

## Prologue: Voices and borders

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With the prospect of an estimated 200 million refugees worldwide as a result of climate change and armed conflicts, with resurging irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea after the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), and with more than eight million displaced Ukrainians registered in Europe one year after Russia's military intervention in February 2022, it is evident that the question of how refugees are hosted and represented in Europe is not only an urgent one but a persistent one.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the debilitating conditions that formerly applied to a few groups, such as the inhabitants of Palestinian refugee camps, living for decades in a state of permanent temporariness and civic limbo, are now shared by more and more people across the world. Forgotten or hidden out of public sight in camp-like accommodations, they become what environmental studies scholar Rob Nixon has termed *unimagined communities* (Nixon 2011). Paradoxically, this invisibilization is taking place in parallel with an opposite development. Thanks to surveillance technologies and the media, the movements of asylum seekers and irregular migrants into and across Europe are intensively imaged and spectated, forming the basis of dominant aesthetic dispositions. As performance studies scholar Emma Cox has observed, these aesthetic dispositions manifest in different 'representational domains'. Although they are not co-constitutive of one another, they can nevertheless be interlinked as 'aestheticized traces of Europe's "migrant crisis"' (Cox 2017, 479).

A core idea of this book is that art is a representational domain that plays a crucial role in making such unimagined communities come into appearance within the public spaces of civil society, thanks to art's dual capacity for facilitating processes of self-representation, worldmaking, and community-building among the forcibly displaced, *and* for communicating their experiences and perspectives to other members of civil society in nuanced and engaging ways. *Worlding and Storying Forced Displacement: Contemporary Art and Refugee Experience in Denmark* aims to analyse and contextualize the important but under-researched contributions by

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1 According to the UNHCR, as of February 15, 2023, almost a year after the war began, 8,072,198 displaced Ukrainians had been registered in Europe, representing 18 per cent of their country's population (Stoquer 2023, n.p.).

contemporary artists from Denmark to the representation of refugees and forced migration. It engages, therefore, primarily, but not exclusively, with art-based projects and artworks that have emerged from or been exhibited on the Danish art scene in the 21st century.

Now, what is special about this material? Although the individual artists and collectives behind these projects and works have taken very different approaches to refugeedom and employed radically different means of representation, and although some of them engage with international contexts, the majority have responded to the country's political climate in which an endless series of tightenings of asylum laws has won support not only from anti-refugee right-wing parties but also from the majority of politicians in the Danish Parliament, the 'Folketinget'.

A powerful demonstration of art's dual capacity for supporting forcibly displaced people and deepening the understanding of forced displacement and refugeehood in host countries is the adaptable, site-specific public art installation *MUTE* (2000–) by the Syrian-born, Berlin-based artist and cultural activist Khaled Barakeh. In 2022, *MUTE* was shown in three different public spaces in Denmark.<sup>2</sup> On the UN's Refugee Day on June 20, 2022, Barakeh made an intervention in Christiansborg Slotsplads, the public square in front of the Danish Parliament, titled *MUTE – A Muted Demonstration* (Barakeh c2022, n.p.). On June 23, *MUTE* was presented on the square in front of Mariakirken ('Maria's Church') in the Copenhagen district of Vesterbro, where it formed part of Barakeh's exhibition inside the church, entitled *Khaled Barakeh: Design of Necessity*. Finally, *MUTE* was incorporated into *RE:ACT Human Rights*, a three-day programme focusing on art and music as engines of activism, organized as a part of the annual Roskilde Festival – one of Europe's largest music festivals, and visited by approximately 135,000 people in 2022.

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2 *RE:ACT Human Rights* was a collaboration between Rapolitics, the Danish Institute for Human Rights and Roskilde Festival. For an introduction to the exhibition at Mariakirken, including a video interview with Barakeh, see <https://www.folkekirken-vesterbros.dk/khaled-barakeh/> (accessed November 9, 2023). For an interview with Barakeh including video footage of the exhibition outside the church, see Melanie (Dejlige Dage), *Interview with Khaled Barakeh – MUTE – A Muted Demonstration, June 23, 2022*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEl6-ecVvVk> (accessed November 10, 2023).

Fig. 1: Khaled Barakeh, *MUTE – A Muted Demonstration*, mixed media installation at Christiansborg Slotsplads, the square in front of the Danish parliament, Folketinget, June 20, 2022. © the artist.



The 49 figures in *MUTE* were all dressed in ordinary clothes that had been donated by Syrian activists living in diaspora. The clothing served not only as bodily imprints of displaced Syrians, creating an eerie sense of embodied presence in corporeal absence. It also recalled the tactical use of neutral, dark clothing by Syrian protestors back in Syria, enabling individuals to blend anonymously into the crowd to avoid capture by the state security forces. Interestingly, the space between the figures also enabled curious passersby to walk among them. Dressed in everyday clothes, the figures became part of the spectacle in front of the Danish Parliament, conveying the impression of a waxing and waning group of protestors to those who walked past and saw the installation from a distance.

What attracted the attention of spectators was thus not so much the neutral clothing or the presence of a group of protestors in a square where demonstrators gather regularly to visibilize and voice their critique and shout their demands at politicians, but, rather, the upsetting discovery that the figures had been 'decapitated' and were, as Barakeh has explained, 'reconstructed to look inside the bodies bringing back all the memories, traumas, and anguish' (Barakeh 2022, n.p.). As part of this reconstruction, the necks of the figures were transformed into a horn or bodily megaphone, serving as a powerful symbolic amplifier for sounding muted political voices. It is important to understand that this was not a critical protest addressed to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who had brutally

silenced the country's political opposition in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, until his regime was brought to an end in 2024,<sup>3</sup> but was first and foremost a call to European publics and a summoning of the communities of Syrians living in exile. In his account of how this work came about, Barakeh emphasizes that it originated on European soil: 'The motivation for *MUTE* was born after 2015. The newly arrived Syrians shifted their protests to German streets using the same words and gestures they had developed in the peaceful protest movement that began in Syria.' Put differently, *MUTE* grew from the experience of being forcibly displaced and from the diasporic attempt 'to find one's bearings and belonging in European space and to build a community in exile' (Barakeh 2022, n.p.).

*Fig. 2: Khaled Barakeh, MUTE – A Muted Demonstration, mixed media installation at Christiansborg Slotsplads, the square in front of the Danish parliament, Folketinget, June 20, 2022. © the artist.*



*MUTE* was first shown in front of the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, on April 23, 2020, where Anwar Raslan and Eyad Al-Gharib, two former officials of Bashar al-Assad's security apparatus, were being charged with crimes against humanity. Due to the restrictions on social gatherings during the surge of

3 The beginning and end of the Arab Spring varies across countries. The Encyclopedia Britannica dates the popular uprising from December 2010 to 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring> (accessed December 9, 2024).

the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, activists and the families of detainees and the disappeared were prevented from attending the court proceedings. *MUTE* was created as an artistic response to the way in which the precautions against the pandemic barred the Syrians from being present in court and making their ongoing struggle for justice visible in their new social and political context in Germany. *MUTE* gave them a very visible presence outside, but adjacent to, the courtroom. This presence was amplified when *MUTE* was joined by members of the organizations Families for Freedom and the Caesar Family Association. Both organizations are advocates for the rights of individuals detained, disappeared and tortured by the Assad regime and other parties involved in the conflict. On the second day of the exhibition, members of these organizations appeared at the site, showing pictures of missing family members and sharing their personal stories, thereby creating 'their own testimony, which could not be shared within the strict confines of the ongoing trial' (Barakeh 2022, n.p.).

The artwork also sent a broader political and ethical message to the public about the right to voice, visibility and cultural citizenship of displaced people. Thus, it is no surprise that, since 2020, Barakeh's installation has moved across regional and national borders and into other political contexts, including the 2022 intervention in public spaces in Denmark. Since 2015, Denmark has not only introduced a strict control and deterrence policy towards refugees but has gradually rolled out one of the strictest and most controversial laws on immigration in the entire European Union (henceforth, EU). It reached its lowest point in June 2020 when the Udlændingestyrelsen (the Danish Immigration Service) launched the so-called 'Damascus Project' to speed up the processing of approximately 900 Syrian refugees from Damascus (and later also 350 refugees from the neighbouring area) in order to assess whether their residence permits could be revoked. The result became evident in the spring of 2021, when 453 Syrian refugees with protection through the asylum system had their residence permits withdrawn, or were denied an extension with reference to a perceived improvement in the security situation (Rytter et al. 2023, 13). This withdrawal reflected a wider change, accurately described by refugee studies scholar Martin Lemberg-Pedersen as 'the ongoing transformation of the Danish asylum system from one of protection to one of temporariness and deportation' (Lemberg-Pedersen 2021, 19). Notably, Denmark and Hungary were the only countries that assessed it would be safe enough to send refugees back to these areas and ignored the numerous international and national protests and warnings. The revocations created fear and uncertainty, not only among Syrians but also among other refugee groups in Denmark. This led to demonstrations across the country, where a section of the Danish population took to the streets to protest in solidarity with the refugees (Rytter et al. 2023, 10). That Barakeh's *MUTE – A Muted Demonstration* was intended as a critical intervention into this political situation is evident from the press release, which included this statement by the artist:

Today, we stand in solidarity with all refugees and displaced peoples globally. Asylum is not an issue restricted to any one country or continent, as the devastating flight of Ukrainians – with two million people becoming refugees in only two weeks – has recently shown. *MUTE* remembers the oppression that led to the Syrians' mass displacement, including to their current European homes. It reminds audiences that refugees are made: driven out of their homes and communities by acts of violence and persecution that the international community must act to prevent.

Finally, *MUTE* demands an end to the forced deportations of all refugees and vulnerable persons from Denmark or any other country. [...] Syria is not a safe country for the return of refugees, a necessary truth that *MUTE* re-asserts at the heart of public space in Denmark. It takes up the creative legacy of the Syrians' protest, and invites Danish voices to join them, in reminding governments that the right to seek asylum is inviolable.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in the Danish context, *MUTE* added to its original call for social justice for the victims of Assad's political persecution and barbaric warfare a claim to the right of Syrian refugees to remain in safe countries and not be deported back to Syria. Despite the muteness of the artwork, it asserted, through powerful visual means, the inextricable connections between 'here' (Europe) and 'there' (Syria), and between past and present, at the core of the experience of forced displacement and exile.

The performance studies scholar Emma Cox has used the concept of procession developed in theatre studies as a tool to analyse the appearance of 'refugee bodies' and the European mediated experience of the refugee situation in 2015, when the ongoing civil war forced more than a million refugees to flee Syria and seek asylum in Europe. Cox coins her own concept of 'processional aesthetics' to establish an *aesthetic* perspective on this historical event. The concept of processional aesthetics is similar to cultural theorist Mieke Bal's influential concept of migratory aesthetics, in the sense that both scholars use the term 'aesthetics' to refer to sensory bodily experience and the representation of human experience, not to designate a specialized area of the fine arts and art theory (Cox 2017; Bal 2007a). This broad understanding of aesthetics that embraces the many different forms sensory experience can assume is helpful when engaging with art on forced displacement, because it often blurs the boundaries between art, social practices, activism and political activity as well as coalition and community building.

Cox uses the term 'processional aesthetics' to theorize a mode of envisioning and representing refugees that makes the abject mass and movement of people 'repre-

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4 Khaled Barakeh, quoted from 'Khaled Barakeh: MUTE – A Muted Demonstration. 20. juni, 2022 kl. 08–20, Christiansborg Slotsplads', press release by the curator Matthias Borello, June 14, 2022.

sentational'. When a wave of refugees is described metaphorically as a procession, refugees are projected into 'a visual and spectatorial paradigm' as 'figures who enter public space through processional collectivity' (Cox 2017, 478). Processional aesthetics is thus,

[...] a mode of looking and responding [...], within the context of narrative and photographic representation, chiefly within news media, and in collective embodied responses via processional pro- and anti-migrant practices, including community marches, walks, parades, religious ceremonies, and performance art. (Cox 2017, 479)

Among her examples, Cox includes Ernest Hemingway's characterization of Greek refugees during the Greco-Turkish War in 1922 as 'A Silent, Ghastly Procession', as well as media images of large groups of Syrians waiting at train stations and walking along motorways, or in solidarity processions, and the German activist collective Centre for Political Beauty's 2015 performance intervention *Die Toten kommen* ('The Dead are Coming') (Hemingway, in: Cox 2017, 478; see also 489–492). Accordingly, processional aesthetics can be understood as a mode of representation that situates refugees as objects for scrutiny by the non-displaced, and moves refugees into the societal domain of *biopolitics* with its social and humanitarian concerns and its public debates – at least at the level of representation. As Cox notes, 'procession' is central to the visual economy associated with refugee transit and border-crossing in the spheres of media and surveillance, as well as other representational domains.

It could be added that a processional aesthetics can be used purposefully in artworks such as *MUTE* to make an unimagined community come into appearance in public. Although Cox's definition might leave the impression that processional aesthetics is all about the spectators' framing of and ethical response to refugees, she does not rule out the possibility that a processional mode of representation may also express the agency of refugees and migrants. Processional formations of people can, therefore, also be seen as 'claim-making collectives' and 'strategic formations wanting to be seen' (Cox 2017, 480), which is exactly the mode of looking and responding that *MUTE* encourages. In Cox's understanding, processional aesthetics is a kind of interaction between migrating/claim-making and spectating bodies. Without the co-presence of the bodies in procession and without spectating bodies, there is no processional aesthetics. One of the strengths of Barakeh's installation is that it enables these two types of bodies to merge, as viewers can position themselves both physically and imaginatively as one of the bodies in the group of refugees/protectors – potentially evoking feelings of empathy and solidarity.

Fig. 3: Nermin Duraković, *Our Border*, video installation, 2022, installed at the exhibition *Forbindelser – danske kunstnere fra det tidligere Jugoslavien* ('Connections – Danish Artists from Former Yugoslavia') at SMK (the National Gallery of Denmark). Courtesy: the artist.



In contrast to the aesthetics of embodiment deployed by Barakeh, Nermin Duraković's single-screen video installation *Our Border* (2022) invites the viewer to share the disembodied bird's eye view of a drone-borne surveillance camera. The work formed a monumental entrance to the group exhibition *Forbindelser – danske kunstnere fra det tidligere Jugoslavien* ('Connections – Danish Artists from Former Yugoslavia') shown at SMK (the National Gallery of Denmark) in 2022. The exhibition featured artists who had all made their mark on the Danish art scene. Like Duraković, most of them had come to Denmark with their families in the early 1990s, when many people fled the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mišković and Østergaard 2022, 2). In *Our Border*, video footage of the Plješevica mountain is projected onto a slanted wall that mimics the scale and slopes of the mountain, which is located on the border with Croatia and close to the city of Bihać in the northwestern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this border town with about 60,000 inhabitants, a large number of refugees and migrants, primarily from Syria and Afghanistan, have been detained on their journey to the EU country in which they wish to apply for asylum. When Croatia became a member of the EU in 2013,

this national border also became one of EU's geopolitical outer borders. As the title suggests, it is therefore also 'our border' – a deterritorialized Danish border.

A distinguishing feature of the Plješevica border is the use of advanced technologies, with an impassable zone designed to prevent clandestine entry into the EU.<sup>5</sup> The footage for *Our Border* was shot about a decade after the EU implemented, in 2013, an extensive surveillance network, named the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), in order to systematize the surveillance of migration and to optimize the tracking of irregular migration especially. The network uses a variety of technologies for surveillance, such as CCTV footage, drones, satellite remote sensing, reconnaissance aircraft and thermal camera systems, to secure the borders – or in EUROSUR's own words, 'for the purpose of detecting, preventing and combating irregular migration and cross-border crime, and contributing to ensuring the protection and saving the lives of migrants'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, EUROSUR was designed to serve the dual objective of control and protection. The network was devised to strengthen the exchange of information and operational co-operation between EU member states, and, as the curator and scholar of photography Louise Wolthers recounts, made each of them 'responsible for compiling all relevant data, analysing and interpreting it, deciding what to share and with whom, and creating a coherent "national situational picture"' and thereby using technology to produce 'criminalized bodies' (Wolthers 2015, 115–116).

Duraković's use of drone surveillance technology mimics *and* critically subverts the border surveillance system by publicly revealing situational pictures that should not be publicly accessible. In *Our Border*, a low hum accompanies the camera as it navigates around the security system at the border crossing to remain undetected and record what usually remains undocumented. For four minutes, the camera slowly traces the barren zone that has been created by removing vegetation along the borderline to ensure the visibility needed to survey the area and to better monitor and stop the many migrants and refugees who attempt to enter the EU on a daily basis, with, for some, a fatal outcome. This reinforcement of the border is akin to the many border walls that have been built around the world in recent decades and is thus reflective of a pervasive violent border and migration regime (Casey 2015). Like these walls, the broad hostile zone translates the abstract borderline of

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5 As described in the transcript of Duraković's statement on *Our Border* made for the video introduction to the artist in the *Forbindelser* exhibition (Mišković 2023, vol 2, appendix 2, p. 17).

6 Quoted from the EU's official website on Migration and Home Affairs, 'European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR)', [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/european-border-surveillance-system-eurosur\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/european-border-surveillance-system-eurosur_en) (accessed January 4, 2024). See also Ross 2022, 94; Wolthers 2015, 114–115.

geographical maps into a material 'object' in physical space. The border has become an aesthetic, experiential phenomenon and thus a potential material for artmaking.

As the observant curator of the *Forbindelser* exhibition, Tijana Mišković, notes in her subtle reading of *Our Border*, this work is expressive of a double consciousness, founded in Duraković's diasporic position between Danish and Yugoslav culture as well as the artist's critical view on the dual logic of this national/European border:

According to this logic, the artist's former homeland ends where his current homeland begins. It is an interesting juxtaposition and contrast. The artist's focus on the border as a phenomenon enables a broader reading of the work. [...] The border can be understood as a geographical marker between two countries, but also as an ethical boundary of what migration policies we as Europeans are willing to accept. (Mišković 2023, vol. 1, p. 170)<sup>7</sup>

But there is more. Mišković reflects on the inextricable connections between 'here' (Denmark) and 'there' (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and between past and present – connections that are also key to Barakeh's *MUTE*. *Our Border* juxtaposes Duraković's experience of the 'narrative of migration' in the context of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s with the narratives shaping contemporary perceptions of flight and migration. As Mišković explains, the reactivation of personal memory and a sense of shared experience are central to the work and provide its political message with leverage:

At the time, the artist and his family were fleeing the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and crossed the border that refugees from the Middle East are trying to cross today, basically for similar reasons: in search and hope for safety and a better life. For the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, many of whom were refugees themselves only a few decades ago, seeing new waves of refugees must be a kind of *déjà vu*. This repetition across time should trigger a new perspective, one that transcends the specificity of individual situations in order to see the problematic in a wider context. It is as if Duraković's landscape attempts to do just that: to lift our gaze so that the artificially created border stands out as the only motif in the work. (Mišković 2023, vol. 1, p. 170)

To conclude, both Khaled Barakeh's *MUTE* and Nermin Duraković's *Our Border* indicate that some of the art on forced displacement and refugeedom emerging from the Danish context is of general relevance to the study of how contemporary art engages with the predicament of refugees and the border and asylum policies of Europe.

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7 All quotations from Danish and German language sources have been translated by the author.