

hybrID



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Taysir Batniji, James Bridle, Nidhal Chamekh, Aleksandra Domanović, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Admire Kamudzengerere, Rachel Monosov, Raqs Media Collective, Slavs and Tatars, The Otolith Group, Sung Tieu, Helena Wittmann, Guan Xiao

The theme of cultural diversity is more relevant than ever today throughout Europe. In July 2018, *The Brussels Declaration—For the Freedom of the Arts* was published stating: “Culture emerges through exchange, not through isolation.” Currently, the initiative *Wir sind Viele (We Are Many)* is taking a strong stand for a diverse and solidary art and culture scene.

The exhibition *hybrID* starts from these discourses. The aim of the project is to discuss from an artistic point of view the ambivalence and complexity of spatial and cultural localization in our globally connected world.

Through digital communication and the rapidity of technological developments we are living in a time of transformation. We must constantly learn to reorient ourselves, since new technologies such as apps are impacting our daily lives and information flows are appearing to become ever more complex and non-transparent. Owing to the trend toward individualization processes, one’s own identity is regarded as something that must be permanently optimized. This has become the fundamental obsession of our present lives. Identity is defined not only through unmistakable individuality but also constitutes our social sense of belonging. Especially in the current social debates and political polarizations, the concept is mainly being misused and associated all over the world with notions of the local and original as a means to reinforce power structures. But the complexity of cultural globalization—who we are, how we evolve, and how we relate to our social context—is not taken into consideration in a differentiated way.

In our multi-mobile age, in which national discourses are inextricably linked to international developments, the understanding of a sense of belonging as something static, geographically anchored, must urgently be called into questions. Not only now are flight and displacement leading to waves of migration in many places, humankind has migrated throughout the most part of its history. Cultures are therefore never homogeneous, they always emerge through exchange with other cultures, reciprocal acceptance and demarcation—they are hybrid.

The exhibition *hybrID* is a contemporary reflection on identity construction in the context of technological, political and historical developments. It brings together international artists grasping identity as an open construction that refers to global interconnections and hybridity. The artists address and analyze the contradictory tendencies between networking on the one side and the increasing trend to solidify borders on the other. Their themes range from identification and self-localization to uprootedness and the question of national borders. In complex ways, the artworks reflect the relations of cause and effect of digitization against the background of global relationships.

Curator: Anna Nowak

TAYSIR BATNIJI

Taysir Batniji's (*1966, PSE) artistic practice consists of a variety of media, including photography, video, performance, sculpture, and installation. In his works, the artist addresses the different cultural and political dimensions of Palestine, a region whose statehood is controversial under international law. In particular, Batniji has been taking up the challenges of migration and the state of the "in-between" in a series of projects since 2006, when he left Gaza without being able to return. In *Man does not live on bread alone* (2012–13), Batniji stamped Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into common household soap, which guarantees the right of every human to mobility—both within national territory and beyond it. One can see a continuation of this ephemeral sculpture in *hybrID*. In each of the 457 stacked pieces of soap the Arabic saying *Dawam el Hal Men Al Mohal* is engraved—no condition is permanent. In Arab countries this saying is used when people are confronted with painful situations. The sentence contains a contradiction and brings comfort and hope in difficult moments by communicating the idea that pain is not permanent, like soap disappears with use and time. *Untitled* (2014), also part of the series and exhibition, is an identical Murano glass copy of his bunch of keys. These are the keys that gave him access to his house in Gaza. Thus the work refers to his personal, domestic dispossession, but at the

same time reflects the daily immobilization of the Palestinians, as well as the restriction of freedom to shape space and time. For them, the keys are an important symbol of their flight and displacement, as well as of their right to return to their homeland. (AN)

JAMES BRIDLE

The essay film *Se ti sabir* (2019) reflects on cognitive and artificial intelligence and our relationship to new technologies. James Bridle (*1980, UK) is an artist and writer whose interdisciplinary work deals with digitalization, new forms of communication, and the increasing interconnection of virtual and physical realities. Bridle's most recent short film is also a reference to the paradox that mankind only explores the manifold forms of other cognitive intelligences on earth, for example in the animal world, at the same time as it develops artificial intelligences. For the title of the film, the artist chooses a term from the lingua franca, a commercial and diplomatic language used in the Mediterranean between the 11th and 19th centuries. Translated it means, roughly, *Do you understand?* A salutation that simultaneously asks *Can we understand each other?* The artist's general fascination for transformative auxiliary languages (pidgin), which serve for rudimentary understanding in transcultural contexts, is rooted in their hybrid character. Between sailors and merchants, Pidgin languages not only emerged as a mixture of Romance and Arabic languages, they were always in motion and constantly changed. Bridle also explores new forms of communication and asks how humans and nature can communicate with their new interlocutor—technology—in the future. Due to the development of artificial neural networks, humans are already no longer able to comprehend the decisions and solutions of computer programs. How important will computers be in our society in the future? Will artificial intelligence be on the same level as human intelligence, or will it serve as a tool for us? Bridle's work makes us aware that now is the time to ask these questions and to develop suitable regulations for a future "living together". (NM)

NIDHAL CHAMEKH

Nidhal Chamekh (*1985, TUN) deals in his work with the complexity of transcultural and sociopolitical issues. Raised in Tunisia, he was influenced by the politics of his home country, in particular by the political transformations after the independence, but also by his experiences in Europe. *The series Le Battement des Ailes* (The beat of the wing), 2017 consists of a number of graphic works in which the artist combines pencil and graphite drawings with photo transfer printing. The heterogeneous pictorial elements are based on archive images, which the artist reproduces in partly photorealistic detail. Chamekh works figuratively and fragmentarily in collage drawings. Essential pictorial motifs are animals, people and scientific

objects that come from very different contexts and enter into new connections in the white space of the sheet. For Chamekh, art means “the creation of a gap”. In this way, he deliberately generates empty spaces that allow for ambiguous ways of reading and a view of the “in-between” of the various historical levels.

In doing so, he takes up the mechanics of flying—both in animal anatomical motifs and on the basis of technical construction drawings. In his dissecting pictorial language, Chamekh places flying as an ancient metaphor of freedom in direct connection with the crossing of borders within the framework of flight and migration. The measurement of the flying apparatus appears in his pictures, as does the measurement of the human being. It served in the early days of modern medicine, but also for so-called “race theories” in colonial history. In Chamekh’s pictures, the promising scientific discoveries about the functional mechanisms of movement seem to distance themselves from metaphorical freedom. Instead, he presents them as efficient tools for controlling mobility. (AT / KS)

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ

The works of Aleksandra Domanović (*1981, SRB) begin with extensive research. She puts the information gained into the context of her own history and memories from her childhood, which she spent in former Yugoslavia. In her installations, she examines both her own and the collective identity of her homeland, which she relates to complex references from the 6th century BC to the 21st century. She often uses materials such as aluminium, brass, foam, and carbon, or produces plastic elements using 3D printing techniques. A recurring element in her works are the “Belgrade Hands”, which were developed as a prosthesis for people in Yugoslavian research institutions. In her sculptural Domanović, picks up these artificial hands, originally built by Rajko Tomovic, on in her sculptural work and addresses the connection between man and his own reproductions. In *From you to me* (2012—14) she describes the beginnings of the Internet and illustrates the interweaving of virtual information and communication relationships. The artist makes use of found footage documenting the development of the Internet domain.yu. By cutting them together into a narrative video work and consciously avoiding a concrete temporal location, attention is drawn to the mutual influence of virtual reality and the actual situation of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. The top-level domain.yu was developed by two female computer scientists in 1991 and switched off in 2010, long after the state no longer existed. (JZ)

LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN

Lawrence Abu Hamdan (*1985, JOR) develops his works both as expansive media installations and in a legal context in investigative sound analysis, often in collaboration with the Forensic Architecture collective based at Goldsmith College in London. Here, analyses of spatial information and media data in connection with human rights violations are usually carried out in collaboration with human rights, media, or environmental organisations. The work *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012), shown in the exhibition, is situated precisely at the interface of Abu Hamdan's forensic and artistic engagement. It was created together with a group of Somali refugees whose asylum application had been rejected in the Netherlands. The court used language analyses as a basis, which assigned the accent of the Somalis to the so-called safe zones of their homeland.

Together with the asylum seekers, but also with linguists, scientists, activists, cultural representatives and a graphic designer, Hamdan created a non-territorial map. In this wall-filling graphic he describes the political-humanitarian development of Somalia, which in its post-colonial history since the 1970s has been marked by wars and famines. At the same time, the map also takes into account the influence of humanitarian-political disruption on the manifold interweaving of linguistic territories. In addition, he produces an individual map for each of the asylum seekers involved in the project, in which he traces the different linguistic and phonetic influences depending on their biographies. It becomes clear that individual language in Somalia is dependent on crisis and migration, and that the sound of the voice can hardly be used as a substitute for a missing passport to fix a person's affiliation to a place. (KS)

ADMIRE KAMUDZENERERE

Admire Kamudzengerere (*1981, ZWE) deals in his works, in different ways, with issues such as migration, dealing with borders and questions of identity. His points of reference are often personal and shaped by the conflict-laden political and social developments in his home country Zimbabwe. His wall-filling installation *Open Line* (2017), which consists of countless printed telephone book pages, explores the special "relationship" between identity and numbers. Numeric codes are omnipresent in our everyday lives and often serve to quickly and easily identify and classify individuals in social structures. The recurring motif of the distinct number can also be read in Kamudzengerere's work as a metaphor for the tiny distinctions that ultimately defines us as a personality.

In Zimbabwe, for a long time the possession of a landline phone was a status symbol, and the entry in the telephone directory marked a certain prosperity, but also confirmed who was excluded. Today, borders often manifest themselves in virtual space through mobile communication and

digital technologies — though even more powerful. In his work, Kamudzengerere attempts to set the ideas of a “nomadic” cultural identity in dialogue with the strategies of an outdated, local classification. In *Open Line*, for example, one repeatedly looks into one and the same face and yet always sees another person; like a word that loses its actual meaning after endless repetition. In his video, the artist also questions the uniqueness of the self. In a silent ceremony, he paints his face with thick layers of paint, which he then removes and repaints. For a brief moment, a mimic appears in the otherwise mask-like face that reveals feminine traits. Apart from that, the tracing of his own facial features with pasty materials is reminiscent of the almost manic stroke of his portrait drawings and monotypes. Particularly when removing the thickly pasted layers, despite the artist’s calm gestures, a painful undertone resonates, reminiscent of the detachment of skin; or of the possibly conflictual condition of a hybrid personality. (JZ)

RACHEL MONOSOV

Rachel Monosov (*1987, RUS) works in the field of photography, video art, performance, and sculpture. Her artworks deal with transcultural questions. Topics such as cultural alienation, territorial belonging, and identity run like a red thread through her work. She records her own migration history in the bronze sculpture *Welcome Gift* (2018): the image of her first banana, which she received as a welcome gift when she left the ship that took her from Russia to Israel at the age of five. In the video work *Freedom in the Clouds* (2015), Rachel Monosov shows a world that functions according to its own laws. She creates a kind of utopia in which man lives in harmony with nature, and cultural identity plays has no meaning. The plot constantly changes between the real and the surreal; borders seem to blur. The series of work *The Blind Leader* (2018) consists of an installation in which two performers interact at the opening reception. The installation forms a scenography for a control system in which minimalist objects set clear limits to the actors’ ability to move. Due to its fragile nature, however, the installation primarily implies mental and invisible barriers. Part of the work is the so-called *Waiting Room*: despite its purely symbolic function for the performer, a simple wire grid becomes a real boundary that leaves him waiting. The natural behavior remains inhibited and trapped in silent acceptance. This part of the series, *The Space in Between*, illustrates this narrow degree of physical and mental bondage: cacti are installed in two opposite-facing holders so that only a minimum of space remains between the spines. Anyone who dares to enter this space must maintain great self-control in order not to injure themselves. The fine metal holders of the *fingerprint* also fix the performer to his neck and leg symbolically, and yet he seems to be at the mercy of giving his fingerprint; similar to his own country of origin, which presents invisible yet often insurmountable obstacles such as entry regulations. (AT / KS)

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Time, language and history play a central role in the artistic processes of the Raqs Media Collective (founded 1992 in New Delhi, India). Using various media, the trio explores social and political structures in a global context. The one-channel video projection *Untold Intimacy of Digits* (2011) shows the historical handprint of the Bengali businessman Rajyadhar Konai. In 1858 he was asked by the British official William James Herschel to leave the imprint of his hand on a contract in addition to his signature. It was to ensure that the contracting party would later be unable to claim that the signature had not been his. This handprint laid the foundation for biometric data collection. The floating hand is a ghostly reminder of the beginnings of systematic identification and monitoring procedures. It symbolizes the relationship between identification and identity, but also their discrepancy. Today, India, with 99% of the registered population, has the largest biometric database in the world. Aadhaar (english: foundation) is an identification number that has been mandatory since 2016 and collects all day-to-day data. The categorisation of people according to biographical and biometric data not only creates the means to identify individuals, it also holds the risk of creating new boundaries in the mobile age as transformation and deviation lead to disruption of the controllable system. Cultural diversity and pluralism, on the other hand, always mean an exchange and the possibility of free personality development. The group of artists thus also questions the influence of state surveillance on the development of each individual's identity. How does it affect our individual freedom of action and self-determination when time and place are recorded and stored when buying a SIM card for a mobile phone or sending a message? Today, data is the most valuable resource in the world because it enables new forms and possibilities of behavioral and social control. In the video, the fingers of the hand count indispensably in a continuous loop and in this way symbolize the current data collecting mania of both, private companies and the state. (NM)

SLAVS AND TATARS

The art collective Slavs and Tatars addresses the interweaving of contemporary anthropology and transnational politics in its extensive installations, consisting of prints, text material, sculpture, audio and video works. A central and connecting element for them is language in the context of religion, power and identity building. Their works develop from extensive research and discursive social analysis. They examine traditions, gestures and rituals that cross the borders of different countries and create contact zones between cultures, especially the often forgotten Slavic, Caucasian and Central Asian cultures. "Eurasia" — east of the Berlin Wall and west of

the Chinese Wall—is of particular interest to them. Central to the exhibition is the work *PrayWay* (2012), a hybrid between Rahlé, a traditional folding wooden desk for sacred writings, and Takht, the mostly carpeted seating areas in oriental tea rooms. Visitors can take a seat on the piece of furniture, making the installation a social meeting place and at the same time representing the core idea of the exhibition as a communication tool and invitation to interactive exchange. The mural *To Mountain Minorities* also takes up themes such as nationality and belonging. The original Georgian expression *Chven Sakartvelos Gaumardjos* is translated as “Long live Georgia”. Only by changing a single letter in the Georgian Mchedruli alphabet, the “a” from “Sakartvelos” into a “u”, to “Sakurtvelos”, does the expression “Long live Kurdistan” emerge and the unresolved geopolitical identity of one mountain minority is replaced by another one. (AN)

THE OTOLITH GROUP

The Otolith Group (founded 2002, GB) expresses their interests in various media such as installation, performance, film, publications, workshops or curatorial practice. In *hybrID*, the group of artists is represented with the online work *@Glissantbot* (since 2017), a synthesis of their interest in transculturalism and the linking of poetry with current communication technology. For this purpose, they have programmed a bot on Twitter that posts quotes from the French poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant every 15 minutes. The author, who lived in the French Caribbean, is regarded as one of the most important pioneers of postcolonial discourse. In 1990 he published the book “*Poétique de la Relation*”, in which he describes his idea of a world in transformation, in which identity is defined above all by cultural and social relations to one another and not in separation from one another. In this book, in addition to locating through language, he also deals with the relationship between poetry and computer technology. Reminiscent of Glissant’s influential writings, The Otolith Group developed a “technopoetic bot” almost 30 years later. Twitter, with its limited number of 140 characters, is particularly representative of the fragmentary character of contemporary information consumption. In times of growing importance of artificial intelligence, the work points beyond Glissant’s cultural anthropological approach and raises the issue in the futuristic sense of whether algorithms are also capable of postcolonial poetry. (KS)

SUNG TIEU

Sung Tieu (*1987, VNM) artistic practice involves sculpture, performance, photography, and film, often based on literary sources. She is interested in the inherent power structures and cultural codes of everyday and consumer culture. In doing so, she deals with the transnational movements of products as well as people. Her confrontation is often real, sometimes fictional, influenced by the autobiographical experience of belonging to a minority as a Vietnamese immigrant in Europe.

The work *Wind 1* (2015) allows the viewer to look into a mirror in which only small areas are carved and filled with black paint. It is the image of a swarm of birds, in which the artist refers to a species of migratory bird that, despite its small body size, covers particularly long distances from sub-Saharan Africa to Greenland and Alaska. The stability of the installation is achieved by only two orange swim wings, which draw a parallel between the tiny wings of the bird and the current situation of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean between the African and European continents with the most makeshift equipment. In addition, an LED treadmill entitled *Selfportrait* (2019) is installed on which the sequence of all the artist's places of residence can be read. It is an attempt to create a value-free protocol of the various stations that have shaped her biography. Here, no distinction is made between "mobility" and "migration"; rather, the paths of life become the narration of a very individual personality who draws on different cultural experiences.

For the performance *Inferiority Complex* (2017), Tieu extinguishes all lights for a brief moment on the opening evening. In complete darkness, the artist poses a series of questions about identity politics and representation in the context of the art system. Since she remains unseen in this performance, the positions of audience and actor become unclear. Who finds a place in the representation structure and who doesn't—who actually has the "inferiority complex" that is addressed. (KS)

HELENA WITTMANN

It is summer, in a nameless place, at an unknown time. The camera shows an apartment bathed in the amber light of the afternoon sun. Helena Wittmann's (*1982, GER) works can be placed at the interface between visual art and experimental film. In her oeuvre, the artist deals with space, not in the sense of a physically placed place, but rather questions and contextualizes its social boundaries. The anonymous protagonists of the short film *Ada Kaleh* (2018) wonder where they could possibly live. The crumbling plaster in the shared kitchen draws countries and continents on a world map with infinite options. National borders are set geographically and politically, but where are the dividing lines between cultural areas? Doesn't separation exist primarily in the mind—and if so, must the borders

of others also be mine? A glass stone in the window frame breaks the light into the smallest fragments, through the dirty windows the sun paints pictures on the wall. Wittmann opens a space for the viewer to reflect. The tirelessly rotating camera creates future utopias. The work is named after the Romanian Danube island of Ada Kaleh, a remaining Turkish enclave that last gathered inhabitants from all parts of the Ottoman Empire. When the world's largest run-of-river power plant was built, the 500 inhabitants had to leave the island, which was then flooded in 1971. The attempt to relocate the population to a nearby island failed. The inhabitants preferred to emigrate to bordering parts of Romania or to Turkey. Wittmann's work thus also references the complexity of the historical, social and cultural ties of homeland. In times of migration, global networks and cultural globalisation, home does not necessarily mean origin. (NM)

GUAN XIAO

In her video installations, sculptures and assemblages, the artist Guan Xiao (*1983 CN) combines the great variety of digital data with natural forms. Among other things, she creates sculptures reminiscent of life forms from another world and videos depicting virtual space. Guan Xiao creates new forms of transformation by linking individual motifs and icons from the most diverse cultural and sometimes also temporal backgrounds. Seemingly familiar objects are withdrawn from their original contexts and at first appear unknown or alien. She reconnects information from the Internet and harmonizes it in such a way that a new virtual space is created. Through this form of exchange, pre-programmed boundaries are hybridized, even overcome, and prevailing opinions are abolished. The interplay of nature and technology becomes particularly clear in her work *Cockatoo*, 2017. Everyday life, high-tech and traditional cultural assets meet here in the shape of a bird. The artist composes the form as a ready-made assemblage of a car rim, a wooden root and a bicycle helmet with tufts of reeds. Her works are both complex and vibrant in their aesthetics and take up the aspect of hybridity not only through the combination of different materials, but above all through the manifold contexts from which her objects originate. Personal, social or even scientific references serve as a model in her work. (JZ)

Texts: Nele Müller, Anna Nowak, Katja Schroeder, Anissa Tavara, Juliane Zimmer

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