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Dispossession

[Press kit]

ECC Wrocław 2016 presents **Dispossession**, a collateral event of 56th Venice Biennale European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016 is proud to announce Dispossession, an official collateral event of 56th Venice Biennale. The exhibition, which will take place in the Palazzo Doná Brusa on Campo San Polo, is one of the first international projects of the next year's cultural capital of Europe and announces Wrocław's cooperation with Dresden and Lviv. Taking as its departure point the city's history of displacements, the exhibition intertwines historic and contemporary dimension of dispossession.

Before the War, Wrocław – then Breslau – was one of the biggest German cities with population around 600 000 people, only a small fraction them speaking Polish. Most of the civilians were forced to leave following Hitler's order of turning the city into a fortress in the end of the War. Thousands died during the journey westward, many more reached Dresden, which had become haven to over one million refugees before it was bombed by Allies few weeks later. The reshaping of European borders agreed during the Potsdam conference meant that newly renamed Wrocław was to a large extent populated by Poles arriving from the Eastern Borderlands that had become part of the USSR.

A historical axis of displacements – Lviv-Wrocław-Dresden – sketched out here outlines the exhibition's field of research when thinking about contemporary migration. In February this year number of people displaced as a result of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine reached one million. Dispossession is an everyday event in a supposedly peaceful European Union. Each day hundreds of people embark on a precarious journey through the Mediterranean to reach its north shore in an attempt to escape wars, poverty, humiliation and hunger. All of them abandon their homes with recognition that they might never return or might have nothing to return to.

The notion of home is central for this exhibition, both in relation to its symbolic and spatial meaning. A home that is lost and a house that needs to be occupied. Dispossession does not mean only depriving somebody of their property, but also pertains to freeing from evil spirits, an exorcism that is meant to oust unwanted energies. The exhibition is guided by the recognition of a universal and atemporal dimension of dispossession in its psychological and material manifestations. It is in this lost and sought sense of belonging that we analyse a multi-layered relationship between space and identity.

curated by: Michał Bieniek, Małgorzata Miśniakiewicz

artists: Manaf Halbouni, Susanne Keichel, Thomas Kilpper with Massimo Ricciardo and Holger Wüst, Szymon Kobylarz, Dorota Nieznalska, Tomasz Opania, the Open Group, Andriy Sahaydakovsky, Oksana Zabuzhko

organised by: European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016

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www.wroclaw2016.pl/biennale

Dispossession

Szymon Kobylarz, Ms Anna, sculpture and a site specific installation, 2015

The realism of the sculpture Ms Anna finds its double in a fact that the whole installation may be read as a peculiar infographic presenting data about immigration in Poland. Basing on various statistics drawn about migrants, such as their employment or country of origin, the sculpture subversively deals with the stereotypes about an immigrant. The colour of her skin shows that people of other ethnicities constitute only a small percentage of the country's population, rendering right-wing, racist slogans ridiculous. Indicating that ethnic minorities are hardly visible in Poland brings to the fore not only the absurdity of the fear mongering populist phraseology, but also the differences between the EU countries and the resulting difficulties in finding widely applicable solutions and pan-European policies. Another important statistics shown here is that the third biggest employment group amongst the foreigners working in Poland is house keeping, just after construction workers on the second place. The saying that a new country becomes 'a second home' for immigrants sounds particularly bitter when we realise that it often applies to the dispossessed: those who clean and build other people's houses knowing that they might have to leave at any time.

Susanne Keichel, Lines of Flight, C-Prints, 2015

Susanne Keichel's series of photographs focuses on the recent social and political situation in Dresden, a city where PEGIDA was founded and where its marches gather the highest numbers of supporters anywhere in Germany, yet the regular Monday protests are often outnumbered by the countrywide counterdemonstrations. Keichel's photographs trace the split between the people of Dresden as they opt for either of the sides. 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West' has stirred controversy in and beyond Germany, with many regarding it as Islamophobic and xenophobic. The killing of asylum seeker Khaled Bahray in January 2015 was quickly assumed to be a crime motivated by racism. Although the investigation proved otherwise, the global headlines suggesting a connection between the death and the rise of PEGIDA's popularity indicate a near impossibility of social dialogue in the heated atmosphere. Keichel's photographs focus on moments where a private stance is intertwined with its public expression, depicting places of memory, mourning and worship, or the gestures and slogans that manifest one's position and sense of belonging.

Thomas Kilpper, A Lighthouse for Lampedusa!, ongoing project since 2008, here presented as a multimedia installation featuring Holger Wüst, Massimo Ricciardo and the Collection of Objects of Unknown Refugees

Massimo Ricciardo, Soccer Field, Lampedusa, photo printing on paper b/w, 2013

Holger Wüst, Venice Refugee/Non-citizen Protest Camp – Against Borders, Nations and 'the Whole Economic Shit'. An image as film, video, 2015

In his ongoing project A Lighthouse for Lampedusa!, Thomas Kilpper proposes building a lighthouse on the Europe's southernmost island that could serve as a real navigation point on the Mediterranean and also serve as a local cultural centre. The lighthouse is part of his campaign to save migrants from drowning in the sea. Yet his attempts from the beginning of the year to present his ideas to politicians in charge of migration came to no avail and he did not receive any responses. The sense of urgency that this project conveys has been tragically manifested with the recent deaths of hundreds of people on their way through the Mediterranean.

Holger Wüst's video offers an alternative vision of immigrants' arrival in Venice, while Massimo Ricciardo's photographs document the boats' scrapyards adjacent to the football pitch, a sight that is not unusual in Lampedusa. The contrast and discrepancy appearing here highlight the question of visibility of these pertinent issues. Part of the Collection of Objects of Unknown Refugees, belonging to Massimo Ricciardo and Thomas Kilpper, is also shown in the installation. It comprises personal items that migrants took with them on the boats on

their precarious journey through the sea; these few objects they were allowed to carry and which they deemed indispensable.

Manaf Halbouni, Al Kaed / der Fuhrer / The Leader, relief in Arabic calligraphy in concrete and steel, 2013

The relief in Arabic reads Al Kaed, which means der Fuhrer in German and the leader in English. It refers to Manaf Halbouni's childhood memory when he was growing up in Damascus. Before entering the school, children had to gather in front of the building to pay their respects to the Eternal Leader. Classes could commence only after the greetings had been recited, which meant that learning was dependent on honouring the Leader.

For the artist, the images of ruined buildings and material remnants of what once constituted a home provided an inspiration for a series of works in concrete. The sturdiness of steel and concrete is in Al Kaed interwoven with bits of wool or flocks of hair – delicate materials that can be found amongst the rubbles of a collapsed house. This apparent incongruence suggests an emotional realm that violently transcends a naïve reminiscence of one's youth and upbringing.

Andriy Sahaydakovsky, A Room, multimedia installation, 2015

Andriy Sahaydakovsky created a similar installation for the first time in 1993, during the turbulent times of transformation that followed the collapse of the USSR. At the time, the installation resonated with the sense of disintegration and instability that characterised the tempestuous era. This image of a world on the verge of collapse still conveys a similar urgency now after over 20 years, as the foundations of the fragile balance are shaking again. In Sahaydakovsky's installation looms an almost forgotten image of a multi-cultural Galician province of Austria-Hungary, where elements from different cultures met to create a myth of a cosmopolitan Lviv. It is in this question of the subsistence of a tradition that the precarious stability amid decay and entropy brings the notion of belonging to the fore. A sense of identity appears here as vulnerable and unstable as the uncertain balance between the individual elements that prevents them from their final fall. It is a world that repels and binds at the same time; it is incomprehensible yet oddly familiar.

Tomasz Opania, Illegal Border Crossing – grüne Grenze, video and object, 2015

In the video, Tomasz Opania explores his family history while talking to his grandmother, 99-year-old Jadwiga Heller, his aunt Ruta Kamela née Breitkopf, and his mother Barbara Opania née Heller. Opania's family live in Silesia, which is an industrial region in today's Poland close to the German border. The family history gets more confused and unclear as the story develops, rendering the facts indistinguishable from their interpretation, and blurred in the grandmother's fleeting memory. The question of her national identity is even more unclear as she tries to define it through language, schools, documents and faith. The machine waves Polish and German flags responding to the identity indicated in the video, thus calling into question the emblems used to describe national belonging. Opania's installation provides an important counterpoint in the exhibition focused on the subject of a loss of home. Rather than posing a question about negotiating one's existence in a new place, here the decision to remain in the family home means the necessity to reconstruct one's identity along with the change in the socio-political context.

Manaf Halbouni, Nowhere is Home, mixed media, 2015

When the protests in Syria started in 2011, Manaf Halbouni had already been living and studying in Germany, and observed from a distance the changes undergoing in the society and in the people he had known since childhood. The first bomb that fell on Damascus at the start of the civil war meant the end of his dream of coming back to Syria after completing his studies and marked the beginning of a search for a place he could call home. Entwurzelt [Uprooted] was the first work in which Halbouni removed the wheels of a car and transformed it into a living space for one person, a house he could call his own. The situation changed again with the PEGIDA demonstrations organised since November 2014 whose anti-immigration rhetoric evoked the feeling of estrangement and insecurity. Nowhere is Home is thus a vehicle for living, packed with the objects he loves and with a capacity to drive away. Halbouni calls himself a modern nomad, unable to belong and grow roots.

Dorota Nieznalska, Reisefieber, doors from the houses on today's Polish and pre-war German territories: Gdańsk Ger. Danzig; Bydgoszcz Ger. Bromberg; Nowe Laski Ger. Neu Laatzig; Zawiercie Ger. Warthenau; Świdnica Ger. Schweidnitz; Jelenia Góra Ger. Hirschberg im Riesengebirge; Łęgowo Ger. Langenau; Pisarzowice Ger. Schreibersdorf, installation, 2015

Reisefieber is a German term describing an emotion of anxiety, fear and nervousness that precedes a journey. Dorota Nieznalska's work refers to the forced displacements of estimated eight million Germans from the regions that constituted eastern Germany before the Second World War, and which became western Poland in accordance with the Potsdam Agreement: Eastern Prussia, parts of Pomerania, Silesia, Wertheland and the Free City of Danzig. During the journey many people died of exhaustion and bitter cold, were subject to attacks and rapes, and some of those who survived stayed in interim displacement camps.

Resembling a wagon or a container, Reisefieber is built from pre-war doors taken from houses that stood on the formerly German, and now Polish territory. These signs of transition – from the private inside to the public outside; from one's place to an unknown destination – are combined here in a way that evokes conflicting associations that resonate with feelings of loss, fear and uncertainty.

Oksana Zabuzhko, We, the Deported: Coda, object and sound installation based on authorial text, 2015.

The commissioning of a text by Oksana Zabuzhko for this exhibition unexpectedly coincided with her preparations for a new novel. As such, *We, the Deported: Coda* may be read as a first sketch for the writer's new book, which will combine fiction and non-fiction. Coda, which signifies a concluding fragment of a musical and literary piece that is often different from the main part, thus subverts its own usual meaning and suggests that an apparent end might merely be a beginning. Zabuzhko's next book will focus on the subject of seeking a lost home, which has already been signalled in her recent *The Museum of the Abandoned Secrets*, which explores the genealogy of memory and inheriting reminiscences. The author's new novel will be devoted to the memory of her mother – who belonged to a generation strongly marked by the experience of dispossession and bearing a memory of the Holodomor – and her struggle to create and inhabit what in Heideggerian terms can be described as 'the house of Being' - a space constructed from language, literature and family from which Zabuzhko's ancestors were persistently displaced.

The Open Group, Backyard, multimedia and video installation, 2015

The Open Group's work juxtaposes a story of two women, one of them recently displaced from Luhansk in the ATO territories in eastern Ukraine, the other from the Volhynia region, now in Ukraine and - part of eastern Poland before the Second World War. *Backyard* focuses on the memory of a lost home as people who had to abandon their houses recall and describe the places that belonged to their families. Recollection of a house accompanied here with the simultaneous 3D digital modelling exposes the difficulty of a language to convey cherished and seemingly clear images. The sharp contrast between the apparent obviousness of the model and the vulnerability of an intimate story filled with emotive details is crucial here. Referring to a tradition of oral history, *Backyard* explores the workings of a memory, mythologisation and repression, and the complex processes of vanishing of some images and clinging to acute details of others. It is in this confused relationship between words, images and emotions entangled with time and space where the personal expression of a sense of belonging finds its sound manifestation.