

Migrations as a State of Being

Diana B. Wechsler

As researchers and curators, we choose topics to work on for various reasons. Besides the professional motivations and the problems we have to address, study, and reflect upon, which result from the urgency of contemporary times, sometimes there are more profound reasons for focusing on certain topics.

In the case of my research on modern art, the subject matters of travel, migration, and exile have been significant to rethinking the canonical interpretation of the narrative of modernism. These topics are also the starting point and the key to understanding the global contemporary art scene.

In this sense, I would like to reflect on the *Uncertain States* project, an exhibition produced by the Akademie der Künste (Berlin, 2016-2017), in which I was part of the curatorial team along with Johannes Odenthal and Anke Hervol, under the general direction of Jeanine Meerapfel. This exhibition establishes an effective connection between archives, memory, artworks, and contemporary states of being in the world. I start this brief contribution with images illustrating the reasons for my profound commitment to the issues of migration and exile. For the sake of reflection, I will then present another archive and some of the artworks included in this project and in my research, as an invitation to *think with these images*.

1st Scene

As a child, I found our bookcase at home very attractive. There were German books about opera and classical music next to others in Spanish about anatomy, pathology, and other medical topics. There were also German-Spanish, French-Spanish, and English-Spanish dictionaries, as well as many novels both in German and Spanish and some others in English. All these books were part of my father's personal history and of his memories. There was also a false book, which was actually a box containing many photographs (figs. 1-5).¹

1 The photos were taken in Berlin during an exploratory trip by "Tante Mize" who was one of the survivors of the Nazi regime. She tries to find, in the middle of the destruction, the places where were located the houses of the family.



1 "Amtsgericht vom Enckeplatz aus gesehen", Berlin, 1948/49, Familie Wechsler Archive



2 „Mize war in Charlottenstr. 5, die 2 Häuser Besselstr. das 1 Haus Markgrafenstr. der längliche Bau Lindenstr. Versicherung”, Berlin, 1948/49, Familie Wechsler Archive



3 „Das war Euer Haus, Mize sitzt auf den Trümmern”,
Berlin, 1948/49, Familie Wechsler Archive



4 „Charlottenstr. Ecke Kochstr. die Figur ist Mize”, Berlin, 1948/49, Familie Wechsler Archive



5 “Lindenstr. Ecke Hollmanstr.”, Berlin, 1948/49, Familie Wechsler Archive

These were the family images. Images of destruction, ruins of a life destroyed by the war. Tante Helene took these photos in 1948 and sent copies to the family members living in exile in New York, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires. They are little pieces, reminders of the place where they used to live before the Second World War.

Jacques Rancière claims that the real does not exist but as configurations of our perceptions and thoughts. The real is always the object of a fiction, a spatial construction where the visible, the speakable and the feasible are tied together. This notion of the real is suitable for a reflection upon the particular condition of the “uncertain state of exile.” Without images such as those in the box in the bookcase, it would have been very difficult to imagine Berlin after the war. However hard it was, imaginary situations about lost spaces and affections became real with these photos.

Thinking with images – the motto of my work – is based on the idea that the multiple forms that images adopt provide new ways to think about the past from the present. The historical articulation of the past is not about seeing it *as* it was but, in Walter Benjamin’s words, it is about “seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”. Therefore, when we try to build a narrative of the past, we take some recovered fragments from that past to make an impact in the present in the way of a “profane, disruptive and powerful illumination”.²

2nd Scene

This is the background to my approach. Now, regarding the exhibition project *Uncertain States*, I would like to think with William Forsythe’s installation *The Fact of Matter* (fig. 6). This piece looks like a mechanical jungle: many rings hang at various heights as an invitation to use them to cross to the other side. There is a notice beside the name of the artist and the artwork: “Please use only the rings to traverse the space. Use this object at your own risk.”

This clever work contributes to installing uncertainty and questions such as: Who is where? What is the right way? What is the right place? What about the borders? These are potential questions to explore the particular condition of migrants and exile.

Forsythe’s work represents a challenge in this exhibition. The moment spectators try to cross to the other side, they fall into a state of uncertainty, which raises the questions above. Rather than appealing to a passive spectator, the work calls for an active public, a *Mitspieler*, who either accepts the challenge or refuses it. In either case, the proposal works. The silent violence of the art piece cuts the space and installs the dilemma of the border: to cross or not to cross.

2 cf. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (1940), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vol., vol. 1: Abhandlungen, Frankfurt am Main, 1974.



6 William Forsythe, “The Fact of Matter”, Choreographic object in the context of the exhibition *Uncertain states* (Curatorial team: J. Odenthal, A.Hervol, D. Wechsler) ADK, Berlin, 2016/17

Just like migrants, the spectators wait in front of the piece as if it were a barrier. This wait dislocates place and time, and prompts a new reflection upon the condition of life.

The whole work – the selection of pieces, the layout proposed, the interactions displayed in the halls, the communicating vessels between spaces and works, the interferences that may occur in the particular situation of each spectator – represents an invitation to abandon the inertia of the gaze and to reformulate some of the current questions about migrations, identities, and the possible and necessary ways of setting and resetting the conditions of inhabiting the contemporary social space.

The delimitation of territory and the deployment of limits, landmarks, milestones, hedges and fences have always been used by individuals gathered in either large or small societies to produce an inside-outside situation in order to express ownership, belonging, or their opposite.

Zygmunt Bauman asserted that these physical and symbolic barriers are a declaration of intent meant to establish positions, define points of view, and to both include and exclude.

Inside and outside the space defined by the borders, these groups of individuals make up a mass of people whom the states can barely define: Are they migrants, refugees, exiles...?

What the states do know is that they are 'the others,' and therefore expel them or maintain them within clearly defined spaces, assisted but not integrated, lying in wait, detained. In a world invaded by the idea of globalization, they all find themselves without a place, thus revealing the twofold vulnerability of the situation: both their own and that of the others. Where is the point of view on these borders? Where is 'us' and where 'the others'? In the flow of peoples and conflicts, the wall, the fence, and the limit become mutually exclusive, particularly within the established logic of the trans-nationalization discourse, the enunciation of which has already found its paradoxical instance.

In addition to the issues concerning contemporary socio-political problems, I personally believe that other topics add to the specific nature of this project focused on uncertainty. This curatorial project represents the symbolic and aesthetic commitments of the selected artists from different backgrounds. Their work, which explores conflicts such as migration, exile, identity, itinerancy, belonging, limits, and borders, is the key to reflecting upon contemporary life. As curators, we address not only the topic of the works, but also the contemporary art conditions as part of the basis for this mobile concept of migration; namely, ideas, the media, platforms, practices, socio-cultural representations, and even the artist's own circumstances.

The objective is to present one of the problem-topics of our world and to look into the conditions of contemporary art on the basis of this dynamic and complex concept, with the certainty that this will push new borders and turn the site of art into a new space for reflection upon our everyday experience.

These considerations create need to reconsider the current role of art. We will advance a possible answer, which might be effective in the light of the works herein gathered: contemporary art enhances the experience of the world. If this is so, the selection of works and their layout add to this project by offering to the spectator an element of credibility capable of expressing the topics around us differently. Such an element of credibility is just one among others, including those that can spontaneously arise along the itinerary of each spectator.

The artists gathered in this exhibition make the above possible by proposing images and generating experiences that differ from the dominant forms of representation. They provide visibility to what the media identifies as 'the others' and

challenge the role of ‘us’ when they use human faces in inhuman stories, exhibit trauma, give shape to the invisibilization of human traffic, show the promiscuity of precariousness and, through the introduction of archives, bring back to memory other transits, other migrations, other exiles.

Finally, I would like to pay homage to a great artist who was part of a previous project of mine in Buenos Aires in 2015, also linked with transits and migrations.³ She was Leila Alaoui, a photographer and video artist. She worked alongside North African migrants, trying to reveal their humanity in the extreme conditions of life in the desert, at sea, on the sand.

Leila was thirty-four years old. She was a member of Amnesty International. Her commitment as an artist was part of her commitment as a human being. Last January, while working in Burkina Faso, she was injured during a terrorist attack and died the following day.

This tribute is also part of my motivation to continue on this route and to share these memories as well as ideas and ways of thinking to contribute to the deactivation of established positions and to the possibility of including other perspectives that reveal other visions on the road to contemporary humanism.

In Bertold Brecht’s words – from a paper in the Archives of the Akademie der Künste included in the archive zone of the *Uncertain States* exhibition – “Das letzte Wort ist noch nicht gesprochen.”

3 *Migrations (in) Contemporary Art*, Muntref Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, 2 October to 31 December 2015.