

Collaboration and Migration

A Discussion with Almut Rembges, Philipp Lutz, Katharina Morawek

by Makiko Takahashi, Lisa Lee Benjamin, Franziska Stern

This roundtable discussion was held on December 15, 2015, at Shedhalle in Zurich, and addressed the current situation around migration in Switzerland as well as different individual viewpoints and experiences. The participants of the discussion included: 1) Almut Rembges, founder of bblackboxx, an “emancipatory art practice” located adjacent to the detention centre in Basel, currently hosting the No Border Café; 2) Philipp Lutz, a political scientist working for foraus, a foreign policy think tank connecting the worlds of science and politics. Migration is now one of their main topics and is explored through their “PoliTisch” project; and 3) Katharina Morawek, director of the Shedhalle, a public institution for artistic and cultural practices related to socio-political topics. Their current project, “The Whole World in Zurich”, is focused on interventions into Swiss migration politics, proposing the concept of “urban citizenship”.

Q: Migration and work is a very large nebula consisting of many institutions, organizations, and individuals. How are you networking within this web of interests, and which areas are you targeting specifically?

Almut Rembges: We have several different levels where we network. In the beginning it was just a few artists who started to make projects. As bblackboxx grew with these artists, I noticed the need for networking in the political field. I discovered political activism thanks to the Autonome Schule, an autonomous education project for people who do not hold papers or permits to stay. Their base principles inspired me and connecting with them was, for me, a major point of orientation for what emancipatory practice means. I also went to visit several no border camps and joined the Network of Critical Migration

Studies, to gain more information and tools to work effectively.

Katharina Morawek: In spring 2016, we started the project “The Whole World in Zurich” with the aim of creating concrete interventions into Swiss migration politics. A transdisciplinary working group developed models of how citizenship could be applied locally, in the city of Zurich. We met with institutional representatives and other individuals from civil society. Instead of meeting them in their offices, we aimed to establish dialogical spaces, where usual habitual frameworks can be shaken up—for example on a ship on the lake of Zurich. The idea is to establish new forms of discussions on eye-level.

Philipp Lutz: We have just established a new forum called “PoliTisch”. The concept is to create an informal dinner, hosted at someone’s home, which is centred on a political discourse. The invited guests range from people from the local city municipality, engaged stakeholders from different backgrounds and local opinion leaders, as well also people who migrated to the area. As Switzerland is so diverse, it is very important that we reach all the regions. Often participants know each other, but they do not know who else is invited to these dinners. It is a quiet and confidential setting where people are not recorded and can have an open discussion and a safe space where nothing leaves the room. This safe space creates the possibility of a very direct exchange. The other approach is through the larger public events foraus produces, which are a bit more traditional but help to share the ideas and spread a new vision to an even broader audience.

Q: What is the overlap of your organizations and the current connectivity between you? You are all in the same field of work but in different ways. Do you develop scenarios to somehow enforce each other?

PL: Katharina and I have met before on a civil society platform. Although there is always a core of people involved with certain issues, people tend to be engaged within a specific focus or within their own organization. Thus there it is difficult to coordinate activities between various organizations. It would be better if we work together and try to use these synergies, as it could have a much larger impact.

KM: There are connections between different organizations, but those connections are loose and there is a lack of strategic alliances. The political system in Switzerland, direct democracy, is structured through referendums which are driven through special interests, while many people are excluded from participation. This contributes to social fragmentations and particularizes political practices. In recent times, the potential for strategic alliances is increasing, for example with the platform “Wir alle sind Zürich”. This is something new, and it is going to mean that many of those who were being ignored by a dominant society for a long time will demand their rights within the framework of something like a new civil society in Switzerland.

Q: Can you talk about the “helping hype” issues and the challenges you are dealing with that you are experiencing now?

AR: This autumn I had twelve different emails from young women—most are only sixteen to eighteen years old—this “helping hype” is actually very gendered. They wanted to find out what they could do for refugees. As a result, I had three meetings a week with these volunteers and talked about post discrimination and my problems with charity. After a while I felt really strange in this role, where I ended up talking about refugees a lot. Also, I did not feel good to be the point of orientation for these volunteers at bblackboxx—I did not want this role of being a mentor for them. So now, I just give them the key and tell them, “Just go there make some tea and see yourself what you want to do”. At bblackboxx, we don’t see ourselves as mediators or the like, because we believe that people can mediate themselves. So bblackboxx just offers a space where everyone can talk to each other, or not talk and just spend time together.

The frame of “charity and community art” which is given to bblackboxx by the proximity of the camp and the prison and the issues we are dealing with is really strong, and I have tried for many years to break this idea or label. I am not sure if it is even possible. Some foundations call us and ask, “Do you need money?” Once I asked back, “Money for what? What is your idea?” The guy said, “Maybe blankets”. We could just go and buy blankets but it feels wrong, as it will just enhance the charity effect. I was so uncomfortable with this hype. They want something real and tangible, like blankets, and I respect that, but I cannot run around for rich people who want to help refugees and buy blankets. They should do it themselves.

KM: I share many points with Almut on this question. But I would like to add something. Empathy, or the interest to share, are ethical resources that we should not underestimate, especially within societies that are characterized by de-solidarization. Migration has been declared the equivalent of a national catastrophe, compared with a flood, a wave, a surge, with all those negative connotations. So the term solidarity has gone through a very difficult history and is saturated with a lot of paternalism, for example, if we look at the history of internationalism or development work.

AR: Katharina, which terms do you prefer instead of “solidarity”?

KM: We could use the term complicity—meaning to partner up with a common interest, like accomplices. But even though I share the criticism concerning the term solidarity, I do think it is worth the effort of trying to reaffirm it. Solidarity is not about helping, it is about sharing a common interest. It is about acknowledging that every one on this planet has a right to the pursuit of happiness. It is essential to acknowledge this right. Our Shedhalle-project “The Whole World in Zurich” is about paving paths for such changes in migration politics, towards “the right to have rights”.

PL: The most central value in the migration debate is the value of freedom. It is our civil right as citizens to have individual freedom, but migration policies often restrict this freedom. By framing migration as an issue of freedom, we can begin to flip the argument, so that those who don’t see an open society as something desirable are now in a defensive position to argue that it is in public interest to restrict individual freedom, and with the duty to prove that

people's freedom is harmful. This change of narrative could be quite powerful.

AR: We should not forget that a person who agrees with border politics also agrees with the fact that people are killed. A pro-border person does not seem to understand that border politics does not work in the way it is intended—it does not stop anyone from migration. I think that should be obvious by now. Maybe we should ask ourselves, to begin with, who we think we are to tell other people where they should stay or go.

PL: In the migration debate they always brought up two cases, to speak up for freer migration, let's say. One is the moral case, and the other is the economic case. Migration is largely driven by economic factors and better personal prospects for themselves and their families. Migrants coming to Europe know that there are jobs for them. People spend all their savings to pay smugglers. There is some project that actually calculated this money spent for people paying to come to Europe, and they calculated the money European taxpayers pay to deter migrants from coming. It was approximately the same amount of money—roughly one billion Euros. So a pure repression strategy is actually a huge economic loss, and in the end it is not very effective, as people are still coming. Violent border regimes are therefore not only inhumane, but also a huge burden on European tax payers.

Paternalism is what our current migration policy regime is based on. All the rules and how it is designed are very paternalistic, especially, when it is the issue of integrating refugees or migrants into the labour market. The general view is that these migrants are only low-skilled people who are determined to do certain tasks in society, and that we know what is good for them, and can place them there or will not there. The rising problem with the asylum system in Switzerland is a result of these paternalistic structures, and they are also reflected in the public discourse.

Q: As we are talking about definitions, and solidarity, how do you insert these or change the public and political discourse? Or reframe the debate? Is it as simple as changing the wording or creating new platforms?

PL: In the recent media debate on the refugee "crisis" it is quite fascinating how the terminology of floods portrays migration as a natural catastrophe or migrants as an anonymous mass with no face. Issues

of individuality and messages may trigger empathy or solidarity. But if you read in the news "100 people drown in the Mediterranean", it is just another statistical figure. However, we saw a significant change in the debate when the picture of a single Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, on the Turkish shore appeared in the media. Suddenly, there was a face, a familiarity, and hence a direct connection.

AR: Yes, but that shift was over in three days, and people forgot about it.

KM: I think it was a bit longer, but to sustain empathy can be exhausting and overwhelming for some people. For example, it is easy to donate old clothes when you have them. But for people to accept that their own "good life" is connected with the presence of those who don't have a good life, and therefore are seeking it, can hurt. It is necessary to see those global relations. But to express empathy and solidarity in such a situation can be quite exhausting. Many people try to protect themselves and their privileges from this exhaustion by repressing, forgetting, and detaching. The point is: those "privileges" of a good life are actually everyone's right—and if some lose them, it does not mean that others will automatically gain. The point is not to fight against privileges, but for a good life for all.

AR: I would like to say something about the term "giving voices" and the representation of individual destinies in the refugee discourse. Just recently, some students came to bblackboxx as they planned a film project based on interviews with refugees. No problem with that, but then they explained: "We want to show the human being behind the asylum seeker". I know what they meant, but to me, this is a totally absurd sentence. Because it sounds like the filmmakers assume that there is an audience who needs to learn that refugees are human beings, and once they know it they would show more empathy. I am not sure if that is the key to the problem. I feel more and more uncomfortable with this attitude that people need to be fed with images of suffering so that they understand that war, poverty, and borders are not right.

Q: How do the recent migration topics affect the art world or cultural production? What do you see happening in the future?

AR: The attention bblackboxx received from the art world was good, but in many cases it felt wrong. I started to feel like the refugees were a fetish,

from the cultural production point of view. I felt strange and guilty because it was clear that the success of bblackboxx is basically based on the presence of the detention prison in the background. What I actually like about bblackboxx is that we are going somewhere where people are already gathering and have nothing else to do but to sit together and to talk. I also like the fact that many people who use our space don't come because of the art projects, but for coffee and tea and to hang around. I have a problem in general with art spaces. Very often, it seems to me that any form of friction and critique is losing its power inside the art context. Inside the white cube, political art turns into homework. When it comes to bblackboxx, I don't think that art should be "used" for other goals, such as social work or political propaganda. At bblackboxx, we never intended to make projects that address a previously defined audience. All we can do with art is to open referential frames... To take people with us to unknown territory, to make room for vagueness and a way of thinking which does not mean to calculate its goals or manipulate.

Needless to say, that, apart from other art projects, there is also some political activism and helping going on around bblackboxx. But the art projects are art projects—they don't serve other purposes.

KM: Within the art world and its institutions, there is a particular interest in migration as a political issue plus an obscene interest in refugees as artistic "material", but without wanting to look at or touch the social structures that produce inequality or racism. It is unsettling for protagonists of the art field to think about precisely their own institution, actions, or affiliations, and how racism is reproduced there.

AR: I can speak of a recent example: bblackboxx was invited to the Textile Museum in St. Gallen with a project called "Cut the Fence" by the artist duo Copa&Sordes. It is a fundraising discourse project. I realized only there that the curator was not aware of our bblackboxx attitude toward migration, which says clearly "NO DETENTION PRISONS, NO BORDERS". For the opening speech, she had invited an official from St. Gallen who was the head of the Police Department. According to her, this should inspire a conversational debate framed like, "The Police come to talk with bblackboxx artists about deportation and border control". But to me this did not make sense, as the head of the police department has already made a decision. He belongs to those parties who chase the unwanted migrants and put them behind fences. For me, then it is simply too late

to talk. I feel like this is a typical situation. Curators from the art world and cultural institutions find bblackboxx somehow interesting, but ultimately, they underestimate our radicality, they perceive us just as a social engaged project for refugees...and it is a very nice thing and everyone can feel better about the whole migration topic because they were socially engaged. I actually dislike the term "socially engaged", or rather don't feel so comfortable with it as a frame for bblackboxx. I would rather think of bblackboxx in the sense of interference or shuffling. We like to frame bblackboxx x as a counter-performance, against a context, which is dominated by separation and oppression.

KM: I want to stress the issue of self-representation, the importance of narratives by those people who actually have something to say about it. What we will experience in the next few years will be new forms of cultural production that are initiated and defined by the newcomers.

Captions

1 Roundtable discussion at Shedhalle, 15 December 2015. Photograph by: Makiko Takahashi.

2 foraus: A moderated talk on migration during a "PoliTisch" at the Swiss Embassy in Berlin. Photograph: provided by foraus.

3 bblackboxx: Meeting place and art space located in Basel. Photograph: © bblackboxx.

4 Participants of the 3rd Hafenforum at Shedhalle, 6 February 2016. Photograph by: Guido Henseler.



bblackboxx (Basel/ CH): **Almut Rembges**,
Founding member

bblackboxx is a network of artists and activists who collaborate, congregate, and create projects in a former kiosk building close to the detention centre for asylum seekers in Basel. It is a place for public encounters, discourse, and education for the current community of inhabitants of and around the detention centre. She followed her passion, and bblackboxx now collaborates with many groups and actively stands and speaks for a world with no borders, no detention centres, and for people to be treated as people, no matter their origin or situation.

foraus (Zurich/ CH): **Philipp Lutz**, Migration
foraus

foraus (Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy) generates independently high-quality recommendations for Swiss foreign policy decision makers and the public, thereby bridging the gap between academia and politics. Its non-partisan approach aims to promote an open dialogue and informed decision-making on all aspects of Swiss foreign policy. foraus is a grassroots organization whose success as a think tank is based on its members' voluntary commitment. Their current project on migration is based on a new event-format called "PoliTisch".

Shedhalle (Zurich/ CH): **Katharina Morawek**,
Curatorial and Managerial Responsibility

An institution of contemporary and critical art, Shedhalle defines itself as a place where new forms of artistic and cultural practices—particularly those related to socio-political topics—can be produced and presented within the framework of exhibitions and other events. The project "The Whole World in Zurich" demands legal, political, social, and cultural participation and investigates how the concept of urban citizenship for everyone living in Zurich can be realized.

Lisa Lee Benjamin (US) is an artist, curator, author, and avid instigator of many cross-pollinating international initiatives including *Kulturfolger*, *We are Nature*, *Urban Hedgerow*, *Alpine Initiatives*, and *UG LAB*. She generates experiences and solutions for diverse animal and human habitats, which challenge conventions of sustainability and community. She is currently studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.

Franziska Stern-Preisig (CH) is founder and curator of *Villa Renata*, an art and project space in Basel. The space offers artists the opportunity to develop and

execute site-specific works. The focus is well balanced between a variety of young and established artists. The mix of disciplines encourages discourses and generational exchanges. Franziska Stern-Preisig has a strong background in coaching and organizational development and is currently working on her Master Thesis on participatory art at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.

Makiko Takahashi (JP) is a curator with academic background in art history, aesthetics, and museum studies. Formerly engaged in art projects, she developed exhibitions for *Spiral* (Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo). She is currently studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK. As curatorial project she is currently developing online exhibitions to explore greater possibilities of curating in cyberspace and going beyond the restrictions of conventional physical exhibition projects.