

Over the Borders

Kati Kivinen // PhD, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Kati Kivinen interviews the Austrian artist **Tanja Boukal**, whose work focusing on Europe's refugee crisis was featured in the 'Demonstrating Minds' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

When doing research on art as social commentary for the exhibition 'Demonstrating Minds: Disagreements in Contemporary Art' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma (9 Oct, 2015 to 20 March, 2016), our curatorial team¹ wanted to discover how contemporary artists deal with different social and political injustices. We wanted to know what kind of strategies the artists employ to voice their indignation and mount resistance. In the era of exhibitions drawn on the signature imagery and repertoire of marches and demonstrations, from protest placards and riot barricades to Occupy camps and Pussy Riot, we wanted to find a different path to follow when tackling these issues. Instead of aestheticised politics or documentation of any particular political conflicts or events, we wanted to take a critical look at the universal power mechanisms and the conflicting stances that artists take against the prevailing consensus. Thus the selected works in the 'Demonstrating Minds' do not simply address a specific conflict or recent world event; rather they make a statement of a more universal yet also particular nature, often framed through metaphor or a deeply personal perspective. Instead of just reporting and acknowledging current events, the art in the exhibition offers an interpretative angle, leaving the ultimate conclusions up to the viewer.

The number one topic of discussion of the summer and autumn of 2015 has certainly been the refugee crisis, which has extended in a completely new way all the way up North to Finland as well. Both the media and coffee-table discussions have been taken over by the news of the influx of refugees and of the border fences that European countries have started to erect in order to direct the masses of refugees on new routes. Many artists have felt a strong need to tackle the subject in their individual works, especially with the aim of shedding light on the matters that easily remain hidden from mainstream media attention. This is what the Austrian artist Tanja Boukal (b. 1976) has also done in *The Melilla Project* (2014–15) which was on show at the 'Demonstrating Minds' exhibition. However, at the same time discussion on the effects of the current situation on artistic production have arisen; questions on the ethics and responsibilities of the artists working with such delicate issues have been debated during this autumn.²

Tanja Boukal's art revolves around people, their social circumstances and their various ways of coping in the face of adversity and unexpected challenges. *The Melilla Project* is about a Spanish enclave on the north coast of Africa that is separated from Morocco by a 3m-high, 11km-long border fence. For many sub-Saharan Africans this 13.4 km² enclave with its population of over 80,000, is a gateway to the north – a heavily guarded European fortress on the African continent. Boukal first travelled to Melilla on a research trip in spring 2014 to

1 Kati Kivinen, Patrik Nyberg, Marja Sakari & Jari-Pekka Vanhala

2 <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/some-points-to-consider-if-youre-an-artist-who-wants-to-make-work-about-refugees/2716/3>

meet the refugees, both those waiting on the Moroccan side for 'the perfect moment' to jump the fence, as well as those who had somehow successfully crossed over, but were now stuck in limbo in the Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes (CETI) Camp in Melilla. Boukal wanted to meet them to discuss their dreams for the future and how it feels to wait, day in, day out, for a new life to begin, without ever knowing what will happen or when it will happen. Through her work she wishes to give visibility to those who are invisible and who have been deprived of the authorisation to speak and act on their own behalf. I contacted the artist as I wanted to hear more about her ideas and thoughts on what it is like to work with such controversial subject matter and what kind of ethical duties and responsibilities are involved for artists in such a project.

Kati Kivinen Could you explain briefly how you ended up in Melilla in the first place and how you became interested in working with the refugees there?

Tanja Boukal *To work on the outer borders of Europe has been a vital part of my art practice for some years. I did a project about Lampedusa in 2007 and since then I have made a lot of works regarding flight and migration. Making it into Fortress Europe is a dangerous thing in general. According to estimates by the International Organisation for Migration, over 27,000 people have died on the way to Europe since 2000. Most of them drowned in the Mediterranean. But in Melilla there's a very special situation. It is a port city in Morocco that has belonged to Spain since the 15th century. Four fences surround the city of Melilla – two belong to Morocco, the other two to Spain. If a refugee manages to climb all of them, they are within European borders. And so, many try to climb the fences, but this is really dangerous. The fence is guarded by military and police forces and equipped with high-tech devices, additionally secured against illegal immigration by watchtowers, motion detectors, radar, night vision gear, and teargas bombs. That way Melilla becomes a small version of the Fortress Europe and this was my starting point.*

Educational workshop at
Melilla, 2015
Photo: © Tanja Boukal





Artist Tanja Boukal at Melilla
 CETI camp with residents,
 2015

Photo: © Tanja Boukal

KK During your project on Melilla, how have you created the ethical and political framework for your art project?

TB *I did a lot of research before going there for the first time. This involved listening to dozens of interviews with refugees, both those who succeeded and those who failed to cross the border, discussing with human rights lawyers and activists, contacting local NGOs, getting to know the legal situation at the border, as well as logistic stuff like obtaining approval to work and photograph there and brushing up my Spanish. I thought I was well prepared, but while I was working in Melilla, I was confronted many times with the need to analyse and reconsider my approach. Not everything I researched and witnessed was something I would make artworks about. I decided to write a blog about what I was doing and how the public authorities behaved at the border. For example, there was the case of one man, who was beaten up and then thrown – lifeless – across the border to Morocco. That terrible scene was captured on video. I put this and also other violations of human rights I saw on my blog. But I also wrote a lot of portraits about refugees I met. Writing gave me the opportunity to express my research interests in a more direct way. By the end of my stay, more than 5,000 people were reading my blog.*

KK When you have been working in Melilla, have you seen yourself as an outsider or rather as a participant?

TB *Well, I always tried to tell myself that I am just a visitor. I live a totally different life. I can't possibly imagine how it is to be forced to give up everything and leave home forever. I can't possibly imagine what it must be like to cross deserts, to walk for hundreds of miles and have nothing left but hope for a better life. I can't possibly imagine what the refugees were going through. But to develop my works, I spent a lot of time with these people and talked*

to them. I heard a lot about their life and expectations but I also told them a lot about my life, hopes and dreams. We exchanged skills, learned languages, cooked together, celebrated birthdays and mourned our losses. So I entered very quickly into a close relationship with some of the people I was working with. It was not possible for me simply to play the role of observer any more, I got involved in these people's lives – even if only temporarily.

KK When making this work, have you ever had to question critically your own intention in the project?

TB *Sometimes during that project I woke up in the night asking myself: What the hell am I doing here? And the answer was always the same: I am here because I want to know about it. And not to know about the terrible situation doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. I go to these places because I want to understand the situation there. And I want to communicate via my artworks what am I thinking about it. I am not someone who can speak for the refugees, but I can tell about how I felt when I was standing at the fence. I needed a lot of time to research on-site, that's a big part of my work that is not visible. I worked with a lot of organisations, did healthcare in the illegal camps in Morocco, did workshops in the refugee camp in Melilla, accompanied the local police at the border and talked to inhabitants & politicians. In my projects I always have to be very clear to myself about what my intention is, because while researching I am absorbing a lot of different opinions. And of course I get personally engaged. So it is really important for me to question myself and my intention continuously.*

KK What kind of feedback have you had from the participants in your project in Melilla? Have you been forced to speak-up on behalf of your project there against critical counter-voices?

TB *I have an agreement with the people I am working with: I inform them about what I am planning to do. I never tell their story without their permission. I never publish photos*

A workshop at Melilla for the making of *Journeys*, 2015, by Tanja Boukal
 Photo: © Tanja Boukal



without their agreement. I show them the photos and let them choose which photos of them I could use. I worked with these people for several weeks before I asked them if they wanted to participate and I showed them other projects I had done before. It is really important for me to not persuade them. I try to know as much as possible before I begin. I invest a lot of time, engagement and personal emotions in my projects – this is something that people can feel, that's why the participants trust me. Until now I have never had to deal with counter-voices. I think everybody who reads about my projects or talks to me about them, can feel my honest concerns.

KK As a European artist, how do you deal with your own privileges when working in a place such as Melilla?

TB *How can someone deal with this? I crossed the border back and forth every day, just showing my EU passport. I went back to my hotel every night, and enjoyed warm showers and proper beds. If I wanted, I could always get a cheap, secure boat to the mainland. Yes, I know how privileged I am. I don't think that I have to feel guilty about my situation – but I was concerned that my partners in the project did not have the same privileges, just because they were born in another country.*

KK Will your work in Melilla continue in some form in the future or will the same subject matter – the current refugee crisis – be presented in your future works in some other way?

TB *When I started The Melilla Project, I wanted to show people in the middle of Europe what is happening on our outer borders: How it is to live with a fence, who these people are who try to enter Europe, how dangerous it is to find the way, how much courage it takes to give up everything and leave your home, and how it feels for the European inhabitants of Melilla to be in a permanent state of emergency. But the situation in Europe has changed dramatically, refugees are not hidden anymore in the outskirts of Europe, we are building fences in the middle of Europe right now. One of my next projects will deal with the current situation.*

All photos: © Tanja Boukal

To visit Tanja Boukal's website, go to:

<http://www.boukal.at>

For Tanja Boukal's Melilla Project blog, visit:

<http://www.boukal.at/blog/>

See Tanja Boukal's video interview on The Melilla Project at Kiasma's YouTube page:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb7AZ7NSIOo>