

# Reflexions on Personal Geopolitics by Students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating Conducted by Michelle Geser Lunau & Mona Liem

The students of the Postgraduate Program in Curating at ZHdK collaborated on the OnCurating Journal: "Work, Migration, Memes, Personal Geopolitics" by leading interviews with different people acting in the field of work and migration. However, most of us are or have once been ourselves in a specific migration situation or witnessed this situation through colleagues of the program. As master students from foreign countries, many of us are privileged and highly qualified migrants but at the same time in a quite insecure working and living situation. We would like to add these experiences of the students involved in the project and developed a survey as a frame to the issue.

We asked the students the following questions:

1. What was the most memorable moment when you were interviewing your interview partner(s) in this project?
2. How did your personal migration experience or perception of migration influence the interview you led?
3. How much of an impact did this project have on your personal life? What is your perception or opinion of migration and migrant people today? Did you encounter specific problems in the project you didn't know/consider before, etc.?

Through the surveys, we got back interesting answers from our colleagues pointing out their personal situation in the migration context and their personal opinions about the topic. Many of them are encountering precarious work and insecure visa

situations. This created in all of us an awareness of possible problems and critical situations other migrants could probably experience. It made us all think about ourselves and our positions in relation to the migration topic and review our preconceptions in a critical way. Through this, we did not only act in a more sensible way in interviewing people from different contexts, it also made us think about our standpoints in the migration discourse and helped us to adopt more conscious and pointed stances. In the end, it made us aware of the many different points of view and gave us a small overview of a very current and extremely complex topic that is striking us all in one or another moment of our daily lives.

**Michelle Geser Lunau** (1983) studied literature, art history, media and comparative cultural studies at the universities of Konstanz, Regensburg and Madrid and graduated as M.A. She has been working for the KKL Lucerne and the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich. Since 2011 she is the cultural appointee of the city of Rheinfelden and thereby responsible for fine art exhibitions and classical music. In 2015 she started her studies at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK to gain further knowledge in the field of contemporary art.

**Mona Liem** has educations and working experience in visual communication, design and management. Her passion for art became one of the reasons to visit courses in art at ZHdK, Oxford University and Node Centre. Currently she is studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK and is doing research with Z-lab (Smart Curation ZHdK). She is fascinated with new media art as

art can be explored transdisciplinary and through diverse media. Her MAS final exhibition "PRISMA" (2016) is about identity and new media art connecting two spaces through technology.

### Lisa Lee Benjamin

1 Memorable moment ... I would have to say it was during the course of our roundtable interview and was an overall feeling that everyone is working on this together. We somehow are all searching for truth, clarifying personal beliefs, trying to understand and work out what it means to be alive in exactly the situation we are in today. We are all in this together, no matter our standing or our current place. The world is changing as it always does, and this issue is one that is ever-present and has been ever-present in history—it is not a problem but a quest for personal freedom or perhaps an evolution of our human spirit. It is a question of how art can reclaim its role for society by actually commenting and actively suggesting change and new ideas and helping us find our way.

2 It created a moment of listening for what the possibilities are and how connectivity is changing approaches to migration politics and a deep interest in how art can actively participate.

3 I have been striving for several years to obtain my somewhat shaky existence here in Zurich. Switzerland is my soul, is home, it is where I have found the path to myself somehow. Trying to establish here is in some ways unattainable, and the most the steep and difficult route to take. It could be easier to make my way with my family nearby, in my native country, with full support and within the boundaries of what I know.

What does one do with this feeling of longing of desire to be spiritually home? I think it is this, of course, which has inspired solidarity and a sense of empathy. We all should be free as human beings to find our spiritual home and to find our way back to ourselves. I also have felt many emotions and am questioning not just the symptoms of what we see presently, but also the root. There are some like me in search of themselves, yet many people are fleeing because this freedom and their basic rights are limited or in danger, and many of them have to leave their spiritual home, the place they know and not by choice leave much of what they love behind.

We are being asked to evolve and create the space that we can all return home, whatever that means for each of us as individuals. It is ever more

complicated with new mobility, perceived threats of lack, fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of loss, and the dynamics of these ever-changing diasporas. Yet this is exactly what is pushing us into the next paradigm and the ability to see what is possible. What is wonderful about our world is each place has its own resonance, culture, values, strengths, weaknesses, and lessons for our species as a whole. How do we grasp and incorporate this knowledge and create people and places that stand for themselves, are confident in their abilities and skills, respectful of their environments, origins, and culture.

Peace is needed, fairness is needed, a language based in something other than economy is needed, so that we can create safety and health in the world. This safety starts where each of us is treated as an individual, and not as a commodity, a consumer, or a number. Where each individual is proud of who they are, where they have come from, and each is recognized as a member of this planet, with a voice, a desire, and a dream. We actually have all we need, and have the ability to provide for every being: peace, safety, healthy food, healthy soil, clean water, clean air, clean energy, and the opportunity to pursue what makes us happy. We are being asked to address the current situation where money and combating religious interests alone fuel our wars and drive us from home, 50% of our food is wasted, agricultural land is used not for food but for the ever hungry overconsumption of a few, and resources are squandered for the sake of price wars, and we strive for the what the market tells us we need to have to be happy.

I, in some ways agree with this idea of re-centring brought up in Tim Zulauf's lecture *Narrating Spaces. Interdependencies of Spatial Frontiers and Verbal Production and Verbal Frontiers and Spatial Production* (2015): what if those of us who stay and those of us who flee commit to re-centring the places we have chosen and best contribute to their uniqueness. We can do this by preserving and respecting the places we migrate to by valuing their language, their culture, their balance, and their integrity. What is special about Switzerland? For me, many things that I uphold and value. I sometimes buy two train tickets if I accidentally forget, as I value the trust in the system and want to make sure I act with trust back. I value the language, and am learning as fast as I can. I value the traditions, food, land, and the way communities look out for each other, and I do my best to learn and honour these things. I think as migrants we must also accept that we are also coming into someone else's home and must respect what is given and find ways to contribute positively. I think it is through these acts of empathy, solidarity, generosity, and acceptance that we

find the way back to ourselves and are able to return home.

**Frédéric Bron**

**1** When I visited the ‘social sculpture’ project, Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg with my colleague Silvia Converso, we were invited to participate in the workshops and community procedures that are part of the collaborative alignment. We had the chance to experience the “Emotion Room”. It’s a part of the daily work flow where participants meet on an optional basis to sit together on the floor in a room only illuminated by some candles. The word is passed over in a ritualized way and the participant can speak out to express or deposit his/her emotions of the day or he/she can simply remain quiet and get the silent awareness of the others when it’s his/her turn. This intense experience provided me a practical insight in the understanding of terms like collaborative, dialogical work as mentioned by Grant Kester, or the creation of inter-human relations, elaborated by Nicolas Bourriaud in “relational aesthetics”.

Through this insight, I gained a more concrete comprehension of the concept of ‘social sculpture’, which is a description with different significations and which is also preoccupying the makers of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. On a personal level, it made me think about ethics and the enormous gap between my first-world preoccupations and the precariousness of the migrants. And subsequently this encounter made me reflect on curatorial ways that in the end can really have an effect for migrants.

**2** I only migrated within Switzerland in my childhood. But as it was a migration from a different language and cultural region to another, so I can relate to some of the feelings and experiences migrants might have. The loss, the search, and the definition of identity in particular are aspects of migration that interests me, and I wanted to emphasize this topic and their view on identity in the actual situation but also their expectations of the new country and the new surroundings as a facilitator of identity to find out more about this aspect of personal geopolitics.

**3** When a subject matter becomes a face and a personal, often tragic story, you react more emotionally to it and it starts to affect you on a different level. Again, the notion of ethics came up and the question about “the right thing to do” being confronted with such inequality and being the one standing on the privileged side. It also made me more aware of the

responsibility as a curator to work with art as part of a social practice and that an interdisciplinary collaboration with social workers is needed. Further, the notion of solidarity came up and what it means to engage so that the theories of socially engaged art play out in practice without exploiting the migrant crisis to make yourself feel better, but to actually make a difference, even on a small scale, for the concerned community.

**Emilie Bruner**

**1** ASZ interview.

The interview, a quiet hour, an hour to listen. A poet, philosopher, and activist, softly spoken with a peacefulness and clarity. The January afternoon chilled the makeshift room, a garage on the property of the old ZHdK where we three sat. A space used for parties, art openings, and graffiti. The interview began. I said nothing. The recorder documented.

New idea. Iconic interview, a script to follow. Deadline fast approaching. A try for something artistic. Bah agrees.

**2 & 3** Emancipation, occupation, freedom of movement: Ideologies I hadn’t termed, examined, or contemplated but forged through. Mandatory applications, interviews, ignoring deadlines, fitting the requirements, American passport.

German visa approved, UK visa approved. Temporary setbacks and strategizing. Swiss visa denied. Freedom of movement. I work around it.

I suffered no military struggle, hunger, illness, death, violence, hatred, race discrimination, lack of money or transportation limitations.

**Silvia Converso**

**1** I got the chance to get in touch with Grandhotel Cosmopolis and a Zurich-based artist, Vreni Spieser. Both interviews were enriching and offered me really good insights with which to continue my research on this topic, expand my knowledge about this issue, and relate to this on a human level as well.

**2** My perception of the migration plays a big role in the interviews I led. I am well aware that I am in a privileged migrating position, that is, I have access to education, the health system, and employment, whereas asylum seekers and other migrants have to go through never-ending processes of registration in order to get their status recognized. Still, when they get to that point, they have no access to the benefits and the welfare system of the country

they are living in, and they are stigmatized by their status. This is a really big inequality generated by our society and politics that dates back to the past and the colonial system.

**3** This project inspired me to deepen my research on this topic and to travel to Lesbos in order to get a hands-on experience of what is currently happening in Europe. To me, it felt really important to witness all this with my own eyes, get direct impressions in relation to my life, opinion, and perception in order to process this experience and see what it's really like and what we can really do, since the states and the EU are unable to provide real answers.

### **Cordelia Oppliger**

**1** It was when an undocumented woman was telling her story to the three of us, and we all got physically closer and closer. We formed kind of a conspiring circle, the Colombian (with a B permit for students), the Italian (with a tourist visa), the “sans papiers” (with no papers), and me, the Swiss citizen. It was very intense and touching.

**2** I never understood this concept of nation—and I still don't. Working on the migration topic reconfirmed my understanding that nation is a construct in the sense of an arbitrarily forced inclusion and exclusion. For example, why are we talking about German people in Switzerland as expats but Bolivians as migrants?

**3** I always considered the whole discussion in Switzerland about migrants and refugees—categorized as real, false, and economic refugees—as an embarrassing one. People are moving from A to B, that is my understanding. And the movement/migration won't stop; on the contrary, it will increase.

Working on the migration topic didn't change this perception but I am more sensitized to the seriousness of this—in my opinion—false and racist discussion. And I'm even more convinced that we Swiss citizens should be more confident about our own beliefs and values instead of blaming foreign people for bringing their own to our country. And that we should embrace the diversity that people with different backgrounds and cultures offers to Switzerland.

### **Diana Padilla**

**1** The most memorable moment while inter-

viewing Melanie Muñoz was when it was noticeable in her voice and her expressions how much she really cared for the women that she worked with and for. She has a genuine respect for what she does, and I will always remember how she pointed out that she works for her beliefs and that all the people involved in Lysistrada cooperate with selflessness and have a strong sense of community. It's all a big, strong, and powerful sisterhood.

**2** I guess I've been always very interested in how women should be protected. I have “migrated” in a very privileged way, I came to get a postgraduate degree, I have a good economic status, support from my family, I am not disabled in any way, and still I have encountered some difficulties by coming to Switzerland, starting with the fact that my visa was denied at first. The bureaucracy that someone has to go through to come from a non-Schengen/non-European Union country is enormous. Now imagine a sex worker trying to make a living, considering the entire stigma that still exists around sex work, but still being alienated because of your nationality. These women have to face a lot of obstacles, and their rights deserve to be respected, acknowledged, and protected. I admire very much the courage of all these women and also the people who have set a goal to fight for them.

**3** I find problematic all this discussion about nationalities and the hierarchy of oppression that exists today. I understand that as a government it's not a piece of cake to take in everyone and just make it work, but I believe that we are all citizens of the world and no matter where you come from, your life is as valuable as anyone else's.

The problem I have encountered is that I wanted to include more people that I considered important for this project (I wanted to include more than one person's/organization's position on the theme) to be more cohesive, and the list is being more and more reduced for different reasons. Apparently the topic of sex work is not very approachable, but I will try and do my best to make it complete.

### **Paloma Rayón**

**1** The best moment when interviewing Rayelle Niemann was when she described what *heimat* means to her, which is something very different from the German concept of home or land, but more something related to the inner feeling of being at home, to be part of something which is not necessarily the place where you were born.

**2** My personal experience as a migrant has probably changed my way I see or observe Spanish society, and myself. When travelling, the traveller changes in order to adapt him or herself to the new circumstances in which he or she is living. First of these changes, and probably the most important one, in my opinion, is the change on one's thinking, the consequence of speaking and thinking in other language different from your mother tongue, which changes the way you reflect and express yourself. You have, though, a bigger perspective; you are seeing "the whole picture".

**3** In my opinion, the most important lesson to learn is that there are always at least two different ways to see things or to solve problems, and they both can be correct.

And the reflection that migration is a global and historical process. And maybe taking this into consideration should be considered when trying to solve the problems related to it. Migration has happened since human beings have existed, although the reasons for migration are very different.

### **Mariana Bonilla Rojas**

**1** The thing that stuck with me the most during the interview with Fany (a former "sans papiers" born in La Paz, Bolivia, currently living in Zurich) was not exactly a specific moment. Instead, it was more an aura around her. It was her unbreakable spirit and strong presence. Despite living very difficult moments through her life that most of us could not even imagine experiencing, she always spoke about it with immense gratitude.

**2** It was, of course, a major influence. I have come to realize that living in a place as a foreigner is immensely gratifying and I am immensely privileged, but it also comes with important challenges. There are specific restrictions that condition the way you perceive, live, and understand your surroundings. You are immediately being categorized, in my case as a foreign student—there are more layers of categorizations, for example 'Latina', that also come with specific preconceived ideas that are binding and sometimes coercive—which gives me access to certain things and as well as controlling and restricting access to others, work-wise especially. Fortunately, mobility is not a problem and once you get the document that certifies your status, things that are taken for granted which right now we have become so attached and dependent on, like the possibility of opening a bank account, buying a cell phone line, a house contract, are now available. In this sense, you

have a glimpse of what it implies to be conditional or deprived of things, and you develop a strong sense of understanding, a great sensibility, and a sense of empathy.

**3** I think migration is not a problem, it is a fact. I think the problem is the way in which we categorize it and how we 'deal' with it, or not. The thing is that it is not something new, and it is something that will not stop. People will continue to move for whatever reason. So, what we need here is first a change of mindset.

With respect to the impact that Fany and Bea had in my personal life it was quite a positive one. It was more about strength and empowerment. About the construction of the self. In the end it is about the people and their experiences, and how they deal with what life brings. That is what matters to me. It is about our actions and our position.

It has been also very important and gratifying to work with a great group of friends with whom I trust; when embarking on demanding journeys, it is always best to travel well surrounded because the learning experience is enriched. The most important realizations have materialized thanks to our talks around the subject, the project, the concept, the people involved, about us, and also about the challenges encountered and the emotions triggered.

I also was left with some existential questions that I can add to my collection. What is it that validates us as who we are? Is it a piece of paper? How can we deprive others of their identity by taking away the right to inhabit a specific place? The list can go on...

Thank you girls!

### **Silvia Savoldi**

**1** In collaboration with Mariana Bonilla and Cordelia Oppliger I interviewed Fany Flores, a woman who used to live in Zurich as a "sans papiers". Her story gave me shivers, especially hearing it from her very own lips. She lived as a homeless person, she was afraid of any policeman or control, and she accepted any kind of housework she could in order to send money in Bolivia to her four children, who had to be raised by the grandmother. At a personal level I was very moved.

**2** My point of view is a migrant's, so I had a great empathy towards Fany, even though my own migration trouble is far less destabilising than hers. With the second part of the interview, which was with the president of the Zurich organisation that

helps sans papiers, we tried to be more focused on the technical matters, because it is important to understand the counterparts in such a complicated topic. How do locals, and the Swiss in particular, react? Why is there so much fear of the foreigner, of the stranger, of the other? Paloma Rayón and I also had a conversation about transnationality with Rayelle Niemann, a curator who reflected on the notion of homeland and who used to live in Egypt. Having a common background as migrants helped us to have a more natural conversation, starting from our personal experience in order to grasp and discuss the most diverse topics.

**3** I think my vision of being a migrant with papers has changed a lot by now. First of all, I consider myself part of a system which on the one hand encourages people to move abroad, attend schools, buy goods, etc., and on the other hand tries to control the streams in ineffective ways. Then I have become very aware of how powerfully people could act in terms of legislation. Laws have to be respected, but also have to be changed when they are proved wrong. Through information, dialogue, and negotiation, a solution could be found to treat migrants as human beings rather than some kind of puppets.

#### **Franziska Stern**

**1** It was a special moment, when only after some time of discussing did we realize that, of the six of us sitting around the table, there was one from the U.S., one from Austria, one from Germany, one from Japan and two from Switzerland.

Also always interesting with interviews is that only when afterwards listening to the record do you learn how sometimes questions were not accurately asked nor accurately answered, and nobody realized.

**2** I don't have a migration experience in the common sense. Still I think the main difficulties for people exposed to migration/mobility issues—namely the problem of loss of identification—is an experience all of us have from time to time. Being excluded because of whatever different background—ethnicity, economy, education, generation—is a most irritating, sometimes even traumatic, perception. Working on the interview made me more attentive to such experiences. Where do I find myself excluded and how do I behave in such situations? Am I able to address it or do I withdraw?

**3** I started reading more about the topic of migration/mobility. I can recommend a very impressive book—fiction—written by the German author

Jenny Erpenbeck. It tells the story of an elderly German professor who starts his own private approach towards the subject of refugees. Title: *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, by Jenny Erpenbeck. Read it!

What I do think is really most important with people migrating from areas where there are war conflicts going on: that we don't treat them as victims. And therefore also don't talk about victims.

In general, I think we do have to start thinking very intensively about hierarchies: who is setting the framework for integration? It might be important to think about collaboration rather than about integration ...

#### **Makiko Takahashi**

**1** It was when migration was discussed in terms of civil rights. One of the participants, Philipp Lutz, a political scientist from the think tank foraus mentioned that, "It is our civil right as citizens to have individual freedom, but migration policies often restrict this freedom". I had read many arguments from the point of view of economy and paternalism for and in Europe, but very little discussion from the viewpoint of migrants' side. Maybe it is too essential even to think that everyone has a right and freedom to pursue happiness, and a safer and better life. Considering this point, I could relate myself very well to the migration issue today, because I came here for study to pursue better possibilities in my career. I also had the possibility that my application for a resident permit was turned down for whatever reason. I have a place to go back to if my application is turned down, but many refugees don't, which is a big difference though. But people move in pursuit of a better life, whatever the reason behind it is, and it is individual freedom that is guaranteed as a right. With this project I learned that migration is not only about refugees, and the migration issue is not someone else's problem but became my or our issue.

**2** The migration topic is significantly related to me and to many of us. I approached the interview and the project itself by reflecting myself a lot, not merely as a hot social issue like everybody is talking about refugees coming to Europe. I'm also a migrant, as I came here to have better education for my career from far away.

**3** I feel any kind of migration-related issue cannot be separated from me or us. Today, refugees coming to Europe is a big topic. They are migrants seeking a better life just like many of us do, and it should be guaranteed as an individual freedom. But

their freedom is severely restricted. As a migrant here, I also felt lots of restrictions. It seems there are always economic and political reasons, and we all have to fight for our rights. The migration project brought me all these thoughts.

### **Petra Tomljanović**

**1** Martin Krenn, the Austrian artist, shared his views on the politics of creating history, as something that is constantly being rewritten. He took a historical perspective with respect to migrants in Austria, and explained the patchworked, multidimensional history that consists of a mixture of social and cultural memory that was opposing the collective or national memory, i.e. the official version of history. With different approaches, it is necessary to understand that nothing is fixed. There is no final right version of history, and if one believes in the one official version of history, then one can be sure that this will also change in the future, because it also has changed in the past. I think it necessary to keep in mind that the myth of the nation state with strict borders was born only 150 years ago, whereas cultural exchange has existed ever since humans invented means of transportation to cross the seas and reach distant continents.

**2** When thinking about the personal migration experience (and also coming from Croatia), I can't deny the historical trace of Balkan figure of a "Gastarbeiter" who immigrated to German-speaking countries from the 1960's onward, and marked the trace in Western European economies. Gastarbeiters were forming, no doubt about that, their own stereotype; they created melancholic mythical stories about their country, waiting to go back home anytime, but maybe not really now. They spent most of their life abroad, but failed to make that "abroad" their home. Gastarbeiter is something like a metaphor of a failed Yugoslavian regime, but at the same time, an expression of its vitality. The Gastarbeiter almost heralded global capitalism, which was able to re-establish the notion of the southern worker through persistent, dedicated work. So, the sentiment is that a Gastarbeiter is a constant guest, a displaced stranger who is ceaselessly coming somewhere else. What I find especially empowering and poignant in this perception is the very true deconstruction of national identity, national culture, and emancipation of hybridity. In the terms of global migration, I seek the idea of a Gastarbeiter as someone who is transnational and trans-social and demands the articulation of those new terms. And everything is so relative, after all: a Croatian, when living in Singapore, is an expat, a

"first-class Westerner", but when living in Western Europe, a "second-class citizen"—a "Yugo".

**3** It was interesting to see last week in Zurich how the collective Laboria Cuboniks makes an analogy between aliens and the collective; for them being an alien is a way to create new worlds. They are maybe sharing a utopian, but surely an optimistic vision of identity politics. So they say, "We are all alienated—but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given—and it's certainly not given by anything 'natural'. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; Alienation is the labour of freedom's construction." Therefore, I can be an alien, a Gastarbeiter, or a migrant, native to the universe.

### **Katrijn Van Damme**

**1** Petra and I interviewed the artist (he wants to be less qualified as a curator) Martin Krenn by Skype. The interview in its entire duration was very interesting.

**2** I honestly hadn't my background in mind while setting up the questions. My parents moved from Belgium to Luxembourg, and I was born there. But I never felt like a migrant/expat in that sense, just like a free-floating atom in a big system where I connect with atoms from different cultural and social backgrounds.

**3** Migration is already a hot topic in Luxembourg given the fact that the capital's population consists of 47% "foreigners". I am today more aware of the history of migration and that it is already an issue for more than a few decades. The problematic hasn't changed much but the way to deal with it from the political and administrative point of view is more visible now. Personally, the most shocking part is the terminology used to de-humanize—we can even say "instrumentalize"—the economically weaker "migrants".