Border crossings
by Nicola Holzapfel

LMU art historian Burcu Dogramaci studies the effect of emigration on the work of modern artists and teases out their influence on social perceptions of contemporary population displacements.

“Your present role is the most difficult, but also the grandest, that life could have assigned to you – don’t forget that – Max Beckmann – and you will have to accept all that it entails.” This is an excerpt from a diary entry made by the painter on December 18th 1940 in his Dutch exile. Beckmann had been branded as a ‘degenerate artist’ by the Nazis in his native Germany, and worked in the Netherlands for 10 years before emigrating to New York in 1947.

Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to leave Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, and had to find a place for themselves in a foreign country. Many of them, like Beckmann, were artists. “As an art historian, one has a better idea of the sorts of challenges facing refugees today when one realizes how difficult it was for these emigrés to find their feet and begin working again,” says Burcu Dogramaci. Beckmann produced a significant body of work in exile, but many of his colleagues who had been highly successful in their home countries were unable to pick up the threads after they left. “Emigration is not always a new source of inspiration for artists. Having to work in an unfamiliar context can also be a profound shock. The story of emigration and exile is always one of upheavals – and of failure too. Dogramaci is an art historian whose research focuses on the impact of migration on artistic production and the artist’s perception of his or her oeuvre, and on how the conflicts it provokes are reflected in diverse forms of artistic expression. In particular, she is interested in how the artist responds to the fact of emigration itself. Many artists incorporate their personal trauma and their individual experience of emigration into their work, but that is not what fascinates Dogramaci. She explores how works of art can stimulate us to see things differently, to change our views – especially when they deal with such a highly politicized issue. “Most works created by artists in exile do not set out to depict emigration as such. Instead, they tend to confront us with images that undermine official narratives.” One of the best examples of the latter, she says, is the portrayal – in the media and in political discourse – of contemporary refugee flows as mass migrations.

“Postcards from Europe”

According to Dogramaci, borders and how to overcome them are elemental for every artistic treatment of emigration. In the work of photographer Eva Leitolf the European Union’s external borders are emblematic for its refugee policy. “Leitolf photographs ostensibly innocent landscapes that have been the backdrop to shocking events,” says Dogramaci. In her series “Postcards from Europe”, Leitolf documents the tragic fates of refugees without depicting refugees at all. One of her “postcards” shows what appears to be an alluring park landscape in the city of Melilla, a Spanish enclave on the coast of North Africa. It takes a while for the viewer to notice in the background a segment of steel fencing designed to keep potential immigrants out. Another shot shows the strand near Tarifa, the southernmost city on the European continent overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar. During a severe storm on November 1st 1988, a boat with 23 Moroccans on board sank off Tarifa. Ten bodies were later washed ashore at Los Lances nearby. On the back of her picture postcard, Leitolf notes that only four of the boat’s passengers survived. The rest were never found. Only when one reads this text does one grasp why this section of coast is what Dogramaci in a commentary on the series refers to as “a politically contaminated location.”

“Crossing the Mediterranean is not a theme that appeared from nowhere. Lives have been lost in the attempt for years. These waters have acquired a new connotation and many artists have been treating this topic for a long time,” says Dogramaci. But the refugee flows over the past several months have brought the many victims to the attention of the media. In February, the Chinese conceptual artist Ai Weiwei created an
installation in Berlin which pointedly and poignantly referred to those drowned on these desperate voyages: The piece was dominated by life-jackets. According to the artist himself, he obtained 14,000 life-jackets on the island of Lesbos, which had either been washed up on its shores or were left lying on the strand after their wearers had been rescued. Prior to that Ai Weiwei had reconstructed the press photo of the 3-year-old Syrian Alan Kurdi, who was drowned after the boat in which he was travelling to Europe with his family capsized within sight of a Turkish beach. 

Commenting on the global impact of the original photo, the German news magazine Der Spiegel stated that it “encapsulated the awful consequences of (Europe’s) restrictive immigration policy.” Burcu Dogramaci expects that there will be further responses from artists on the mediatization of migration, which dominates public perceptions of the phenomenon in the countries to which migrant flows are directed.

For present-day migrants to Europe, the gulf to be traversed is the Mediterranean. Most of the refugees forced to leave Europe in the 1930s had no other choice but to cross the Atlantic. In the context of the interdisciplinary research program on “Representation and Presentation” at LMU’s Center for Advanced Studies, of which she is Joint Coordinator, Dogramaci focuses on this phase of the migration process. “I want to know what happens to exiles on the voyage out. This phase is often ignored in research on emigration and exile, which tends to focus on why people had to leave and what happened to them after they reached their destinations. The significance of everything in between remains unclear.”

This blank space is powerfully exemplified in the work of the photographer Hans Günter Flieg. He emigrated with his parents from Chemnitz to Brazil in 1939, and he took a camera with him. But the only photographs of the journey that he subsequently published were his last view of Chemnitz and his first sighting of Sao Paulo. “The long trip itself is represented by the narrow black band between the two photos, which for me is a powerful metaphor for the uncertainty of the in-between – this ‘come-so-far but not-there-yet’ feeling,” says Dogramaci. The current movements of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean...
and their all too often tragic outcome will no doubt find their way into future works of art. How will contemporary artists choose to represent the routes into exile? How can the chasm between the familiar and the foreign, the past and the future be captured in images, objects and texts? Works of art that refer to migration often transcend the boundaries between genres – photography is combined with painting, installation with graphics. “This is a natural response to the theme, in which the notion of breaching boundaries is inherent. This can inspire artists to think in terms of transcending the limits observed in their earlier work.”

Other large-scale migrations are also included in the CAS program, including the waves of emigration from the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empires to destinations in North and South America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Although 3.5 million people left the Habsburg Empire for the US and Canada during this period, the research that has been done on it is very heterogeneous. No single monograph covers the subject as a whole,” says Professor Ursula Prutsch, Professor of American Cultural History in the Faculty of Languages and Literatures at LMU and Joint Coordinator of the CAS program. Very many of the migrants who went to the US were from Galicia and Dalmatia, the poorest parts of the Empire. On the quayside, many of them were persuaded by touts to switch tickets and seek their fortunes in Latin America – sometimes with false promises, although some South American countries did offer attractive incentives for immigrants. In fact, many of their descendants possess EU citizenship thanks to these regimes. “Their transatlantic links have never been cut off,” says Prutsch, who is planning a collaborative project with historians which will study how these immigrants were integrated into local society. Ethnic conflicts, for instance, were often translated onto a symbolic level. For instance the inhabitants of the city of Apóstoles in Argentina still celebrate the anniversary of the arrival of their ancestors in the town by erecting a new bust. But representatives of a different nationality are responsible for organizing the event each year. The aim of the CAS program is to study these historical episodes of emigration, and their impacts on sending and receiving countries, in a broader context.

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**PIE0238-ES-190109 Playa de los Lances, Tarifa, Spain 2009:** A boat carrying twenty-three undocumented Moroccan immigrants went down off Tarifa during a severe storm on 1 November 1988. The bodies of ten who drowned were washed up on the beach at Los Lances. Nine were never found and there were four survivors. A vessel with more than thirty people on board sank near Tarifa on 15 September 1997. Six passengers survived, fourteen corpses were found on the Playa de los Lances and an unknown number were lost at sea. El País, 11/02/1988 and 09/19/1997; Diario de León, 10/09/2002

The text that accompanies Eva Leitolf’s photo reveals why this section of coast is what Burcu Dogramaci terms “a politically contaminated location”. Source: Eva Leitolf (Postcards from Europe, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016)
context for the first time, and relate them to current migrations.

“Migration has always been with us. Every city you care to think of is a product of migration,” says Dogramaci. In the 1970s, photographer Candida Höfer began to document the effects of the arrival of – mostly Turkish – guest-workers in the city of Cologne. In her sequence “Turks in Germany”, she contrasted rigorously composed images of Turkish businesses with shots of the new immigrants in their homes. Strikingly, the latter reveal that their domestic interiors had much in common with typically German sitting rooms, but they always included objects that referred specifically to their homeland.

“It is astonishing that this series dates to the 1970s – a time when politicians were reluctant to acknowledge that Germany had become attractive to immigrants, and continued to propagate a very different social image of the country,” Dogramaci remarks.

Of course, reflections on the idea of home are another central element in artistic confrontations with the phenomenon of migration. Performance artist Nezaket Ekici, for example, maintains that she belongs to three cultures: German, Turkish and International. When asked where she was most at home, she replied: “I have no idea what home means. I believe it is somewhere within myself.” For media philosopher Vilém Flusser, who was forced to flee from Prague to Paris in 1939, the exile’s only homeland is his dwelling place. As he pointed out, “you can have a succession of homes or none at all, but you’ve got to live somewhere.” For Dogramaci, this assertion poses a challenge to art historians: To re-imagine or reconfigure the concept of ‘homeland’, which has a strongly nationalist flavor, in terms more appropriate for our globalized world. This is the subject of her latest book “Home: Tracing Its Expression in Art” (Heimat: Eine künstlerische Spuren-suche).

Interestingly, several ongoing projects explore how the notion of home is altered by the experience of living elsewhere and how these changes in turn affect one’s native land. In a series of photographs entitled “The Migration of Spaces” (Migration von Räumen), Stefanie Bürkle portrays houses built after their return to Turkey by migrants who had spent their working lives in Germany. “Migration always feeds back on developments in the land one has left behind,” says Dogramaci. Bürkle’s photos show how migrants expand their conceptions of life and the world: In Germany one displays objects that remind one of Turkey and in Turkey one builds houses that look like those in Germany. “People take what they regard as valuable with them – and that can include the notion of robust house construction.” This is an example of a creative response to the division between ‘here’ and ‘there’, which is constitutive for “transnational living spaces and biographies,” she says.

“Turning migration into museum pieces”

In many contemporary artworks problems of identity and the acquisition or attribution of identities are crucial. In projects that are concerned with emigration from Islamic countries, these questions are often posed in the context of everyday attire or of identification papers. Artists create false passports as framing devices for photos. Dogramaci sees in these impulses a reflection of the continuity of the phenomenon of migration and the conditions that give rise to it. “False identity papers have always been a feature of migrations, both today and in the past. In Germany in the 1930s artists created documents for others, because they had the skills needed to make convincing copies of the real thing.” In the year 2000, to complete a project in which he plays around with clichés, the Berlin artist Nasan Tur applied for a new passport. Over the preceding months he had grown a beard, which is typically perceived as a sign that one is a Turk. The document showing the artist as his bearded self was later exhibited in museums. The piece provokes the visitor to reflect on the meaning of such an official piece of paper: What exactly is an identity and how does the identity that is legitimated by such a document relate to the bearer? “Tur’s work points to the fact that the formation of an identity is never a self-referential process; it always takes place in a larger context,” as Dogramaci puts it in her new book.

Passports, together with suitcases, are among the objects that often turn up in exhibitions on emigration and immigration. Burcu Dogramaci refers to this easy way out as “turning migration into museum pieces”, contrasting it with the vividness of the artist’s engagement with the issue. “I believe there is a risk in reducing migration, which is after all a highly complex process, to a few emblematic objects. The locked suitcase suggests that it will never be unpacked. If it is meant to stand for migration, the implication is that the migrant never really arrives.” She also regards it as problematic that very few museums have curators or directors who have any personal experience of migration. “So the approach is always a matter of second-hand reference.”
She herself is a member of an expert panel charged with studying how art institutions have addressed the issue of migration and critically examining their responses to recent developments. For example, theaters have begun to put real refugees on stage, with little thought for what happens to them after the curtain falls and they are left to cope with the realities of their precarious situation.

In “Migration and Artistic Production”, a volume of essays which she recently edited, Dogramaci asserts that migrations are among the most important catalysts in the history of art. The number of planned projects and calls for proposals on the theme of Migration and Art is still rising. “Many people realize that thinking in terms of nation-states is no longer enough,” she says, adding that it is time to go beyond the purely biographical approach to research on migration and exile. “Many artists who come from immigrant families do not wish to be viewed solely in this light,” she says. But this wish will be realized only when work by artists with non-German surnames finds its rightful place in large collections and permanent exhibitions of German art – names that demonstrate that their bearers are no longer excluded from the canon, and that unalloyed nationalities are a thing of the past.

Dogramaci views current migrations in a broader historical context. “I am convinced that, instead of allowing our responses to be dominated by fear, we should learn from the past. How can we ensure that the migrants to whom we give shelter become an accepted part of our society? I realize that this presents a huge challenge, but history demonstrates that migration is anything but an unusual phenomenon. This country will certainly be changed by the influx of migrants, because they all bring their own personal histories with them. But the migrants themselves will also be changed, and that can give rise to something new and interesting.” Many of our artists have the capacity to give us an idea or at least an inkling of what that something might look like, and of the discomfitures it might entail. Dogramaci is excited by the potential impact of migration, and the dissolution of artistic boundaries that it provokes, on her own discipline, which has long thought in terms of “national” schools: “Quite possibly,” she muses, “we will have to rewrite the history of art.”