Miriam Schickler with Ahmed Isam Aldin and Ulf Aminde

Negotiating Opacity and Transparency in the Art Academy

The

*foundationClass was initiated at weißensee academy of art berlin in 2016. Taking advantage of new funding possibilities for projects and programs geared towards granting (re)access to so-called newcomers into higher education, the *foundationClass' primary goal consists of supporting artists and designers who have fled their home countries to continue their studies in Germany. Situated within the institution but rejecting to embody it, the program scrutinizes the art academy as a powerful site of knowledge production. Refusing to be integrated into an economy of difference, the *foundationClass aims to formulate strategies that position the participants outside of the grid of reductive modes of representation. Together they want to find answers to the question of what an art school of the future would look like if it genuinely recognized migration as an essential societal factor.

When we first received the invitation to write an article for this publication, we were wondering how we could formulate a critique that would not bite (off) the hand that continues to feed us. Which, to a big extent, is a *white* institution that provides us with the infrastructure to run the *foundationClass and a platform from which to apply for funding for the continuation and development of the program. Rather than directly attacking the institution, we decided to have a recorded conversation about one of the major conflicts Ulf Aminde and I have been facing since the beginning of our work, namely the constant negotiation between the participants' right to opacity, defined by Édouard Glissant (1997: 189ff) as the right to not comply with the demand to be knowable, understood and transparent, and the transparency stipulated by donors, journalists and, of course, the institution of the art academy itself.

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As will be shown in the conversation, we do not reject transparency and visibility altogether. To a certain extent we do agree with the assumption that "those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized" (Butler 2004: 141). The decision to only give teaching positions to artists, designers and academics who themselves, or whose families have experienced migration, stems primarily from the conviction that their knowledge and strategies to navigate and position themselves within the context of a predominantly *white* Western art industry will equip the *foundationClass participants with important tools that will hopefully be helpful for their own paths. On the other hand, we also believe that their visibility as teachers within a still highly exclusive and *white* institution, especially when it comes to the teaching staff, is already performing and thereby creating the type of art academy we are envisioning.

When it comes to the participants of the *foundationClass, however, there is a persistent concern that they will only be granted access and visibility in the art world on the condition that they perform the predetermined roles of refugees. We strongly agree with Glissant (1997: 189ff) that transparency constitutes the basis for "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought; that it is a tool of reduction and standardization and eventually a means of control.

So instead of getting stuck "between the old dichotomy of the invisibility of the legitimizing bourgeois art world and the strategy for attaining *visibility* for the traditionally marginalized subject", the *foundationClass tries to create the conditions that allow the participants the freedom "to float between both", thereby "producing a new kind of cognitive space" (Haq 2015, emphasis in original).

The following text consists of edited extracts of a conversation about our work in the *foundationClass regarding those questions and contradictions. Since Ulf Aminde (**U**) and I (**M**) believe that our perspectives cannot possibly be complete, we invited our friend, a first generation *foundationClass participant and now student of Visual Communication at weißensee academy of art berlin, Ahmed Isam Aldin (**A**).

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M First of all, it has to be stated that we're obviously talking from very different perspectives here: opacity is different to us than it is to you, which is also part of the whole problem about this concept; the question of whether the possibility of going opaque is a privilege. When we talk about the *foundationClass, Ulf and I can decide to go opaque, to not let anyone enter, to not tell anyone who is in the class, but then we need to ask ourselves: what does it do for the participants? Doesn't visibility also signify freedom and participation?

A The refugee identity brings with it a lot of heaviness, especially when moving from the *foundationClass to being a regular student. Most of your colleagues in the *foundationClass have the same status, even though they come from different places, but you feel you're on the same level. Especially in the art school, where you see so much competition between the students; there's always this fear of the institution and the worry to do things right, and I think that it's also connected to the notion of transparency. Students from the *foundation-Class often feel inferior for being the refugees in the class room. It is very different for international students: they may have the same problems with the language, of understanding and communicating correctly, of understanding the institution, but they don't have this idea of: "I'm a refugee, I have to make a bigger effort in order to get to the level of a normal student". There's a feeling of "I'm always behind", and there's also this exaggerated trust in the German academic institution, that it's better than everything else, which means that only the very best students are getting accepted.

I think there potentially is something empowering within transparency when we're talking about the program itself, the discussions that are happening there, the materials that are being produced – I think it's very important to make that transparent and to document what is actually happening inside the *foundationClass.

But there's another thing: when I go to the classes and there's a member of the staff or the teachers who doesn't know that I'm a refugee it has a very strong impact on the level of conversation. There was one professor, for example, who thought I was just a student

from Sudan. If he had known that I was a refugee, it would have changed the conversation and probably would have included this empathetic thing, like "Oh, the poor refugee". So when we're talking about the *foundationClass, the transparency should not concern the identity of the people, but how very powerful the experience of being in the program is, and how powerful the materials, the conversations and discussions are. I think if this would all be published it would be very empowering for the students as well.

M Yeah, but this is how we from the *foundationClass see it, right? And this is what we always emphasize; that you should look at the actual work of the people, rather than constantly demanding to see the people themselves. We maintain that their work speaks for itself and that you don't have to add the artists' legal status in order to make it significant, but still we're constantly asked about that.

U I think it's very obvious how transparency can violate individuals, especially in the context of the so-called "Welcome Culture", and we cannot say that this is not part of our story. It's producing an environment with its own inherent power structures, which also provided the basis of how we met each other, right? Part of that Welcome Culture is about detecting and subsequently framing a group of people, the so-called "refugees", or "newcomers". It produces programs that are supposedly welcoming them, making things easier for them and in our case in giving access to academies. But at the same time, transparency always determines who needs help and who provides it. So this kind of transparency is producing visibility and it also reproduces essentialist categories and I perceive that as a very violent situation.

As a matter of fact, we're constantly dealing with that: we have to be accountable to the academy, we have to present the program to the public – that's how we get money – because so far we receive funding from within the field of Welcome Culture – although hopefully this will change one day. As a consequence there are many stories of how the staff, or other students from the academy, without even asking, simply open the door and say, "Hey, you have this great program with refugees, I'm also interested in participating, I need some students of yours to work with me on my Master thesis" and so on.

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There were many crazy situations that are actually a result of this transparency.

Transparency ensures that everything is visible and everything is clear, including the different positions of people that then become ready to be used, also in very paternalistic ways. And that is the starting point, I think, both for our discussion here, but also for the *foundationClass in general. Being a refugee unfortunately means that you're being reframed again and again and the big hope of the program is to change the status in a way that this framing becomes an impossibility, but I'm really not sure whether it's working.

A To me the *foundationClass is not just about getting students into the educational system, but to become part of an artistic production that can empower them, but then again I think there will be many difficulties after people leave the *foundationClass and the program should address those problems from the very beginning.

There's a general perception, also among the staff working within the academy, of a refugee as a person who is running from shelter to shelter because of war, so it is assumed that they don't have any artistic tools or skills, and even if they practice art, it's nice and different, because they allegedly don't have any experience. But when you actually see what they are doing, through their production, the materials, texts and works it creates a totally different image. So this has to be visible, as opposed to their identity. People should think: "Oh, this is a student from the *foundationClass", instead of: "This is a refugee from the *foundationClass".

M This is how it starts, I think – with the naming. The program is called *foundationClass for a reason, but it's much more often referred to, or translated as "Refugee Class" or "Übergangsklasse".

U The concept of the name, including the spelling of it, is very important, yet nobody spells it correctly, with the asterisk and the lowercase letter and everything. Speaking of being productive, I sometimes think we have a crude mix of concepts, because at the end of the program we hope that everyone will get accepted by an art academy, and in order to get accepted everyone has to work really

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hard, so there's a sense of productivity which I find highly problematic, because it's all about producing effects; it's all about producing objects for a successful portfolio, and this method, this way of thinking is super capitalist. Everything goes straight from A to B, instead of dancing in circles or whatever. There's no time for doing your own thing, which is very important if you want to do art. Everything is focused on producing this direct effect and I find that very problematic, I feel guilty, to be honest, I'm like, "Wow that's the style we're teaching?". I really don't believe in that, but at the same time it's very important and sometimes I think we should be even stricter, because it's a big challenge, it's not easy to get into the academic art context. At the same time I'm also very interested in what you, Ahmed, are saying, because the potential of this program lies in the asterisk; in the performance of being a student, and also of having our own definition of a class; of an educational environment; of getting together; of working and collaborating. The program is claiming to be part of the school and at the same time it's really having its own focus and its own concept, maybe even its own identity, without essentializing anything; hopefully it's the creation of an identity in flux.

M I think the choice of the name of the program, including its spelling, already invokes Glissant's understanding of opacity. It's not something obscure, it's something that is not one, that is not singular, something that cannot be reduced, it cannot be pinpointed and therefore it frustrates knowledge. People don't understand why the program is called or spelled like that, they probably think it's a typo and since they don't understand, they rather turn it into a 'Welcome Class'.

U In German it sounds even weirder, "Willkommensklasse", and it's absolutely not what we're doing! But we often have to communicate the program, when it comes to the internal politics of the academy for instance, when we apply for funding, when we're going to some conference, or when we give an interview. People demand transparency and they also try to test us, to figure out whether the program is one of the successful Welcome Culture programs, and of course

in some of these instances I have to perform a lot, because there's no possibility to discuss the really important questions we would like to discuss; in order to get money, we need to perform.

M It's not only about money. We have to account for everything. I don't know how many tables I had to fill in already; they want numbers, and I actually don't even know them, I'm a really bad coordinator, I don't even know how many people are in the program at a specific moment, and then they want to know where these people come from, how many women, how many men, did they study before or not – and I don't even know where this data is going, which is actually super problematic and irresponsible.

U I think we are so concerned with different kinds of questions, and we actually are very, very responsible. Far beyond that "5 o'clock, let's go home" thing, we're really working on creating an environment, an accessible environment – also for us. I still believe in it, but at the same time we have to perform the numbers, yes.

A I understand the problems of turning people into statistics, but I'm still sticking to the question of what's happening inside the *foundationClass, the idea of why we do it.

M That's the thing though, they're never interested in that; the sort of visibility we would like to create is for each and every participant to be seen as an artist or a designer, and not as a person coming from Sudan or Syria, and that's the big challenge.
  Take the current topic for this publication here – we cannot be fully transparent about how we're situated within this institution. If we actually answered this question we could harm the future of the program, because of course we have a lot of criticism, but we cannot be completely transparent about that, because then it would be very obvious that we're doing way more than what they think we're doing, right?

U That's the reason why we have to hide our exhaustion.

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A Another reason why I find transparency very important is that maybe in the future the individual *foundationClass participant can also take credit and benefit from it.

U You're talking about cultural credit. Of course, we all hope that this is going to happen. Part of the goal of performing in the art world, by sometimes participating in exhibitions is also based on this very idea of producing this sort of hipness, because it's part of the game. In a few years we will be able to determine whether it was worth trying. If in the future the *foundationClass will become a positive label for one or the other individual, then it was worth doing the whole program, I think.

When it comes to what we're doing inside the *foundationClass, there are several voices in my head, but there are two main ones: there's this kind of cynical voice that wants to talk to every participant in the class and say: "Watch out! It's going to be really tough and you'll be constantly racialized and this is just a fucking game – the art academies as well as the art world – and you will have many problems, because this refugeeness won't just disappear and it's very meaningful, especially now in these really disturbing times, with the right-wing shift and all." But there's hope, because we do have our art production, which very often deals with notions of identity and we do have a desire to transform these notions and there's a promise of the possibility to do just that.

M Of course, art production is dealing a lot with identity, but *white* artists have a lot more freedom, because they're not expected to work on their biographies, whereas, although there is now more visibility of Black artists and artists of color, there's still this expectation that you will produce something autobiographical.

But I think we're trying to support them in getting prepared for this reality. I also think we have a special situation, because most of the participants didn't come to Germany voluntarily and within the societies they lived before they were not marked at all. To the contrary, a lot of them were very privileged, so it's a very new situation for them. All of a sudden they have to deal with all of this bullshit and I always wonder whether we manage to support them in a way so they can better deal with it.

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U Exactly! We'd need a very compressed class on the discourses stemming from Cultural Studies that are dealing with identity politics, because it's so much about the image of the artist and students of the *foundation-Class and how they will have to deal with it in the future. And yet I maintain that art production is at least offering a chance to do so in a productive way. At the same time, it's absolutely true that institutions and also the art industry as a business model is still run by privileged people, but that's also part of the artist's dream, no? To become one of them, to create access to these privileges.

Apart from the cynical voice, there's also a more positive voice in me that sees the potential of this program to also question the art academy and to change it through the program, because in this relatively small academy there is already a change and although it could be much stronger I do think there's something in the air – people are becoming more aware that they have to question themselves in a more critical way. The amount of new students already creates a small change, but talking about the politics of the institution, it is really not easy to initiate change, there's a lot of resistance.

A The confrontation with identity politics is much more common in Europe than in all the places that people are coming from. When we talk about refugees in the context of identity politics, we have to emphasize that it's not an affirmative category, like queer or trans for instance. People labeled as "refugee" usually hope to shake it off somehow, so it's actually the opposite of those other identities. For me at least it's an identity that I need to fight somehow. At a certain point I need to stand against it and say "I'm not a refugee". Some people start to use the word immigrant, and some people want to abolish those terms altogether, so it's not only due to the perception of society, but also our own perception of it and it is not the responsibility of the *foundationClass to solve another problem in society; of how society perceives refugees if the refugees don't want to be labeled as refugees in the first place. But since there's already "queer art" I wonder whether there's something like "refugee art" and whether people can benefit from it, in terms of funding and so on.

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U Yes, there's a lot of funding, it's a business model already, you can make a lot of money with it.

M There are people who invent a refugee biography in order to get this funding.

U We have Documenta artists who all of a sudden were framed as refugee artists. It's crazy.

M Of course, you can make a career out of it, because it obviously can be branded and marketed.

U I try to respect the decision of people to allow others to frame them as refugee artists. It's their choice, of course.
   When I talked about the potential of art production, also when it comes to queer art, the framing obviously cannot be equated with the production, although, of course you frame through producing. But producing in the art context always means transgressing the framing – it's one of the methods. It's playing with framing and it's dealing with the perspective from the outside and also with identity. But the potential is to transgress it and to transform it into a way more open cognitive space and that's the reason – and maybe that's very conservative or romantic – why artistic practice is a working model, it's a method of dealing with it.
   There are many great artists who are suddenly labeled as part of the queer art scene, which might be right, or not wrong, and it might be okay for that person, but I'm not so interested in that, because the framing won't describe the work. In the end it's about producing a moment, or an intensity, a way of perceiving the world, or whatever. There are billions of reasons why we work in the arts, right?

M I think it's very important what you're saying, Ahmed. That it's not an affirmative category, and also the fact that it's hopefully a temporary one. I don't have a problem if somebody labels me queer, because queer was reclaimed and used as an empowering term, and it still is to some extent. Also the meaning of it, in its original sense at least, was supposed to embrace everyone who in whatever way deviated from heteronormativity, and fuck you, if you think that it means I only have sex with women. But refugee art? No one chooses to be a refugee, I can choose to live a nomadic life, but that's totally different.

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U In the art world, the discourses on identity politics are based on the anglophone discussions of the eighties and now these discourses come to a European context and it's really interesting to see how it is being dealt with; they behave somehow hysterically, because they understand that they also have to find a position and that it's about producing positions, but they really don't have the skills to deal with it, so I see many discussions fail.

A Yes, and again it never worked with the refugees' struggle. People at Oranienplatz for example, both supporters and refugees, were thinking that the struggle would create a civil rights movement and they were waiting for a refugee version of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X to come out of this movement. Then they created this quite problematic discourse that you can see on many of their posters: "Refugee Forever!". I cannot be a refugee forever, I will be Black forever, but I cannot be a refugee forever. I think they just imposed identity politics unto the refugee politics and it simply doesn't fit.

U Let's go back to talk about the potential of the *foundationClass: it's a model for a possible art institution, so maybe we also need to ask what an institution is and what it means? Do we have to be part of it? Do we need to be a program at all? I feel really bad about even using this term, because "programing" always means that we have everything under control; that we have a structure, and that we know how to do things.

In the end, however, we were always able to produce great moments, because we were able to share time with each other without it being clearly programed, because there were many moments of in-between-ness and not everything was always visible and transparent. Sometimes I think what we actually do in the *foundationClass is pretending to be a program, but then we close the door and we share time. We share time. That's very different from running a program. So we're running a program just to be able to close the door. Everybody else, please keep out.

M Hiding in plain sight.

U Maybe that's also very romantic, but I really believe in it, and then from time to time we open the door and say "Yes, this is the refugee program, please come inside!"

M No, we never say that.

U Yes, that's true, we never say that.

In general I find it very ironic that also here in this institution, we have many so-called "educational migrants", people who come for educational reasons. And to me it's a huge question why an institution is not able to offer a spot to everyone, no matter where she or he is coming from, and that a person's origin, especially the social one, is determining that. Those who come with money and who have passports are of course very welcome, because they contribute to the international character of the school. The other ones simply have to work much harder. In that sense, the *foundationClass is very conceptual, because it's producing a visibility for exactly these kinds of contradictions and – I'm still in a romantic mode – this may be the political potential of the program!

We had a huge discussion in the academy last year, when professors started to understand that now they have to look at portfolios of people from Syria. Once they realized it, they came up with so many clichés, like: "Really? Now we have a Syrian portfolio? Do they know anything about contemporary art?". That's the ugly version of visibility, but in the end this also produced a different transparency, namely of the way a lot of the staff members perceive art and artists from the Global South.

M A key moment for me was when a staff member told me "Wow, this year you have a lot of women", but as a matter of fact there were a lot of women in the previous groups as well. The big difference was that in this year's group some of the women were wearing hijab, and it was the hijab that apparently clearly marked them as refugees and therefore also as students of the *foundationClass, because a woman wearing a hijab clearly doesn't fit the common perception of a German person, and even less of a student at a German art academy.

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A When you talk about "Syrian portfolios", or "African portfolios" – because Africa is a country, right? – and Eurocentrism, it doesn't only exist in Europe, but of course also operates outside of it. In Sudan, for instance, I was studying a British curriculum, basically all the students in Sudan study European art, European science and so on, and if you ask for instance about East-African contemporary art, nobody knows what you're talking about, it doesn't exist for them. So the students do know about contemporary art and they practice contemporary art, but it's Western contemporary art.

But going back to this notion of "refugee art", I still believe that this temporary situation of being a refugee, the very experience of it, can create culture and art works and it can also be very rich.

U Of course, and that's why a lot of the portfolios are so powerful. I can compare *foundationClass students to "regular students", who just started their foundation year, and the majority of them simply don't have any kind of concrete experience. I'm absolutely not romanticizing people who were forced to flee their countries and therefore have great knowledge of what it means to be human, but at the same time it's a fact that they do come with very intense experiences and of course it shows in their practice.

M And those experiences are anyway mediated within the art industry, but we don't want to see another Olafur Eliasson or Ai Weiwei dealing with it, but then all those questions of authenticity emerge and that is also super problematic, but of course, here the visibility can change and improve a lot of this bullshit.

A I believe there's a need to share the experience of being refugees in the institution, because there's a lot of fear and a lot of challenges. When you enter a drawing class for the first time, there's a feeling that the other students have been drawing since they were three years old, because they had the time and possibilities to do so. So you think all the time that they're better and I think it's really important to take away those fears. Even if, intellectually you know that it's not true and that it's wrong, there's this sense of inferiority. When I first

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came to Europe, for example, I agreed with everything a *white* person said and that produces a big problem of how you see your own work. You're always waiting for the approval of the teacher, of the institution, to feel better about it and other students simply work, because they don't have this sense of inferiority and they do not fear the institution in that way.

M So do you think that the typical *white* German middle-class student has a different perception of the institution?

A Yes, some of them definitely do. There's this concern of not being familiar with all the tools that "normal students" are familiar with. Of course it's a wrong perception, but it creates a big fear and this needs to be discussed. I personally didn't have this challenge so much, because I already knew weißensee through my time in the *foundationClass and therefore I felt more empowered and comfortable, so I think it's more important for people who go to other institutions.

U Yes, we should really work on that, but I cannot tell students how to deal with a *white* institution, so we need to continue to work on formats where you teach each other. But let me tell you that all this self-esteem of the other students is rubbish, it's just pretension and it's totally useless, it's not a mode of production. Of course, there's a huge difference between an insecurity that stems from experiences of discrimination and racist structures and an insecurity that is actually of value, if you know what I mean?

M Questioning and doubting yourself.

U Exactly. I find it very painful to work with students who pretend to know everything. Their self-esteem is based on spoilt *white* European narcissism and that's really not productive, so fuck it!

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