recently performed two pieces by Nancarrow at the Elbphilharmonie and made them come to life again in the city of Hamburg is especially touching and meaningful in this context. There is a similar gesture of siting what was once absent, i.e., “compelling [it] to materialize,”⁹ in Michaela Melián’s installation *Movement* (2020). Here, Melián has translated Jewish violinist Susanne Lachmann’s (1988-

⁷ Khaled Barakeh, 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/sp/mute>

⁸ Valentina Napolitano, “Anthropology and traces,” *Anthropological Theory* Vol. 15/1(2015): 48.

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of “siting absence,” see Nicole Gervasio, “Feminist Photography, State Violence, and the Limits of Representation,” in *Women Mobilizing Memory*, ed. Ayşe Gül Altınay, Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, María José Contreras, Alisa Solomon, and Banu Karaca (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

1967) exilic itineraries into musical notations and light, into visuals and sound and through the exhibition has brought her back to Hamburg, where she was based, before Nazi persecution.

Judith Raum describes her practice with the legacy of textile designer Otta Berger (1898– 1944), who was murdered in Auschwitz after being unable to emigrate to the U.S., as a “perennial project,” thus signaling the open-endedness that such an artistic accompaniment entails. This open-endedness is mirrored (in a heartbreaking way) in the numbered but empty pages from Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) notebook included in Dilek Winchester’s installation *Sticks, Stones and Bones* (2020). Schwitters had planned to rewrite all his poems from memory, as he believed them to be destroyed by the Nazis – a project that he was unable to finish in his British exile. It is also central to Winchester’s engagement with Schwitters that painter Richard Hamilton had (re)discovered Schwitters’s final Merzbau and had saved it from deterioration. In her own work as in the exhibition, Winchester sees care for artists and their works as an important strand of artistic accompaniment. Such accompaniment is needed even in the case of celebrated artists whose experiences of exile continue to be bracketed out of art history.

Thus is the case with Gustave Courbet. In her multimedia work *An (art) historical research on Gustave Courbet* (2020), Balca Ergener follows less pursued traces of Courbet’s life that although never quite erased have been obscured or misrecognized in art historical canons, that is in the dominant knowledge production on art. On the one hand, Ergener’s research centers inquiries that recover Courbet’s radical politics (that go largely unnoted today), that emphasize his participation in the Paris Commune, his prison sentence and exile to counter the depoliticization Courbet experienced when he became an “object of history.”¹⁰ But Ergener also follows Courbet’s footsteps in the Swiss landscape, including his view of Lake Geneva. This leads her to address a misrecognition that speaks more to the limited and limiting imaginations of exile by those untouched by it than to the actual experiences that Courbet might have had: Ergener photographs the lake during the frequently adverse weather. Through her photographic retracing of Lake Geneva she unsettles the simplistic notion that Courbet’s pictorial rendering thereof speak to his melancholia

¹⁰ Linda Nochlin, “The De-Politicization of Gustave Courbet: Transformation and Rehabilitation under the Third Republic,” *October* Vol. 22 (Autumn, 1982): 67.

during exile. It is notable that such narratives that are seemingly sensitive to the wounds of exile exist in the same breath as the Courbet's depoliticization in art history.

The assembled works share a sense of vulnerability, the vulnerabilities of exile, and the vulnerabilities engendered in forgetting, including partial forgetting as in the case of canonized artists like Courbet. In our conversation, Dilek Winchester, who conceived of the exhibition, speaks of "ties of affection" (*gönül bağı*) between the participating artists and those they remember. She proposes that centering on shared vulnerabilities (and cultivating the sensibility for such shared vulnerabilities) allows for "being in community" with these artists and hence working not *on* but *alongside* their exilic experiences. This mode of accompaniment allows to go beyond the question of trauma and its irrepresentability. Winchester describes many of the works as emerging from shared curiosities in the making of art, in creating references and relations in between artistic practice. According to Winchester, such an approach fashions different bonds to the past as well as possibilities of "affectional belonging" in the present. Two paths seem to open from this exploration of affectional belonging. One, she suggests, is the embrace of artistic production that has been outside of the limelight that is also an embrace of one's own work beyond place and time. The other allows to depart from the misrecognition that exiles were only produced by either a violence that is past or one that is far away; it allows to recognize and acknowledge that this violence continues to operate in the here and now.

The artistic accompaniment across time and space, the retracing of one's own or other artists' trajectories works against the seductive force that the national frame continues to hold. It allows not for merely for remembrance but to remember differently. According to psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan,¹¹ the futureless memory does not have a correspondent in the future, in the sense that it is past and can be remembered as past, rather than haunt and shape the present in opaque and often illegible ways, and even doom the present to repeat that which is not truly past. The exhibition constitutes an expression of hope, or rather the desire

¹¹ Vamik D. Volkan, "After the Violence: The Internal World and Linking Objects of a Refugee Family," September 2001, *Unpublished Conference Paper*.



to make exile into a futureless memory, not to be forgotten, but to be remembered through accompaniment of the past and to be sited in the present through the struggle against the violent conditions that produce it.

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