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Sown by Scattering¹: Reflections on an Unrealized Commission for an Artistic Project at an Asylum Center

Beyond all doubt, commemoration and representation constitute the heart of Western political and cultural life. However, what are the implications of a commissioned monument that envisages a participatory process between an artist and the inhabitants of an asylum center? From defining the context and identifying the assumptions of the commissioner to recalling the personal experience of the artist, this paper attempts to unfold some of the many legal and cultural contradictions embedded in an official framework.

In September 2016, the director of the Vincenzo Vela Museum approached me about a possible collaboration. I was told that a representative of the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) wished to launch a collaborative project involving asylum seekers and a visual artist, in order to commemorate the third and final year of the temporary reception and procedure center in Losone, Ticino. Since its announcement in 2014, the plan to transform a former military complex for the recruitment of grenadier guards into a reception center for asylum seekers had been controversial. This proposal to provide an infrastructure for refugees triggered hate speeches that garnered opposition among the local population. A petition, a rejected court appeal, the collection of 6000 signatures protesting the reception center, and a horrifyingly violent episode were clear signs of

hostility that seriously challenged the federal decision to lodge refugee seekers in Losone (see Jankovsky 2014).

During my first meeting with the project committee, I learned that they expected me to conceive an artwork that could be realized together “with” the refugees of the asylum center in Losone. In order to clearly render their expectations—while emphasizing my freedom and their generous receptiveness—a number of members attempted to describe possible scenarios: “For instance, it could be a long-lasting sculpture situated on the main roundabout of the village,”² a spot that regulates traffic, connects the adjacent valleys to the larger urban centers, and is therefore visible to thousands of passersby. The monument—as it was then called—should celebrate and commemorate the cohabitation between “hosts” and “guests.” In a nutshell, the committee’s hopes were based on the supposed celebratory and redemptive power of art, and for this they needed a healer.

It took me some time to decide if I should accept the proposition. It’s not that I don’t believe in the healing power of art. After all, pantheons of cultural healers can be found in any European capital, and their names and achievements literally inhabit the streets. However, the problem lay elsewhere.

When I visited the center in October, I learned that, as in any other reception and procedure center in Switzerland, asylum seekers are hosted only for

¹ It is interesting to note that the eighteenth-century word *broadcast* was originally an agricultural term that referred to “sown by scattering.”

² The original conversation took place in Italian. Excerpts translated by the author.

the amount of time required to trace their past—i.e., nationality, motives, possible criminal records—and verify whether their situation applies to Swiss asylum law. The maximum stay is three months, although the duration of the inquiry procedure can shrink to forty-five days. Ultimately, the applicant is either rejected and repatriated or assigned a new residence somewhere in Switzerland. It was clear, then, that it would be impossible to enact an enduring collaboration with the people forced to inhabit the center for such a short timeframe. The project was meant to take place over the course of one year and result in a sculpture that would be inaugurated shortly before the center's closure. Every one or two months, new faces would have joined the project, replacing those who had been relocated or rejected—their past, stories, and emotional lives discarded, leaving no other option but to articulate their individual experiences through generic, interchangeable qualities.

And we are not ready

After pondering the matter and requesting advice from people with experience in participative matters and an emigration background, I suggested providing the center with an internet radio station. Radio transmissions have captivated art since their inception, providing a unique site for experimentation. More importantly, there are many radio projects launched by, or together with, refugee communities. To name just one of many, *Jungala Radio*—“re-chewing” the discriminatory name, *The Jungle*, given to the alarming situation in Calais, northern France—is an activist project committed to broadcasting the unspoken, unmediated misery of refugees within this informal settlement as they desperately await the next opportunity to cross the border into the UK. It is known that in art there reigns a despotic pressure for the new, and from this point of view my proposal would not have satisfied the common criteria for a contemporary art project.³ Yet, because the work was commissioned for an “extrajudicial” terrain—that is, outside of museums and art galleries—the criteria of originality could be blatantly ignored. Even more, it was the occasion to question—even drop—the narrow role of the artist that the commissioners seemed to project onto me. My opportunistic compliance with keeping the project under the shelter of the arts might be regarded as a strategic maneuver, through which I was able to smuggle in ideas that otherwise might not have been considered. In other words, I seized the opportunity to fully embrace the schizophrenic nature commonly ascribed to the artist and to escape an inherited comfort zone.

³ For insight into the complex and multifaceted pressure for novelty in art see Verwoert 2005.

To start with, the equipment needed to implement the radio station consisted of a few basic items: two microphones, a mixer, an internet server, and ten meters of cables. Refugees interested in the project would have access to the radio setup according to a self-organized schedule and would receive technical support from a team of radio amateurs. My own role would be limited to raising interest among asylum seekers, regularly introducing newcomers to the project, and participating in regular meetings. After collecting, discussing, and selecting music, the refugee community would broadcast their own playlists, interpolating them with self-organized interviews, live concerts, fables and tales, and, perhaps most importantly, real stories—a sheer need that I guessed from the sporadic and unregulated written contributions by the refugees, compiled in a quasi-journal organized by center personnel.

The short proposal time and the restrictive measures enforced for the visit to the center meant that I never had the chance to meet any refugees before handing in my draft. Moreover, their precarious situation discouraged me from insisting on contact: even had I met anyone, within two months they would already be gone. To counter these limitations, I had to imagine collaborating with a partner in absentia; the only strategy I could devise at the time was to keep the project as vague and open as possible in order to allow for future adaptations, transgressions, and rejections by participants.

I delivered a sketch of the project after one and a half months. The committee members asked me to send it via email. The proposal was accepted, and a month later a meeting was arranged with the committee that launched the project and the local council board. Within the first half hour, it became clear that the council members would not support the proposal. Rather directly, they asked: “What will remain to remember the effort? And what will we get in return?” In other words, the council board members wanted to know how they could politically capitalize on the project. One member of the council recalled, as exemplary, a 1942 work by Polish-Jewish refugees in Losone. Confined to an internment camp, they helped pave a street and drain the swamp where the very same military complex-cum-asylum seeker center was built in 1949 (see Genasci 2005).

Toward the end of the discussion, one of the council members straightforwardly admitted that the project was far more innovative and progressive than they had expected and that they weren't “ready” for that. With mixed feelings of frustration, contentment, and suspicion of this somehow charming utterance, I attempted to argue against, though ineffectively.

However, there was some hope: the delegates of SEM were still supportive, and in December 2016, the

director of the Vincenzo Vela Museum announced the commitment of the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) to financially support the project by covering one-third of its estimated budget.

Broad-casting

The Vela Museum is an institution that preserves a significant number of the gessesoes by the Ticinese sculptor Vincenzo Vela, (1820–91). The artist—heavily involved in political activities—was forced to flee Milan and return to his hometown in Ticino during the Austrian occupation of northern Italy. There, he commissioned a building initially intended to house a school of art, but that eventually provided studios and an exhibition space for his own complete oeuvre. Over the years, the gallery became a popular destination for wealthy Europeans traveling on the north-south road. Nicknamed by visitors as *The Pantheon*, the large gallery featured busts and monuments of the most progressive thinkers, patriots, or Risorgimento sympathizers who inspired the political and cultural life of both Italy and Switzerland, including Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Count of Cavour, Vittorio Emanuele II, General Henri Dufour, Stefano Franscini, and many others.⁴

Based on the above, it is clear that “cultural healers,” along with their commemoration and representation, constitute the heart of political and cultural life in Western societies, and the expectations imposed on my role as an artist were clearly drawn from such cultural references. However, one of the questions that might arise while visiting one of the many European Valhallas is whether art today *can* or *should* carry the burden of such representation. How can art remember—that is, freeze for the future—events taking place in the here and now? How can art fairly depict the arrival of a growing number of persons fleeing their countries, cynically described by the media as “waves”? How can art provide an account of the singularities amid a multitude of stories? And who is the final recipient of such representations? To cope with this political conundrum, Western countries seem to have developed a “successful” strategy known as abstraction. The anonymous soldier is a good example, where anonymity functions as the perfect abstraction machine capable of inspiring patriotic feelings beyond internal political divisions. The counterpart of anonymity is the hero. Whether elected or rebellious, once recognized as a leader, he—rarely she⁵—is sublimated, becoming a powerful signifier able to gather and unify a multitude of

people and demands. Although I am aware of the fact that contemporary memorials can also function as “spaces of engagement,”⁶ I recognize at work the same abstraction device that now frees the socle for the author of the monument.⁷

That said, the central question for me became: what if we opt for a remembering stratagem that refuses the heavy matter so characteristic of sedentary Western culture, and, instead, embraces forms more consonant with times of uncertainty, characterized by flight and migration? While the etymon of *monument* is rooted in the word *monumentum*, from *monere*, “something that reminds and admonishes”—which implies something built to last—the etymological meanings for radio, transmission, and broadcasting project us into a completely different realm.⁸

I imagined the radio as a table for negotiations, a medium that would ideally provide the freedom to decide who would be involved in the game and how. In the tiny space accommodating the radio setting, the rules of the game should have applied—equally—to all parts and become a place for a “collective praxis of speaking”: a space in which even the unavoidable asymmetrical power relations between the so-called hosts and guests could be discussed (see Sternfeld 2013). To articulate it metaphorically: I hoped that the project would act diachronically, like a bunch of seeds that, sown by scattering, could prompt, provoke, and crack the official “soil” upon which we were supposed to perform.

However, in February I was informed that, regrettably, the Swiss Parliament cut a major part of the FOC’s annual budget, making the project unfeasible. No further visits to the center would be granted and the project for the radio station was definitively stopped short.

A raw nerve

Today, with the necessary hindsight, I am tempted to reconstruct the dynamics of the case differently. Strangely enough, even a number of the project’s initiators openly criticized my proposal during the meeting with the council’s committee. Perhaps attempts to preempt critiques from the council, they

4 The Risorgimento was a struggle not only led by men. See Beales 2015.

5 Rather, women are relegated to embodying generic entities, such as the nation, or abstract virtues, like *peace*, *justice*, and *grief*, usually shaped according to current tastes. See Wenk

1996.

6 See Stevens, Franck 2016. This rather poor compilation of engagements with public memorials shows to what extent their implications have yet to be explored. More so then, Claire Bishop’s seminal critique of relational aesthetics remain as an important contribution. See Bishop 2004.

7 An interesting counterexample is Jochen Gerz’s *Place of the Invisible Memorial*. I am thankful to Nanna Lüth for the valuable input. See Gerz 1990 and especially Jhering 1993.

8 All three words share a clear reference to relational implications of contagion, sharing, and spatiality. From a theoretical point of view, I am referring here to Rosy Braidotti’s seminal inquiry into what she calls “no-madic theory,” which she opposes to the sedentary tradition of Western patriarchal society. See Braidotti 2011.

nevertheless reveal a significant point that I shall define as symptomatic. They expressed concern for the difficulties that would emerge once the radio began to broadcast and were already thinking about how to restrict asylum seekers' speech. They specifically feared that the station would potentially allow participants to broadcast sensitive information about the asylum center and its registration procedure, communicate with their compatriots, or even—they confessed to me later, while sipping a beer—plot a terrorist attack. Nonetheless, the committee continued to support the project. Together with the representative for the reception center, they suggested setting up the radio station outside the center in a "politically neutral" location. They advised me to contact the parson of Losone and ask him to kindly supply one of the parish's activity rooms to host the station. Besides the legitimate issues about neutrality that this option raised, it also revealed the contradictory nature of the committee's desire to engage refugees while "neutralizing" potential risks and avoiding diplomatic blunders. This seemed to hit a raw nerve, and the underlying issue that had constantly haunted the project was finally spoken outright: how can we give a voice to those who are not accorded the full rights of citizenship? A question that not only challenges the legal paradox but ultimately exposes the unchallenged assumptions that one "gives" while another "receives."

After-thought

I have been asked whether I will proactively promote the radio project in other reception and registration centers in the future. I don't know, since I have never thought of myself as an activist. The proposal was a response to a government official's request, that is to say, a need that had emerged from within the State Secretariat for Migration. Although the desire for an artistic project appears here as an intertwinement between an unelaborated benevolent wish and a slapdash political agenda, it is important to recognize that somehow, someone within this very system sensed an existing problem contaminating a wider context and longed to find help in or a solution through the arts. Ultimately, the project collided with the very legal framework in which we all were supposed to perform, and since the project was dropped before I even had the chance to meet refugees who might be interested in collaborating, every effort turned into a thought experiment.

Having left the "comfort zone" afforded to me by my profession as an artist, I probably forced the entire project into a terrain vague. However, since I am also not trained as a farmer, I would like to think, perhaps naively, that even when nothing grows on sown soil, there is always the chance that it might happen years later, unexpectedly. Because I have heard that "small flowers crack concrete."⁹

Linguistic revision: Michele Faguet

⁹ "Small Flowers Crack Concrete," lyrics and music composed by Sonic Youth, produced by Sonic Youth and Jim O' Rourke, from the album *NYC Ghosts & Flowers* (2000).

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