

## Research Article

Agnieszka Dauksza\*

# Affective Diffusion Between Migrants and Inhabitants. Art Based on Migrant Movement

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0024>

Received April 25, 2018; accepted September 17, 2018

**Abstract:** The main objective of this essay is to consider Polish perception of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century European movement of migration and analyse the literary and artistic representations of this experience through the examples of Jarosław Mikołajewski's *A Great Surge*, Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Guests*, Anna Konik's *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* and Margot Sputo's *Who Where?*. I relate these works to the latest international art, including projects by Ai Weiwei, E. B. Itso, Giacomo Sferlazzo, and look for common denominators. I claim that the common feature of many artistic projects is the creation of a substitute for contact between the viewer and refugees, appealing to other senses than sight, especially to the sense of touch. These works do not attempt to represent the experience of migrants as individuals, but point to the experience of migration in its elemental aspect—matter and physical contact, exposure to destruction, dependence, intimacy, confrontation with others. What's more, art based on migrant movement—referring to the imagined experience of direct contact with migrants or their belongings—bypasses the process of identification and empathy. Instead, it relies on affective transmission. I propose a category of affective diffusion as a process that can occur not only between sentient individuals but also as a result of the material aspect of art and the contact with the viewer. The inspiration to create the concept of affective diffusion is the relationship between migrants and inhabitants described by Jarosław Mikołajewski in his essay *Wielki Przyływ* [*A Great Surge*] which shows aspects of migration through Lampedusa Island. Many inhabitants who are asked about migrants show intensive emotions like anger, fear and xenophobia. But the testimonies of people who see the living and the dead day after day suggest that these emotions get weaker under the influence of physical contact. It seems that the moment of two bodies getting in touch undermines the frozen system of ideas and emotions, stimulates feelings, opens up a new, ambiguous potential for understanding. This is because expressive emotions lose their importance with the activation of affective transmission. This physical contact gives rise to changes in the economy of feeling, thinking and judging.

**Keywords:** migration, affect, materiality, touch, art, affective diffusion, Lampedusa

When we are thinking about incomers who have a different skin colour, a different religion and different customs, who are adding their problems to our own problems and destroying our “peace,” it is easy to think about them with hostility. But when you see a drowning mother with a child, there is no place for racism. You become them. (Mikołajewski 100)<sup>1</sup>

This reflection, quoted from Don Mimmo, one of the inhabitants of Lampedusa, seems to me important when we attempt to think about relations between hosts who receive or reject incomers and migrants/emigrants/immigrants who are fleeing from their countries in order to be admitted to Europe. The difficulty of defining these figures—and their roles—depends not only on economic and political issues; what is

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Polish are my own.

\*Corresponding author: Agnieszka Dauksza, Department of Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, [agnieszka.dauksza@gmail.com](mailto:agnieszka.dauksza@gmail.com)

equally important is the “affective economy,” which I understand, following Sara Ahmed, as the movement between emotions, bodies and signs that stimulates the circulation of values between individuals within a community (see Ahmed 2004a). In this article, I would like to consider the actual physical confrontations of the two parties—whether and how a moment of direct contact changes perception and whether it could change the European view of migrants in general. What is the role of a physical encounter, or of feeling and touch? Can art be a substitute for physical contact and does it influence the ethical attitude towards migrants? If so, can giving up a distanced view lead to a redeployment in the affective field and change the attitude of Europeans? I consider these problems on the basis of several Polish literary and artistic projects, which I analyse both as a manifestation of the perception of migrant movement and an attempt to intervene in Polish immigrant policy. Such reflection also depends directly on my position as a Pole raised in a monocultural community. I analyse Jarosław Mikołajewski’s *A Great Surge*, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Guests*, Anna Konik’s *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* and Margot Spoto’s *Who Where?*. I claim that the common feature of many artistic projects is the creation of a substitute for contact between the viewer and refugees, appealing to other senses than sight, especially to the sense of touch. These works do not attempt to represent the experience of migrants as individuals, but point to the experience of migration in its elemental aspect—matter and physical contact, exposure to destruction, dependence, intimacy, confrontation with others. What’s more, art based on migrant movement—referring to the imagined experience of direct contact with migrants or their belongings—bypasses the process of identification and empathy. Instead, it relies on affective transmission. I propose a category of affective diffusion as a process that can occur not only between sentient individuals but also as a result of the material aspect of art and the contact with the viewer.

## A Great Surge

The problem of confrontation between locals and migrants was described by Jarosław Mikołajewski in his essay *Wielki Przyływ* [*A Great Surge*], which represents the migration through Lampedusa. I shall attempt to present this case because Mikołajewski’s book was one of the first significant expressions by a Polish author regarding the 21<sup>st</sup>-century European migrant crisis. This essay has become an introduction to this topic for many Polish readers. *A Great Surge* takes the form of literary commentary on the moods and tensions on Lampedusa and is based on interviews with residents, local authorities and activists. Certainly, the strategy chosen by Mikołajewski is controversial: there have been objections, for instance, to his selection of statements and the selection of educated, eloquent interlocutors trying to understand the dramatic position of the migrants. One can accuse the author of not quoting conversations with declared local opponents to migration or meeting migrants present on the island. If he had, the perspectives presented in the book would certainly be more diverse and adequate to the situation prevailing on Lampedusa. However, Mikołajewski’s strategy justifies itself in a different way: his goal is not to show the perspective of newcomers, but the attitudes of the inhabitants of Lampedusa, their daily challenges and fears and how tired they are of the situation. As a result, the story focuses on the attempts to help, the insufficiency of resources available to the city, the lack of space, ubiquitous mess and waste.

The situation of this Mediterranean island is both of universal relevance and typical of the present-day “migration crisis.” Mikołajewski is writing about the migration of thousands of people “from everywhere” (e.g. Africa and the Middle East) who have escaped over the years through Lampedusa to Europe, from “everything” (wars, persecution, poverty, starvation). Every day, new transports are taken in, and every night the new corpses of drowned people and those who did not survive the journey are laid on the Lampedusian pier. In 2015 approximately 1,300 migrants were living in the local First Aid Centre, which was designed for 300 people, and the nearby camp, built outside the barracks. The rest are sent to other regions in southern Italy, mostly to Sicily. After some time most refugees are deported back to their homelands.

Mikołajewski feels ashamed when he associates the banner, located on the seashore, which says “The door of Europe,” with the inscription *Arbeit Macht Frei*. But this association suggests the predominant mood of the local community. Many inhabitants, when asked about migrants, show what Mikołajewski

calls the ‘SEP’ (Somebody Else’s Problem) syndrome. When they are told that it is their problem they react with anger, which is easy to understand. The basic source of income on Lampedusa is tourism, but it is not simple when “the island is being described as a place of suffering and journalists come there only to write about death. The locals have had enough of that” (Mikołajewski 55).

The image of Lampedusa as a huge beach covered with corpses was sealed on October 3, 2013, when 368 immigrants drowned on the shores of the island. Since then there has been an unwritten law on the island that incomers are taken in and transferred to the Centre only at night. What’s more, the First Aid Centre is blocked off, and its residents are not allowed to move freely around the island. Television does not show boats with immigrants and moreover “there is silence about refugees” (Mikołajewski 59). For this reason, Lampedusa is no longer associated with common perception with danger, and tourist traffic has been restored.

On the other hand, there are still signs of reluctance both in the strategy of local authorities and in the reactions of the inhabitants. Social discord, anger and fear are very much in evidence. However, such attitudes are not common. Lampedusian inhabitants who have experienced direct contact with migrants declare that talking about them “is an open wound” (Mikołajewski 21). Because of this, they speak only if they expect their “words [to] reach someone” (Mikołajewski 21). At the same time, they sharply criticise other inhabitants who see the migrant problem through the prism of the tourist trade. They point out not only the indifference and inertia of the local authorities but also those of Italian and European politicians. They reject the implicit law of the obligatory management of emotions and start to follow the direction of affective community. Giacomo Sferlazzo, an inhabitant of Lampedusa, resents the nomenclature used of refugees: “for me there is no such thing as immigrants. They are people. Even the distinction between us and them is the beginning of a misunderstanding” (Mikołajewski 56).

In my view, it is no coincidence that openness to diversity goes hand-in-hand with resistance to maintaining the duality between human and non-human. The sense of affective community means you are sensitive to other people’s risk of harm. What is touched becomes tender. Activists criticize the inhabitants of Lampedusa for their lack of respect for animals, plants, objects and monuments—there are no plants on the island, forests have been cut down, monuments torn down and rebuilt, the sewage farm has been closed for many years, surrounding waters are contaminated and people “live as if yesterday and tomorrow did not exist” (Mikołajewski 62). Mikołajewski’s interlocutors have no illusions about how difficult it is to transmit the intensity of their direct experience to other inhabitants. They conclude regretfully:

usually people hear about the suffering of the sea voyage and hundreds of victims: they might be moved, but their imagination cannot keep up. The snapshot of views on the news is not followed by disturbing feelings which provoke you, rob you of peace, stop you from sleeping. And then nothing changes. But something should change. (Mikołajewski 21)

It is not a case of easy emotional empathy or catharsis. The aim is to move other social groups affectively. Activists believe that aversion and fear of strangers are not synonymous with hatred and racism. Although most inhabitants of Lampedusa refuse contact with migrants—perhaps to avoid painful ambiguity—activists keep trying to engage them in the common problem. This concern for refugees can take a variety of forms, but most of them refer to haptic impressions.

Some activists, who are involved in the preparation of tombstone descriptions of anonymous victims, itemise information on their appearance, skin, teeth and so on. Some—like Dr Bartolo—do what is “terrible, but useful” (Mikołajewski 29): they take a fragment of the body of the deceased, such as a finger or an ear, in order to preserve genetic material for the use of any relatives. Others—like Giacomo Sferlazzo—create art inspired by the situation on the island. Sferlazzo wrote a song “Lampedusa 24/01/2009” after January 24th 2009 when he attended the meeting between migrants and locals protesting against the construction of the Centre for identification and expulsion. The event initiated the formation of the group Askavusa Collective—a cultural association, which organises activities such as the Lampedusian festival, a festival of short films and documentaries about migration and multiculturalism. In 2015 Askavusa published *Lampedusa. Instructions for Use*, a report “reconstructing a broad-based vision of the issues facing the small Southern Mediterranean island and providing evidence for the connection between migratory

policies and militarization” (Capasso). Activists from Askavusa are creating a Museum of Migrations of Lampedusa—a non-institutional ethnographic museum of objects, where they collect things abandoned by migrants. These objects are not meant to excite or move the audience, but to make people think, change and discuss the problems of migration. And the gesture of spontaneously gathered objects once again manifests tangible closeness and the desire to maintain a reciprocal relationship. “These are not just objects” says Annalisa D’Ancona, a Lampedusa islander, and she adds: “they are clues that tell us something about people’s dreams” and “they are memories of lost lives” (Peters).

Giuseppi Nicolini, the mayor of Lampedusa, explains why they wanted to leave the wrecks of the seized boats on the island: “We also decided to conserve some boats here to show the world what they represent. If people look at the Arabic words engraved on the boats or at the hulls’ indelible grooves, they will realize without any doubts what migrants had to depend on to hope for a better life” (Nicolini). Katharina Graça Peters from *Spiegel Online* reports:

They’re simple boats, painted red, white and blue and built for fishing, not escape. There are gaping holes in the wood, planks have been torn off, and the railings are covered in rust. (...) Refugees spend a day or more crossing the sea in these vessels before they end up in what the locals call the boat cemetery. They say there are dozens of other rotting boats further inland. (Peters)

Things are material carriers of the memory of the victims, but at the same time they are found to focus the recollection of affective diffusion beyond borders: “we save what we can. Because everything is alive. Each object lives. It carries the energy, the temperature. It establishes a link between itself and those who look at it” (Mikołajewski 78).

## Tangibility

I am convinced that the most important thing is directness—touch or at least a possibility of touch that allows individuals to transgress anonymity. The testimonies of people who constantly confront migrants live in areas of increased migrant transfer, and in special cases, those who rescue the living and the dead day after day suggest that they experience ambiguous affects which occur due to physical interaction, direct contact, the feeling of another person. They feel some intensity but cannot name it. The routine of the inhabitants’ actions becomes broken, barriers are suspended in confrontation with a stranger. They have to get involved in the situation, to change position, to make an effort to interpret the new experience. This kind of feeling is ambiguous because it is so intense, unclear and difficult to explain. This moment of meeting between two individuals initiates a certain potentiality for exchange. It happens because new intensities and images speak, affects replace previously frozen emotions and stereotypes. By emotions I mean the conventions of feeling, accepted ways of naming such states and socially agreed on forms of reaction. Affect is more elementary, vague and singular—it is a psycho-somatic (micro)reaction, so intense that it moves body and mind, forcing us to act or make a stand. Affect is singular, but it is not presocial because, firstly, it always appears in reaction to a specific impulse which comes from the outside; and, secondly, our perception and interpretation is always secondary, through culture. I understand affect as the sensing of an impression; emotion is the way to express this sensing and represent it in a community.

In his *Ethics* Baruch Spinoza describes an affect as a sensation as well as the idea of a sensation (142). Brian Massumi—who is inspired by Spinoza—is also convinced that affect arises when two bodies meet: it is clearly and physically sensed even if it is difficult to define or name this feeling (83-109). Realizing its existence, including it in a verbal representation, is the moment when affect becomes emotion. Relating these regularities to the meeting of two individuals—a host and a migrant—I claim that this eruption of affects creates a situation where pre-formed, declared emotions, prejudices, fear and hostility are replaced by new, ambiguous sensations. This complex state of stimulation requires an interpretation and a stand. And that is vital to change the attitude and break the social indifference of the Europeans towards migrants.

On the other hand, maybe the indifference only masks other emotions. Distancing and political correctness might shroud disgust for and fear of the unknown. During his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, Pope

Francis said: “we have become globally indifferent. We have got used to the suffering of others. We pretend that we are not touched, we are not concerned, it is not our problem” (qtd. in Mikołajewski 98). The pope intuitively connected the one who touches with the one who is concerned. Indeed, the need to isolate and keep a spatial, psychological and cultural distance gives us an illusion of security, keeping away from the problem. The image of migrants who have travelled thousands of kilometres through heat, cold and danger to reach Europe tends to create real disgust and fear in us. In the first case, it is disgust towards physical interaction, towards being touched by a “stranger.” The basis for this disgust is a stereotypical association of strangers with danger, impurity, dirt, illnesses. These stereotypes are always used in nationalist and chauvinistic rhetoric—for example in Nazi propaganda, where it was the norm to compare Jews to vermin or rodents carrying diseases. Yet in modern times, this mode of depicting other nationalities is still used to shape the perception of citizens and “frame” reality. It is very well described by Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* Obscuring and brutalising the picture of migrants, dehumanising and stigmatising them, will gradually make people indifferent towards their suffering, change them into expendable “human waste” and consequently allow state institutions to control their lives, imprison them in refugee camps, persecute, torture, relocate or deport them. This way of shaping the attitude of Europeans can be seen in growing support for various nationalistic groups and deepening xenophobia.

Sara Ahmed sees another convention in disgust: to feel disgust means to be affected by what has been rejected (2004b 86-90). This means that through disgust an involuntary yet intense relation is created, the object of disgust becomes unintentionally internalised, making it part of one’s own experience. And this is one of the most important reasons for fear towards migrants. Every day media reports on the growing migrant crisis dull the sensitivity and perception of Europeans. Gradually viewers and readers become less interested. The media feed us with fresher, more attractive news. But in the background, something important is happening. A non-verbal, possibly unconscious sense of danger is growing, and our atavistic fear is deepened by the media. When I say “we,” I am referring to the inhabitants of EU member states.

Firstly, it is a selfish fear of what is inevitably coming, of masses of people from Africa and the Middle East coming to Europe, a change in the social status quo, destruction of peace and the loss of prosperity. Secondly, indifference towards migrants collocates with fear for our own survival. I call this ‘fear through analogy’. The hopeless situation of the migrants makes us realise our own frailty and mortality. Our disgust towards migrants forces us to sense our own bodies, to go back to primal senses and elementary sensations and proves our human, biological weakness. Moreover, watching somebody’s suffering throws us out of the comfort zone of an impartial observer, it sweeps us up, making us think about the instability of our societies and our prosperity. And because we are the community that is deep in “the lethargy of thinking” (45)—as Peter Sloterdijk says—this awakening is very painful. Hostility towards migrants becomes hostility towards ourselves—towards a confrontation with our own fears, a reflection on our responsibility, our dependence on others and the weakness of our bodies. The hostility towards migrants is also the fear of imagining ourselves in their place.

## Affective Diffusion

The mechanisms I am describing concern the general abstract idea of migrants that is based on the news, state rhetoric, common opinions, our own projections and images. So we are talking about an average social fantasy, not about a real confrontation with another human being. As I mentioned before, only a meeting, the moment when two bodies get in touch, can undermine the frozen system of ideas and emotions, stimulate the circulation of feelings and open up a new, though still undefined potentiality for exchange.<sup>2</sup>

Residents of the island who have experienced direct contact with migrants describe this; for example, Giovanni Fragapane states: “you cannot get used to it. You dream about them every night. Everyone, each of them. This is not the first time we have witnessed this monstrosity. You cannot get used to it” (Mikołajewski 103). They are shocked, numb, powerless, have difficulty identifying their new sensations.

<sup>2</sup> For other, broader analyses of the sense of touch see for example Grosz, Segal and Noë.

This is probably because expressive emotions lose their importance due to the activation of what Teresa Brennan calls “the transmission of affect” (51). Touch or the possibility of touching opens up the potential for transmission and creates relationships. Of course, it is difficult to say that under the effect of touch the boundary between individuals breaks down. What happens is that the reluctance also breaks down and that can lead to transmission. An example will serve to show how this can work.

Dr Pietro Bartolo, who has received and examined incomers for many years, gives this account: “examination is not only looking. It is undressing, touching. It is checking if they have wounds” (Mikołajewski 29). Thousands of living and dead bodies have passed through his hands. Since the catastrophe in 2013, his most intense memory is the case of one rescued girl:

when the fourth corpse was placed in a bag—the corpse of a woman—I touched her wrist and I felt the pulse. After a few moments I felt it again. I picked her up and took her to the ambulance [...]. I do not remember the face because I almost did not see her but I remember feeling the pulse. It was beautiful. (Mikołajewski 30)

Dr Bartolo’s testimony emphasises a sensual, skin-to-skin contact in which visual stimulus does not matter much. Breaking down the unintentional distancing, fear or disgust results in a physical, elementary closeness. What’s more, it changes the perception of another human being. The sense of sight, privileged in European culture, is suspended. Meantime, the “lower,” primal sense of touch lets us feel life in an unconscious body. At that moment the intangibility and strangeness of another human being become familiar, her/his body does not seem dangerous or disgusting, because—though different—it is similar to ours, it is frail, exposed to danger and pain, it needs care, protection and warming up.

Certainly, the case I am discussing is specific because it is based on a professional contact between doctor and patient. The unconscious woman does not know that she is being touched. The contact is unilateral and is not based on a need for closeness. On the other hand, it turns out that even such an accidental, short and professional touch, the moment of feeling another person leads to a vital change in one party. The routine act of the doctor becomes disturbed. He is no longer a reserved physician. He becomes simply a feeling human being showing compassion. He cannot forget about that situation; he changes his professional approach to examined incomers. His sense of responsibility becomes more profound. Moreover, other inhabitants of Lampedusa emphasise the importance of direct contact with incomers. Annalisa D’Ancona, for example, cooks meals for migrants, free of charge. As *Spiegel Online* reports, D’Ancona carries large pots to the Liberty Square in the middle of the island, and it is a spontaneous offering. D’Ancona says: “Eating together is the best way to show solidarity” (Peters). Francesco Tuccio, an island carpenter, after meeting some of the Eritrean Christians survivors from the catastrophe of 11 October 2013 in the church on Lampedusa was so overwhelmed by this contact and so frustrated he could not make a difference to their situation, that he made and gave each of them a cross from the wreckage of the boat as a reflection on their salvation from the sea and hope for the future (Brown).

Giusi Nicolini states:

Lampedusa residents are people of the sea; rescuing and receiving people is a duty. (...) We have been welcoming refugees for the last 20 years. We have been doing our job. On the other hand, European institutions have failed to implement a comprehensive policy that could end this shame. Indeed, we are witnessing migrants who have fled their countries and their homes against their will, and seeing how they have been exploited and abused. Once you encounter them in Lampedusa, you will comprehend their conditions and our need to treat them as humans, not numbers. We should help them before they decide to risk their lives on a boat. We should not allow them to fall in the hands of human traffickers. (Nicolini)

I call this elementary contact between two bodies that leads to feeling moved and opens up a potential for exchange ‘affective diffusion’. Both the biological and the anthropological importance of this concept are vital. Biologically, it is the stimulating, moving and levelling of non-identical tensions between two sensitive bodies; anthropologically, it is the cultural transfer of non-identical values, which is obviously a long process that will be continued later. Now I would like to focus on the moment of meeting between the hosts and the migrants. Why do I use the word diffusion?

As is well known, chemical diffusion may occur beyond thermodynamic imbalance, for instance in the levelling of concentration (or temperature) in each of several diffused substances in a whole system. Inspired by this mechanism, I would like to use it as a metaphor of the process that occurs among people: local inhabitants whose stable, frozen, “cold” system of convictions and emotions interacts with incoming migrants who are under the influence of affects, in danger, uncertain about their future, terrified and in need of immediate help. I assume that the intensity of such contact changes the economy of feelings in both parties. Most of the incomers experience the first moments of interaction with the locals consciously. These experiences are mainly forms of physical contact: being examined, being given first aid, washing, changing clothes, being fed etc. According to the logic of transmission, the routine indifference or hostility of the inhabitants disappears under the influence of sensations: they start sharing the stimulation of the incomers, fixed emotions become ambiguous and are driven away by affects with a much higher level of energy. In this case, touch has a significant meaning. The most important is the sole potential of touch which I call tangibility—the directness of contact, poly-sensualism of being, feeling the incomers with all senses—touch, smell, hearing, and also sight, although this sense loses its usual priority.

Jean-Luc Nancy assumes that community is always “inoperative”—divided and shared at the same time: “A singular being appears, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the same singularity that is, as such, always other, always shared, always exposed” (28). He adds that the act of interpretation moves the boundary of our thinking, reveals our ignorance and therefore opens communication. It appears that our being is always in relation, tending towards somebody or something that touches us and concerns us. This being-in-relation and the tangibility shared by Europeans and migrants requires reinterpretation and a change in the system of thoughts and feeling.

An essential question arises: if directness of contact is a vital factor easing the suspension of prejudices and opening up the potentiality for communication, how can it be made a more universal and accessible means of influence on European societies? That question becomes more potent in mono-ethnic societies with mostly conservative citizens and xenophobic tendencies. A good example of this is Polish society, where there are practically no immigrants from Africa or the Middle East. So there is no chance for such confrontations.

The Polish case is much more complicated by the political situation. Polish politicians openly boycott the solidarity of the European Union and refuse to accept even a small number of refugees with a religion other than Christianity. The government in Poland does not delegate or restrict the freedom of fascist associations. It happens that government officials openly admit to intolerance of otherness and make racist speeches. At the same time, the government is running a populist campaign seeking support from growing social groups. Citizens—especially from small towns and villages—who do not have contact with other ethnic groups experience, on the one hand, conservative, right-wing propaganda, while, on the other, they receive crafted messages from not always independent media that provide information about migrants in a sensational mode, presenting them as a threat or trivial news. In such case, how can local communities be honestly informed and influenced?

## Guests

Maybe it is worth seeking the answer in the most recent Polish critical art which deals with the problem of mass migration. I mean artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko, Joanna Rajkowska, Anna Konik, Margot Spoto, Łukasz Surowiec, Łukasz Skąpski, etc. There is no room here to analyse the art of each of these artists in detail, so I will focus on three projects: *Guests* by Krzysztof Wodiczko, *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* by Anna Konik and *Who Where?* by Margot Spoto.

Wodiczko's *Guests* was presented for the first time in the Polonia Pavilion at the 53rd International Art Biennale in Venice in 2009. It is a visual installation presented on the walls of a dark room which shows the blurred contours of anonymous people who appear in brightened frames that resemble windows or storefronts. These people perform a variety of activities: they wash windows, climb a ladder, renovate,

paint, relax, etc. At the same time, they talk, and viewers quickly realise that these people are migrants who are telling their stories of persecution, migration, intolerance, exclusion, problems with finding a job. As usual, Wodiczko shows excluded people, gives them a voice and confronts the viewers of his art with their problems. But something more happens here. According to Adam Mazur, the project reviewer:

In *Guests*, the public space which for many years has been the main interest for Wodiczko is reduced to four walls of the white gallery cube. The exhibition in the pavilion is transformed into a kind of a speaking tube, a symbolic tool for transporting information about the lives of emigrants and all other people excluded from the public sphere. The critique here is aimed at the cultural elite—privileged in terms of social status and in the place it occupies in the gallery. This is at the core of the difference here; it is obvious that the previous exhibitions of Wodiczko have never been aimed at art experts and gallery-goers, rather they addressed a massive audience—and often random passers-by. In the case of the project shown at the Biennale in Venice, it is, paradoxically, “we” who are the guests, while “they” are hosts (Mazur).

What are the consequences of this change of role? First of all, visitors to the exhibition feel like intruders who are watching and overhearing the working migrants. Secondly, in a symbolic way, the space of the gallery ceases to be a place belonging to European observers and becomes a place of “the others,” newcomers. Thirdly, the project shows the ease of changing social roles. Established rules, behavioural habits, typical, tame places, the routine of perception can be disturbed at any time. The project affects the viewer’s bodily feelings: you can feel the uncertainty of your position and the discomfort associated with voyeuristic watching and eavesdropping: the viewers hear the voices of those who normally do not have a voice—the people we see at work, but whom we do not get to hear and, more significantly, whom we do not want to hear. The ambiguity intensifies when we realise that due to various unforeseen circumstances, we can also find ourselves in a similar situation of social invisibility, inaudibility and helplessness. However, the project is not based on empathy or identification with refugees. This impression would be too fleeting, and the tone of the project would be based on the narrative of specific cases. It is no coincidence that the profiles of the migrants presented in the installation are blurred. Of course, this implies their social invisibility, but it is also a critique of our attitude towards them. Wodiczko suggests that we treat them as living machines, bodies created for work in the services sector, material beings with no subjectivity, which only counts as a workforce. During the exhibition, we have to listen to their voices and look at the shapes of their bodies, even though we do not want to. The migrants’ spectral silhouettes are like living images of the guilt of the inhabitants of the EU member states. However, Wodiczko’s *Guests* do not present corporeality, in fact, materiality is most important here as the displaced social quality. The effect of strangeness and surprise is obtained by material distance. The migrants’ bodies are close, almost at our fingertips, but we cannot touch them, the window-pane separates us. The difference is small but significant: usually, we do not want to confront the bodies and belongings of strangers, we abhor or fear them now we cannot touch them. The figures of the migrants are close: they are present, but this time they are not accessible to us. We cannot force them to do work, silence them, humiliate or reject. The change of body position and disturbance of social roles, which occurs during the exhibition, is an overwhelming experience. It shows how difficult and stigmatising the inability to get in touch, to enter into relationships is. Even the possibility of touching is a social privilege. Wodiczko does not allow viewers to feel compassion and closeness. He and puts a barrier of glass, which suggests different, everyday obstacles, prohibitions, limitations and our indifference.

## In the Same City, Under the Same Sky

One of the most interesting works based on migrant movement is Anna Konik’s project *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* created in 2011-2015. The work consists of 35 testimonies entrusted to the artist by women migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, Kurdistan, Congo, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Somalia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ecuador as well as Roma women, the majority of them now living in suburban ghettos or refugee centres in Stockholm, Białystok, Istanbul, Bucharest and Nantes. Women told their stories about violence, torture, harassment, exclusion, poverty and the way from their homelands to Europe. As Konik declares:



she made an attempt to connect two realities: the world of women from ethnic ghettos and the world of women living in normal conditions in their homelands. The formal solution adopted in constructing the episodes of *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* is performative, bringing to mind the methods of theatre work. In each city where a new episode was filmed, Konik engaged native local residents (Swedish, Polish, Romanian, Turkish and French women, respectively) as actors. Sitting comfortably in their homes, they told the immigrant women's stories, always in the first person, as if they were recounting their own experiences. This important gesture on Konik's part sheds a new light on a seemingly distant problem.

In each city, the artist recorded seven films: seven stories of migrants played by the European women. They do not recite these texts, they learn them by heart and deliver them with great commitment, empathy and passion. Women modulate the tone of voice, gesture vividly, use props like a mug, a pen, a table, a book or even a cat that help them in the narrative, reassure them or give support. There are many aspects of this work that are worth interpreting, but I will focus only on one issue. Konik shows the diversity of the lives of female immigrants. She also casually presents something else—the diversity of the Europeans: ethnic, religious, class, economic etc. The viewer focuses not only on listening to the fate of migrants, but also observes numerous differences in the women's appearance, skin colour, style of dress, contexts, appearance of their homes, etc.—and hears different languages, forms of expression and accents. The artist undermines the myth of a unified European identity. There is no homogeneous community; diversity is the basic value. Perhaps the most important achievement of the Konik project is that it provokes the question: why do European societies have so much distaste for otherness and “strangers,” given that they themselves are so heterogeneous?

The video installation also affects the viewer in a different way: it can be clearly seen that the European women who play the role of the immigrants do not only talk about other people's problems but literally feel themselves into their position. This can be seen in their behaviour, reactions, facial expressions, gestures. Some of them cry, shout, fall silent, can hardly continue their speech, are terrified, sad or angry. These reactions, tensions and intensities change the context of reception, move the viewer, influence him or her in an affective way. The female storytellers do not lend their voices and faces to pass on other women's memories, but embody these stories and internalise the perspective of others. As a result, these stories become intimate, “common,” they are authentic; they are not acted, but they are presented in a bodily and affective performance, which is difficult to be indifferent to.

## Who Where?

The project *Who Where?* (2016) by Margot Sputo, a Polish-French visual artist, was exhibited at the turn of 2016/2017 in Cracow's Ethnographic Museum in Poland. The artist uses pictures of migrants taken from the internet. She selects fragments depicting the material of their clothes, personal belongings, blankets and covers. Then she enlarges and prints them on linen sheets, washes and dries them, giving them back the materiality that has previously been purged from them by the media. To complete the process, she gives the linen sheets to the tailors of Cracow in Kazimierz, and they select different types of stitches and threads to finish and trim these newly materialised objects.

For me, there are a number of vital aspects in the concept as well as in the reception of this work. Firstly, Sputo elevates the migrants' belongings. Focusing on them suggests that we should not treat them as worthless waste that litters beaches, piers and refugee camps. This leads to the suggestion that the refugees themselves also have worth so that in our countries they are not unwanted and superfluous. Using the photographs of clothes to create artistic artefacts forms a symbolic relationship with migrants through materials, the clothes that covered their bodies and protected them from cold, sun, wind and rain. It could also form a connection with European viewers, with us—Margot Sputo's work makes us rediscover and appreciate afresh the primal sense of touch (see Kurz). It makes us touch, feel, imagine and follow the thoughtful pathway from the artefact to the authentic object and its user.

Such secondary materialisation of things should also counteract the work of the media which, transmitting with apparent coldness, diminish the drama of the refugees, turn it into an empty sensation, sterilise the sensitivity of viewers. The photographs that circulate on the internet blunt emotions. The project

*Who Where?* aims to make the problem of migrants tangible and acute again, not least through transgressing general notions which suggest that the problem does not concern us and is happening to “someone and somewhere,” “everywhere and nowhere.” By implicitly relating to the title of Samuel Beckett’s one-act play *What Where?* (1983), Margot Sputo raises the question of the subject and location: who escapes and suffers and where does it happen? Another vital point is the transgression of anonymity and vagueness of location. That is why the artist spreads the artefacts around the specific community of Cracow. Therefore the exhibition is about the process of determining different meanings of the title *What Where?*—such meanings as: 1. the choice of Kazimierz, explicitly connected with the pre-war Jewish community, which is meant to remind us not only of the huge quantity of things left behind by the Jews after the extermination of the population of the Cracow ghetto, but also about the tragic consequences of nationalism and stigmatizing ethnic minorities; 2. taking a political and ethical stand on the growing challenge of migration; 3. “setting in” to a local community, into the structure of already existing social relations—not through writing, but through material and sewing it by hand, through action, physical involvement. The existence of refugees in the awareness of Polish people is meant to happen by means of encountering their things, through the touch of fingers sewing the linen, projecting the authentic matter and finally its original user, their frail, threatened body that was protected by this material. Breaking down anonymity and indifference happens when a viewer intuitively imagines a touch and feels the physical closeness with another human being. Even a viewer becomes sensitive towards suffering and understands elements that are shared and do not depend on national and cultural divisions, in other words, the basic human condition—frailty and mortality.

It should be mentioned that Sputo’s work corresponded mostly to the tendencies of international art based on migration. Sputo’s project is in dialogue with the recent works by Ai Weiwei and E. B. Itso. The first artist set up a studio on Lesbos to highlight the problems of refugees. Ai Weiwei declared that Lesbos or Lampedusa “are not the border, it really is in our minds and in our hearts.” He made “Laundromat” (2016), an installation consisting of 2,046 items of clothing abandoned by migrants who were forcibly evacuated from Lesbos. In 2016 Ai Weiwei with his team wrapped 1,4000 discarded orange life jackets around the pillars of the city’s Konzerthaus and then he repeated the performance in Vienna, where he placed thousands of life jackets formed into the shape of a lotus flower on the surface of the pond.

Another example of work based on imagining a direct contact with refugees’ material objects is *Sheddings* by Danish artist E. B. Itso. Itso travelled to Lampedusa to collect the remains of the incomers. He collected things left by them, dipped them in paint and made an impression of them on paper. Then he framed the pictures with driftwood found on the Lampedusa beaches. We can see in his actions the need to preserve the refugees’ things, to give them a visual-tactile representation and meaning, to preserve the trace of their presence. The authenticity of these objects is essential—traces in the picture are intended to give evidence of anonymous yet still individual fates. These impressions often show the clear texture of things, sometimes they resemble living tissue, e.g. the structure of fingerprints, they seem palpable. Driftwood frames surrounding the pictures seem to protect them from blurring and destruction. The trace of the refugee experience through its ambiguity, transgressing the rules of simple representation, serves to activate the imagination and create a reflection of those people’s stories. The idea of Itso’s work also reveals the dispassion of the usual photographs showing refugees, whose effects we can see in the newspapers, on the internet and on TV. Soulless, technically perfect, clear and colourful, photos which nobody wants to look at any more form a contrast to the ambiguous traces. It is probably no accident that *Sheddings* reminds us of *The Turin Shroud*...

To sum up, what connects all these works—but also many others, such as Joanna Rajkowska’s *Camping Jenin* and *Asylum For Refugees in Uhyst*, Teresa Margolles’s installations, Gianfranco Rosi’s *Fuocoammare*, Philip Scheffner’s *Havarie*, Kate Stanworth’s photographs and the projects of Giacomo Sferlazzo—is the clear need to present the materiality and emphasize the sensuality of physical contact with refugees. The priority for these artists is the recognition and appreciation of the arguments dictated by the material and the body—the bodies of the artists, but also those of immigrants, local inhabitants and viewers. The thing that bonds these individuals is the imagination of direct contact and the sensitivity to touch. All these works are a trace, a remnant of the physical encounter which, due to transmission, moving and affective diffusion, can transgress anonymity, while still preserving the dissimilarity of the people involved. As I have already said, in such

factual confrontations visual judgment and verbal communication are not the most important aspects. What is vital is the sensual, especially the tangible breaking-down of the barrier of strangeness that changes the feeling, allows affects to develop with their full ambiguity and intensity. This elusive state opens a potentiality for reflection and interpretation, possibly changing a person's sensitivity and allowing them to make a stand.

It seems clear to me that the works that I have analysed above prove the unquestionable tangibility as well as the severity of experience. The actions of these artists are intentionally ambiguous, frail, even weak or awkward. The artists are able to show the fragility of matter and highlight the many dangers that threaten the tissues of bodies and things. I call these actions the aesthetics of fragility, bearing in mind how important the affective and bodily-sensual aspect is here. There is one more, non-verbalized yet still very important aspect—the implicit critique of the monopoly of the sense of sight and the eye which, bombarded by images, has lost the ability to see. It is also a critique of the western culture of representation, the routine use of pictures as the illustration of reality. The callousness of viewers' perception is connected with their indifference towards refugees, whom they perceive as not living, suffering people, but virtual silhouettes shown faintly in perfect yet unreal photographs. We must abandon the position of an impartial viewer, ask the question of who looks and who is looked at, what one sees and feels. I believe that physical confrontation and the artistic creations that give us the semblance of direct contact may throw the European society off routine and indifference, so that things can be seen and, most importantly, felt afresh.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* vol. 22, no. 2, 2004a, pp. 117-139.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004b.
- Beckett Samuel. *What Where?* Grove Press, 1983.
- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.
- Brown, Mark. "Lampedusa Cross will be British Museum Director's Final Acquisition." *The Guardian*, 18.12.2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/18/lampedusa-cross-will-be-british-museum-directors-final-aquisition>.
- Capasso, Alessia. "Voices of Lampedusa: Interview with Giacomo Sferlazzo." Translated by D. Jorden, *Cafébabel*, 02.02.2015, <https://cafebabel.com/en/article/voices-of-lampedusa-interview-with-giacomo-sferlazzo-5ae009caf723b35a145e5764/>.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Itso, E.B. *Sheddings*, 2017, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/38580/E-B-Itso-Sheddings-1>.
- Konik, Anna. *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky*, 2011-2015, <https://www.annakonik.art.pl/in-the-same-city-under-the-same-sky>.
- Kurz, Iwona. "Tactile Images and the Experience of Refugees." *Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej*, no. 14, 2016, <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/423/850/>.
- Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique*, no. 31, 1995, pp. 83-109.
- Mazur, Adam. "Krzysztof Wodiczko's Guests." *Culture.pl*, <https://culture.pl/en/event/krzysztof-wodiczko-guests>.
- Mikołajewski, Jarosław. *Wielki przyływ* [A Great Surge]. Wydawnictwo Dowody na istnienie, 2015.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, S. Sawhney, University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Nicolini, Giusi. "Life on Lampedusa, the Mediterranean Island that Welcomes Migrants." *Vita International*, 02.11.2015, <http://www.vitainternational.media/en/article/2015/11/02/life-on-lampedusa-the-mediterranean-island-that-welcomes-migrants/3/>.
- Noë, Alva. *Action in Perception*. The MIT Press, 2006.
- Peters, Katharina, Graça. "Finding Help, Hate and Hope on Lampedusa." Translated by E. Ornstein, *Spiegel Online*, 17.02.2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/an-influx-of-refugees-finding-help-hate-and-hope-on-lampedusa-a-746156.html>.
- Rosi, Gianfranco. *Fuocoammare*, 2016, <http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/italien/arts/cinema/gianfranco-rosi-fuocoammare-2016>.
- Rajkowska, Joanna. *Asylum For Refugees in Uhyst*, 2008, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/projekttyp/183>.
- Scheffner, Philip. *Havarie*, 2016, <https://havarie.pong-berlin.de/en/9/philip-scheffner>.
- Segal, Naomi. *Consensuality. Didier Anzieu, Gender and the Sense of Touch*. Rodopi, 2009.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Letarg Myślenia. Filozofia i Nauka jako Ćwiczenie* [The Lethargy of Thinking. Philosophy and Study as an Exercise]. Translated by T. Słowiński, Toporzet, 2015.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (1677). Translated by E. Curley, Penguin, 2005.
- Sputo, Margot. *Who Where?*, 2016, <https://magazynsum.pl/kto-gdzie-margot-sputo-w-muzeum-etnograficznym-w-krakowie/>.
- Wodiczko, Krzysztof. *Guests*, 2009, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/wodiczko-krzysztof-goscie>.