

# Westfälischer Kunstverein

Rothenburg 30,  
48143 Münster  
westfaelischer-  
kunstverein.de

Opening times:  
Tue-Sun 11am-7pm

Admission: 4 €,  
Concessions: 2 €,  
free admission  
for members

„L’Intrus REDUX“

Ayman Alazraq / Emanuel Svedin, Nadia Barkate, Mounir Gouri, Jumana Manna, Omar Mismar, Chelsea Knight / Shane Aslan Selzer, Mourad Krinah, Anna López Luna, Katharina Monka, Sondra Perry, Sreshta Rit Premnath, Lara Tabet

15 June - 18 August 2019

*My heart was becoming my own foreigner—a stranger precisely because it was inside. Yet this strangeness could only come from outside for having first emerged inside. A void suddenly opened in my chest or my soul—it’s the same thing—when it was said to me: “You must have a heart transplant.”<sup>1</sup>*

The splitting off from and the rejection of whatever is unacceptable to the (social) body inaugurates violence, the origin of which lies in the projection of strangeness proper to oneself onto another. I borrow this insight from French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s text “L’Intrus,” the essay after which this exhibition is conceptually framed and titled. In “L’Intrus” Nancy describes his heart transplant as a philosophical metaphor for the body’s relationship to the stranger. This exhibition borrows it to describe the problem Europe encounters in those it perceives as “strangers,” locating Nancy’s insight in each of the artworks presented.

The exhibition diagnoses a socio-political tension concerning the representation of those seeking refuge—from war, from climate change, from war resulting in some combination of imperialism, neocolonialism, and climate change—as one that is necessarily connected to a failure within the social body, the very body that is decrying an intrusion upon itself. A vital interdependence links the intruder to the intruded upon. Intrusion describes their relation to one another, rather than their being. Yet, so many of the pictures of people seeking refuge define them—formally and existentially—by their apparent misery at being “outside”. Images of them become signifiers of exclusion, rather than images of people.

Do the artworks on view in *L’Intrus* represent the heart that is failing? Or do they represent the heart that is being transplanted? They do neither. Like Nancy’s text, they picture an interdependence, a relation. The curatorial proposition here is that if we can train our attention on strangeness and intrusion as a relation—as these artists do—rather than a type of person, we can attenuate the most vicious forms of structural violence perpetrated against those who seek refuge.

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In the epigraph to this text, Nancy describes a visceral process as the core of subjectivity. Life happens to the body and to its powerful, mechanical organs. Alienation, dissociation, the loss of intimacy—all of these also happen to the body, rather than to exclusively to the mind. As a consequence, the difference

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Susan Hanson, “L’Intrus.” *Cr: The New Centennial Review*. 2.3 (2002): 4.

between the way the body exists in time and space and the ideas it has about time in space breaks down. The body matters to ideology in a profound sense.

If the body matters, so do the structures that support the body's appearance. The stage and the staircase that give access to it are of roughly equivalent dimension in Jumana Manna's sculptural installation, *A Stage for Any Sort of Revolutionary Play*. This architectural symmetry is odd, as it allows the stairs to steal a bit more of the viewer's attention than one feels infrastructure is usually accorded. The stairs are weighted with concrete blocks that protrude from their wooden casing and, as a result, they too clamor for the viewer's attention, competing with the fragile part-objects that crowd the stage. The infrastructure for revolution will not be quietly subsumed into the presence of those half-bodies in the limelight, Manna's sculpture seems to say. It materializes the fact that the stage profoundly conditions the formal appearance of agitation inaugurated by the stranger's coming.

In *Naufrage* (engl.: Shipwreck), a video by Mounir Gouri, one body dances and the other plays an oud in a small fisherman's boat off the coast of the Algerian city of Annaba. Though they appear to share the same small vessel, in fact each man is caught in his own imaginative universe. The man with the oud is focused on the shift in micro-tones of his traditional instrument while the man who is dancing shirtless and whose body is smeared with charcoal graffiti moves gracefully, but in an entirely different aesthetic language. They are alone together in the boat, tethered to a shoreline that is never pictured except as a distant horizon. The work is a portrait of their simultaneity in music and, also, their mutual alienation from each other and from solid ground.

There is no ground at all in Anna López Luna's watercolors, no stage upon which the action takes place. There are only bodies pictured in the moment of their transformation, or of their disintegration. Skeletons that are leaking their bone marrow or growing claws, and figures whose fingers and cheekbones are sprouting green stalks of vegetation and whose flatulence blooms in brilliant colors. The *Princesse tache* (engl.: Princess Stain) shuffles across the surface of one drawing with long, sensitive fingers growing out of her face—a lump of brightly colored monarchal possibility as yet only awkwardly realized. López Luna renders the body as a scatological fantasy, grotesque because it represents desire with so little decorum. The drawings recall a child's tolerance for the strangeness of their own imagination, and a child's acknowledgment of how much strangeness exists already in the recesses of everyday life.

In her installation entitled *...you out here look n like you don't belong to nobody... (For Flesh Wall #3 and Metallic Scent)* Sondra Perry demonstrates that the actual body can be made to appear as strange as the creatures of its imagination. Perry photographed the surface of her own facial skin, removed all of its identifying features—nose, mouth, eyes, and so on—and then embedded it into an Ocean Modifier, a rendering tool in an open-source software platform called Blender. The effect is a livid, mottled, oceanic simulation of flesh. “The flesh loses all kinds of realistic render but you gain some kind of understanding of what creature-ness is or what identity means outside the label of human,” the artist explains. The accompanying scent is not rendered visually, just as an experience. It is based on a metallic or blood-like odor that is commonly believed to come from objects like doorknobs and utensils but which is actually emanates from the human body. “We're smelling the decomposition of our organic matter on the surface of iron and other metals,” the artist writes. In *...you out here look n like you don't belong to nobody... (For Flesh Wall #3 and Metallic Scent)*, that which is thought to be external to the body is shown to be proper to it, rendered by Perry the “manifestation of an ecological system of contact and chemical change.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Correspondence with the author, March 2019.

Nancy sees the beginning of the heart transplant as the failure of the body's own, "proper" heart. The origin of threat is not located beyond the body's limit, in other words. Rather, that origin is at the center of the body. There is something unspeakably intimate about the recognition that one's own heart is dying, an acknowledgment of failure that takes place between the self and itself. I am attracted to the intimacy of this failure—which is present both in Nancy's idea and in the artwork on view—because the acknowledgement of such deep complicity functions as an antidote to easy political cynicism or self-righteous rage.

Mourad Krinah demonstrates this principle at the level of perception, which he considers is produced by news media and the way it circulates online. *RFG* is wallpaper composed of a single graphic form repeated thousands of times, the image of a man in a yellow life jacket vest. His hands are out-stretched so that they meet the hands of his double in the adjacent graphic, forming a line of identical figures along the wall. They do not grasp each other's hands but nevertheless stand united with a gesture of subtle solidarity in the face of catastrophe. It is easy to miss this level of detail, however, because Krinah designs the pattern of repetition so as to approximate in the viewer the apathy that results from the cumulative effect of news media's representation of those seeking refuge. Photographs of people become the visual background noise to our lives, omnipresent and largely decorative. We see them while failing utterly to see them.

*Lonely Planet* pictures both failure and intimacy with regard to the stranger in the daily lives three people living in a foreign country. The video tracks Chelsea Knight and Shane Aslan Selzer's elliptical movements as travelers through Cerro Chirripó and the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica. Insects batter at the border that the screened-in porch creates with the dense night beyond it. Thick lines of ants hurry along the seams between wall and ground. *Lonely Planet* captures the artists' pleasure in a standard-issue global business hotel room. It shows Selzer's small child at play and also very ill in the waiting room of a hospital. On the voice over, which often does not sync with the image, the two artists confront themselves and each other: Why impose oneself on the strangeness of a place, when that strangeness is not of you? What motivates the expat's encounter with difference? Further still: What are white women afraid of, and what do they have the "right" to be afraid of?

*Classic Ass and Omelet* and *The Fate of the Weak* are two glass sculptures roughly the size of a human stomach, though in the context of *L'Intrus* they look like hearts—one vivid red, the other cool and black. Knots of glass, *informe* quasi-beings. Nadia Barkate made preliminary drawings, and then worked closely with a glass craftsman, entering into a collaborative interpretation with him to create the final works. Glass is produced with intense heat and involves a chemical transformation. Despite her elaborate planning, from the moment the forms are placed in the kiln anything was possible. "The glass technique does not start from a model," Barkate notes, "it is not arrived at by addition or by emptying, but rather begins from a simple structure, a skeleton that is thought of as a synthesis of flexible geometric bodies, which deform, melt and lose control." They are study in the willed failure of an artist's relationship to material.

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The violence involved in the heart transplant, understood as an operation, is complex. This violence is located in cutting open the body, cutting through layers of muscle and skin and fat, then breaking the bones, which are in place to safe guard the heart from external threat. Nancy goes on to describe the extensive chemical treatment, isolation, and fragilisation of the body that devolves from the operation, from the moment of incision. He does not describe his heart transplant as a redemptive form of violence performed by heroic surgeons, one that—though intense—is justified by the total substitution of the failing organ with a vigorous, fresh one. Nancy describes the transplant instead as the body's debilitating entry into complex struggle for acceptance and integration, and as the start of an inexorable loss of peace in the body. This

view of violence encompasses all of the stages of body's struggle to resist alterity, rather than focusing on the alterity's fantasized capacity for violence.

The violence of gentrification takes place at the level of urban infrastructure, but its fragilisation of life is commensurate to that of the transplant. "Each of these *Penelopes* have lost the men in their lives, and today their neighborhood and community are threatened. Patiently, they wait," writes Lara Tabet of a series of photographs she took during the summer of 2013 in a neighborhood in Beirut named Mar Michael. A broad staircase leads up a steep slope into the heart of the neighborhood, lined with homes that were slated for demolition by the municipality to make way for newer and denser development. Though many homes have already been bought out by hawkish real estate developers, some residents refused to sell, refused to be displaced. Tabet's series of superimposed images mixes staged self-portraiture—the artist and a resident sipping coffee out of delicate cups—with old photographs gathered from within the houses themselves. These are juxtaposed to images Tabet took of the interiors, of the fissures or traces of disintegrated appearing at the periphery of otherwise neatly-kept sitting rooms. These homes are enmeshed in the complex process of replacing heterogeneity with vigorous, fresh capital. They are dying.

Katharina Monka's video, *InVH00219* (2019), tries to imagine a context in which the relationship between the stranger and the subject "proper to" power is up-ended. The subtitle track is composed of an interview with a male sex worker speaking about how power structures his work and its relation to society. The interview from which the subtitle track is drawn was conducted with a woman; Monka reversed the gender of the speaker. The performers in the video are partially dressed in Nora Hansen's creations, which are inspired by Yoko Tsuno, an electrical engineer, aikido black belt, and heroine of a comic-book series who subverts gender stereotypes. The fluidity of the performers' gender presentation, their demonstrated ambivalence toward a strict binary, troubles the idea that what is needed is simply a reversal of roles or the substitution of men with women. Clustered near the viewing bench is a collection of Yves-Klein blue plaster sculptures that reinforce the complexity of Monka's reflection on this point. *clayfuckin* (2019) are painted casts of the artist's pubic area that aim to flip the monumental power of the phallus. Yet the resulting objects are *informe*—like the stranger. Monka's formal thought experiment is light in tone, but it suggests that the reversal of power, like a heart transplant, is not a simple operation. It obliges many stages of difficult acceptance with regard to the stranger.

In *Those Who Wait*, a commissioned work by Sreshta Rit Premnath, the representation of structural violence is tacit, embedded in the ubiquitous nature of its materials. *Those Who Wait* is made with the recto and verso of a makeshift, corrugated plastic wall mounted with torn laserjet prints. The prints document the view from the artist's studio, which is of New York Bay. The Bay is bookended by the Metropolitan Correctional Center on one side—which currently serves as a prison for those undergoing deportation proceedings in New York—and the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island on the other—the historical point of entry for immigrants to the US. Each location is therefore both a promise of justice and a site of structural violence against those deemed strangers by the US justice system. Behind the fence, two stacked frames built with metal scaffolding are draped with a number of figure-like sculptures, titled *Slump*, made with foam soaked in plaster. The scaffolding structure is based on bunk beds used to hold inmates in ICE detention centers. The installation renders the state of delay and stasis inflicted on bodies held in a spatiotemporal zone of exception, a space created to obscure the State's struggle to resist alterity.

Ayman Alazraq and Emanuel Svedin's *Wall One* is also constructed with reference to barrier walls, modern technologies of containment used to produce extra-legal spaces and the visual absence of those considered to be intruding upon wherever they happen to be. Built to conduct vibration rather than serve as a visual representation, the structure emphatically refuses figuration in the classic sense. The vibration of a number of individual heartbeats, recorded with medical equipment in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, is conducted through *Wall One*'s concrete shell using transducer technology. The artists' refusal of any visual information is a critique of how images of those seeking refuge are

spectacularized. They write that “speech, or other forms of representation and abstractions (of the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East) do not bring comprehension. The violent injustice is far away for some, but for others it is palpable, affecting the body on organic and systematic levels.” In response, Alazraq and Svedin have scaled the monolith to correspond to the size of the body, so that the viewer can almost, but not quite, embrace it. Their suggestion is that the basis for empathy is elsewhere than vision.

Even when the threat of violence seems straightforward, well-conditioned by mythological nationalist ideology masquerading as constitutional law, as soon as it encounters the body it becomes ambiguous, intertextual. A white man in his fifties sits behind the gleaming counter of a gun shop in rural Maine in the US during the summer of 2016. Omar Mismar has convinced both the shop’s owner and manager to read excerpts from Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*. Schmitt argues that an enemy is a person whom a member of the opposing group would, under the right circumstances, be willing to kill. Further, Schmitt believes that political life is defined by this opposition, one grounded in the capacity for violence. Though the entire choreography of Mismar’s video refers to violence—the shooting range, the gun shop, the text being read aloud and commented on, even the metaphor of a video shoot—the work remains ambivalent about the central characters’ capacity for violence, suspended as it is in a general atmosphere of camaraderie between the artist and his native informers.

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“Just to put it bluntly,” she says, “should I be reading this exhibition as a diagnosis of what is happening in the world right now? And am I to understand that such a diagnosis primarily concerns what is happening to *Europe*? Isn’t what is happening to Europe ultimately a consequence of that which Europe refuses to address, except symptomatically? Where is the ‘real’ crisis in this crisis? From where does the ‘real’ violence originate, and who is the ‘real’ stranger?”

I pause. Though numerous artists in *L’Intrus* are not European, it is indeed an exhibition about the problem created by Europe and its impossible imperial offspring, the United States. *L’Intrus* stages a range of responses to the process of fantasizing strangeness as something external to the body, at an individual level or at a collective socio-political level. I do assume that this problem originated in Europe, in the Cartesian split between body and mind, and in the evolution of that split in the form of a wish for some universal form of humanism. I say “wish” because to insist on sameness by virtue of an abstraction—the idea of the human—can and does frequently entail a disavowal of structural violence and its effects on the body. The rebuttal that “all lives matter” to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States is the evil step-child of this idea.

-Natasha Marie Llorens (Guest curator of the exhibition)

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Exhibition Walkthrough with curator Natasha Marie Llorens and the artists  
Ayman Alazraq, Omar Mismar, Chelsea Knight, Katharina Monka, Sreshta Rit  
Premnath, Emanuel Svedin

Saturday, 15 Juni at noon

Guided Tours with Kristina Scepanski

Wednesday, 3 July at 6 pm

Saturday, 17 August at noon

*“L’Intrus REDUX” is the continuation of the exhibition “L’Intrus”, shown 2018/19 at Tabakalera  
in San Sebastian.*

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