

body luggage

migration of
gestures

24.09.2016-08.01.2017

Space02



Kunsthhaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

Lendkai 1, 8020 Graz

T +43-(0)316/8017-9200, Tue-Sun 10am-5pm

kunsthhausgraz@museum-joanneum.at, www.kunsthhausgraz.at

This text is published
on the occasion of the exhibition

Body Luggage

Migration of Gestures

Kunsthaus Graz

Universalmuseum Joanneum

September 24, 2016 until January 8, 2017

‘Wir schaffen das. [We can do this.] On the Shifting of Cultural Cartographies’ is the theme of *steirischer herbst* 2016. The herbst exhibition *body luggage*, shown this year at Kunsthaus Graz, focuses on the movement of bodies: both in the sense of migration as a cross-border movement and in the sense of cultural forms of expression such as dance or body language. Works by ten artists are shown together with objects from selected archives. The only luggage that we always carry with us is our body. Inscribed in it are experiences and memories that are expressed in various ways. How do artists deal with this ‘luggage’?

Continuities

The history of humankind as we tell it, and the life stories of individual people inscribed in it, are shaped by upheavals that often involve radical shifts: political systems change, wars are started and ended again, people leave their home country and try to rebuild their lives. Within these disturbances there are, however, always things that seem to survive temporal and spatial changes. These things can be of a personal or social nature, tangible or intangible: heirlooms, memories and ideas perhaps, but also traditions and conventions, theories, symbols, techniques, values or practices. Even if they are subject to changes during the shifting context of time, they still are not entirely lost. They represent continuities that are revealed time and again in the arts especially. The artistic language of choreographer **Padmini Chettur**, for instance, integrates elements of Indian traditions of dance and music and in doing so gives them a contemporary twist. Puppeteer and shadow theatre artist **Jimmy Chishi** adopts a gentle approach to tradition when engaging with

the artistic aesthetics of his home state of Nagaland (named after the Naga people) in Northeast India. In what ways can we connect with the past? What endures? **Hilde Holger** (1905 – 2001), a pioneer of modern dance in Austria, also had to deal with these questions when in 1939 her Jewish origins forced her to flee her home city of Vienna for exile in India. She carried with her a distinct artistic language that survived the traumatic experience of escape: without abandoning her principles, in India she wove new influences into her work from a tradition that was alien to her, studying for example the hundreds of hand gestures (*mudras*) found in Indian dance. Holger refused to be intimidated by the fact that dance was still often associated with prostitution in India, continuing down her artistic path without shutting herself from the new culture. These continuities do not imply a standstill—instead they form elements of further development.

Migration

Since time immemorial, migration has shaped the history of humankind. Through changes of location, often over vast distances and in precarious circumstances, people of different origins have encountered one another—as did the memories, ideas and stories they carried with them. The *Archivio memorie migranti* on Lampedusa focuses on archiving these things that would otherwise be ephemeral. Migrants' memories are recorded in the form of texts, audio and video documents. **Caecilia Tripp** has also collected image and sound material on Lampedusa. These have been developed into a piece of music that carries in it the sorrow of this place, iconic of the refugee movements in our time. **Simon Wachsmuth**, on the other hand, has addressed the migration of dancers who fled Europe during the age of fascist ideologies. Himself the grandson of a dancer of the 20th century, he was interested in the biography of **Gertrud Kraus**, who went into exile in Palestine in 1935. In his video *Qing* we see dancer **Loulou Omer**, the daughter of a pupil of Kraus's.

The video includes objects that themselves bear a long history of migration, drawn from the Shanghai exile of a relative of Wachsmuth's. It is not only people and their bodies that are subject to change through migration, but also the objects they take with them: new experiences and associations change the history and thus the meaning of the objects. They become embedded within a new context, and so are understood differently. **Kemi Bassene** investigates the various meanings inherent in textiles. Each fragment of textile on display is related to the conversations he had with migrants on Lampedusa.

Bodies

When you have to escape, often the only thing you can take with you is your body. It carries conventions and memories with it, but also new experiences and feelings. This is the luggage that we always carry with us: our *body luggage*. Our body can also give expression to this luggage, even though it does not speak the language of the intellect. It does not make things abstract or

distanced, but instead is capable of direct statements that we cannot completely control. Communication by the body happens on a different level to linguistic communication. Gestures, movement, body language, touch and also dance are connected in a very direct way with our inner states of mind. Around 1900 a central-European cultural shift towards the body led to the development of modern expressive dance, in which both positive and negative feelings were expressed in gestures often perceived as exaggerated. The strictures of tradition were abandoned and dance no longer took place just on the stage, but also in the open. In 1926 Hilde Holger announced that what she taught was 'movement art', thus challenging the category of 'dance'. This extended body vocabulary opened up a new world. The political potential of body movement is of interest to **Chaw Ei Thein**, who re-enacts physical artistic expression as used by artists in Burma to convey their personal experiences of life under a repressive military regime. **Portia Zvavahera** also demonstrates that gestures tell their own distinct story: her

painting *Embraced and protected in you* shows us bodies touching each other, their powerful limbs and sweeping movements conveying strong emotions. Instead of using words, communication here occurs directly from body to body.

Archives

What happens to memories when they eventually vanish from our minds? Are they lost? Or do they reveal themselves in feelings, gestures, objects? Archives embody the attempt to keep memories alive in the form of material things. They are stores of information and knowledge. Archives can only play this role, however, if they are examined. They only become places of knowledge transfer if they are used by people who are interested in them. The exhibition shows a number of objects drawn from archives, such as the archive of Hilde Holger, which **Gernot Wieland** took as inspiration for his work focusing on the transfer of memories through narrative. The display also includes objects from the archive of **Chandralekha**,

a pioneer of modern Indian dance, and paintings by the Indian artist **Shiavax Chavda**. We can also glimpse into the archives of artist and activist **Htein Lin**, a pioneer of Burmese Performance Art, performance artist **Liz Aggiss** and choreographer **Wolfgang Stange**. Obviously, objects cannot tell their stories by themselves—we need to learn how to contextualise them, how to 'read' them. The resulting reappraisal of history and prevention of 'social amnesia' plays a key role for **Milica Tomić**: the *Four faces of Omarska* art project opens up a learning space by offering us the chance to research for ourselves and in this way to process the different meanings of a place that was once a mine, then a prison camp and the scene of mass murder and torture during war and later the site of a capitalist company with discriminatory employment practices and, in 2007, a shooting location for a blockbuster movie about World War I.

Identity

In order to define our own identity, we need to find a counterpart that is distinguishable from us,

and from which we can differentiate ourselves. Encounters with the other allow us to examine ourselves in relation to it. At the same time, however, our personal identity is shaped by the feeling of belonging to a group, a culture, a family. **Sawangwongse Yawnghwe**'s work explores the history of his homeland of Burma together with his family history, which is closely interwoven with the country's political history. He thematises the Shan, a national minority in Burma for whose democratic rights his grandmother had already campaigned, and for which his father then fought in the war against the Burmese military up until the 1970s, before he had to flee with his wife and the one-year-old Sawangwongse. Milica Tomić, on the other hand, refuses to ascribe a national identity and even challenges the demarcation of national borders. What does ascribing a nationality say about a person in all their uniqueness? People experience situations in which everything is at stake—and are faced with the question of what they themselves are actually made up of. To what extent do I remain myself in a moment of crisis? The person we

feel ourselves to be is shaped by the narrative we see when we look back at our lives. What story am I writing, what traces am I leaving behind?

Art History, Art Histories

Can there be only one history of art? Or should there really be several histories of art, overlapping and interwoven? Art history is too often mainly the history of individual nation states. The development of art was conceived within established cultural boundaries, while western art history emphasised its supremacy and sovereignty of thought. This culminated in the idealisation of particular positions and the emergence of mythologies that made critical scrutiny difficult. And yet to what extent can national borders present any kind of borders in art? This kind of limitation excludes from the narrative all of those artists who (are obliged to) leave a country. Techniques and motifs in art have always crossed national borders, making cultural boundaries questionable. The increasing mobility of people, objects and information over vast

spatial distances is progressively forcing us to reconsider—to examine the countless networks of relations that can be determined in the evolution of art. What we need is a broader perspective, one that is as global as possible, capable of embracing these correlations while identifying continuities beyond national borders.

Accompanying programme

UNI KUM! Students Day 2016

Wed, 19.10., 2pm–8pm
www.studierendentag.at

Themed tour
'Demarcations'
with Nadine Schleifer
Sun, 02.10., 3.30pm (in German
and English language)

UNIQA-Family Day
Entrance free!
Sun, 30.10., 10am–5pm

Guided tour
'Culture as a matter of opinion'
with Nadine Schleifer
Sat, 08.10., 2pm–5pm (in German
and other languages)

Themed tour
'Culture as a matter of opinion'
with Nadine Schleifer
Sun, 09.10., 3.30pm (in German
and English language)

Talking Art – *body luggage*
talk with Zasha Colah & Luigi
Fassi
Sun, 09.10., 3pm

3Family Day
Entrance free for 3customers and
their families!
Sun, 09.10., 10am–5pm

Themed tour
'Expressivities'
with Markus Boxler
Sun, 16.10., 3.30pm (in German
and English language)

Curator
Zasha Colah

Text
Antonia Veitschegger

Translation
Kate Howlett-Jones

Graphic Concept
Lichtwitz Leinfellner
visuelle Kultur KG

Layout
Karin Buol-Wischenau