

Campus in Camps
Collective Dictionary

POLITICAL



POLITICAL

Learning from the Forum

Campus in Camps
BAK, basis voor actuele kunst
Wij Zijn Hier

UTRECH AND AMSTERDAM (NL)

to you, Hashim Gmal

Sudan 1983 – Netherlands 2016

This booklet is an outcome from the "Future vocabularies" workgroup at the workshop taught by We Are Here and BAK, considering the question of representation within art and politics with regards to refugees' struggle. The series considers the need for a new lexicon to sustain an actualized understanding engaging in developing a new collective dictionary.

Campus in Camps coordinators

Isshaq Al-Barbary, Diego Segatto

Participants

Adam Adriss, Mina Ben Atta, Michiel Bot, Daphne Gambieraki, Hashim Gmal, Sumugan Sivanesan, Veronica Tello, Felipe Zapata Zuluaga

Photographs

Manette Ingenegeren and BAK





12	INTRODUCTION
15	DAY 1 POLITICAL, STRUGGLE, MOVEMENT
25	DAY 2 REFUGEE, OCCUPATION, CITIZEN
37	DAY 3 “DEAR REFUGEE”, RESPONSIBILITY
49	DAY 4 POLITICAL PRAXES
69	DAY 5 PARTY

In the framework of *Here We Are Academy: Learning from the Forum* (Utrecht and Amsterdam, 5th - 9th April 2016)

Campus in Camps was invited by **BAK, basis voor actuele kunst** to contribute with **We Are Here association** in creating a space and opening doors for a sincere and honest discussion about the complex relation between refugees and citizens, the most urgent issue we are encountering around the world today. Starting from the work of the Collective Dictionary, we sided curator Maria Hlavajova's address on new languages bridging art production and political engagement used to describe such a reality, design its narratives, to claim the right to be political in a space of fertile risks and communal learning.

This time together focused on recognizing political actors, not victims. While We Are Here's ambition to found a political party offered a subtext to reflect upon which kind of spaces and representations are viable to protect and empower the political struggle of refugees in the Netherlands, during the week we already experimented with a mix of refuge, welcome, and room for human approach and exchange.

What we re-learned is that the de-placed, in their attempts to survive and improve life conditions, are able to re-map reality in order to find alternatives. This is why refugees hold a potential, seen many times in a negative ability to destabilize (often compared to migrants or manipulated as a prequel to anarchism, countervoices or even terrorism); that's the potential we have to detour and appropriate: the one about somebody able to re-engineer our societies towards a culture of welcoming, equal distribution and inclusiveness.

It sounds like an endorsement to a broader movement many are ready to support or be part of. Maybe even an exploitation of something citizens are not able to achieve by themselves, but yet an opportunity for the privileged ones, disempowered people who delegate decisions to the elected, to push for new demands.

Diego Segatto

day 01

**POLITICAL
STRUGGLE
MOVEMENT**

UNPREPARED?
OR PREPARED TO
DISCOURAGE?

TOLENT

AMBIGUITY } WHAT LE
IN POLICIES } ROOM

NATION
STATE

CRISIS

DEBA

HOW CAN (CHILD) REFUGEES
BE A THREAT?

WAITING

"DRAG-DOWN"
EFFECT BECAUSE
OF ECONOMIC
LOSS OF BUYING POWER

POLITICS

LANGUAGE

CULTURE

PRIVATE

SURVIVAL

FUTURE VOCABULARIES

DECOLONIZ LANGUAGE IN ORDER

CITIZEN

CITIZENSHIP

PUBLIC

INTERDEPENDENT

HELP

HOMELESS

CAMPS

LEAVES FOR?

IS

IT'S TIME FOR REFUGEES TO TAKE PART IN THE POLITICAL TO MAKE ALL THE PEOPLE AFFECTED CONVERGE MEET, DISCUSS.

A PARTY... WHY NOT??

(MANY PEOPLE SEE REFUGEES AS A COMPROMISED ACTIVITY)

TO INSTRUCT NEW POLICIES IN WHICH POLITICS

SPACES?

AND PROPERTIES

REFUGEES

CITIZENS

Common

COMMUNITY

RIGHT

PROVOCATION NOT VICTIMS BUT POLITICAL ACTORS SENSIBILIZATION

DUTY

STREET

SUBJECT SPACE STREAM STATEMENT

SHELTER

TAKING AND STANCE IN SOCIETY

COMMON

REPRESENTATION

BORDER

How to build a responsible society and politic?

REFUGEE

VICTIMIZATION

I will always remember the first time that I had to face power structures, the first time I had to break down the first wall of my own oppression. It didn't begin with the deconstruction of my own beliefs in a theoretical way or with the decolonization of the language that somebody taught me: it was something more physical and corporeal than any other thing; it was more related with disobedience than with the seeking of something more novel. One Sunday, any given Sunday, I decided not to go to the church.

I was raised in a Catholic Colombian family. Even when I was born in the capital city –Bogota-, my parents are from a different place. They were born in Medellin, a warmer and smaller city in the South-East in Colombia. In the late 70's Medellin was a violent city, hometown of one of the biggest drug cartels of the world at that time. The cartels used to export drugs mainly to Europe and North America. The Colombian government realized -quite late I might say- that cartel money had reached the heads of the state, which allowed them to implement their methods to expand their power without any obstacle or punishment. As

a response to this situation, the US government, as part of their fight against drugs, felt the need to intervene in the Colombian policies in order to bring stability to the region, or at least that was the public speech. The intervention, as any other euphemism for colonization, was not just rhetorical but territorial. With the CIA agents' arrival to the city, Medellin turned even more violent. The Colombian history and its relationship with drugs and US it's a lot more complex but inside that national history, my parents framed the story of their own inner displacement. The first time that my father told me this story he ended up telling me that, looking backwards, now he felt blessed because no matter the reasons or the consequences, God had chosen that path for him and his family. Bogota, or maybe his migration and arrival to the capital, offered him something that he considered a better future. Maybe I wouldn't be here if they had not left Medellin. In his words, "God wanted it like that". Even when maybe it was also the first time when I heard that expression, it wasn't the last: On November of 1985, a few years before my birth, a Colombian guerrilla movement called M-19 assaulted the justice

palace - the equivalent to a parliament in other parts of the world – taking congress members, deputies and everybody else that were inside the building as hostages. That morning a new law that would allow the extradition to US of drug bosses -or any other criminal that could serve US interests- would be approved. The disapproval of that law was the main demand of M-19. This time the Colombian army intervened, under US pressure to pass the extradition law, killing hostages and kidnappers and provoking civil disappearances that until now haven't been clarified. Just before the army entry into the justice palace the government replaced all the public broadcasting of the event with a football match between local teams. Just after the massacre the president of the country, in national television, said "God wanted it like that".

Until now, one of the most precious and valuable objects that my family has is a statue of baby Jesus. It has a special place in my house, in one corner of the living room. It is always on a kind of lectern that my aunt bought during one of her travels to Europe. Since I can remember,

the first thing that my father does before he goes to his job is pray to this little statue. My mother does the same. Even my brothers did the same for a while when they were living in my parent's house. I was also part of this ritual. I wouldn't say that I am a person of faith, at least not as my parents wish. But I have been curious. I don't like to follow and definitely I don't like to lead. Perhaps that's why, every time that I was forced to be part of that ritual, I always wondered why: Why were they worshipping a small, blonde, blue eyes statue with porcelain skin and with a crown in its head? In terms of form, the statue was everything but them. After few years I realized that the statue wasn't a representation of me or of them, at least not an accurate one, but at that moment I couldn't understand what it was indeed representing. When I look back in my memory, I recognize that moment as the one of the first when I understood - vaguely I might say- the value and the power of an icon, of an image: The problem of representation was part of my daily life without me knowing it. After a while I discovered that the problem was much bigger than my own reality, than my personal rou-

tine. The Spanish colonization in Colombia and the vast rest of Latin America was presented as an enterprise that was seeking the evangelization of indigenous cultures with human and religious purposes. The European cultures used, among other things, those kind of representations to vanish entire “barbaric cultures” -as they called them -, kill hundreds and hundreds of human beings, rape women and kids, invade sacred lands, exploit natural resources and establish their own beliefs and their own power structure, all of that in the name of the same statue that my parents have 500 years later. The otherness was born, in part, due to the immersion of those images into the collective imaginary of native cultures. I am sure that at the end of the invasion they also said “God wanted it like that”. I can say with certainty that that Sunday when I decided not to go to church, I started to challenge the notion of representation. Let me say that I am not putting all the responsibility of cultural colonization on religious institutions, of course not, it is bigger than that: Every time that I am in Bogota’s streets and I see ads of white, blonde, straight-haired girls and then I see my friends straighten

their curly hair; Every time that I go to my aunt house and she tells me how proud she is of all the European furniture around her living room; Every time that I went to the school and all the authors that I read were western white males; Every time that I hear on Utrecht's pubs that the refugees are a threat to a civilized way of life; Every time I hear a politician calling for divine intervention to help the future of his nation; Every time that a non-Western artist is labeled as exotic and he/she gains recognition in western markets/institutions because of that, every time, I return in my mind several years ago to that Sunday.

Felipe Zapata Zuluaga

day 02

**REFUGEE
OCCUPATION
CITIZEN**

REFUGEE

(IMM. DEFINITION) OF "UNDER PERSECUTION"
E. LIMITED, COMPARED TO MORE UPDATED
AND VANGUARD (CONTINUING) VOCABULARIES LIKE
IN LIMBO, UNDOCUMENTED, **ANTI JUMPER**,
ILLEGAL, INVISIBLE **QILDI** (Arabic)

"A TENTATIVE SCAFFOLD"
SHIFTING ACCORDING TO
DEBATIONS AND THE
SITUATIONS

THERE IS A
GENRE DIFFERENCE
INSIDE THE
REFUGEE AGENDA

SOMEbody FORCED TO DISPLACE UNDER THE
PRESSURES OF COLONIZATION...
A THREAT FOR OUR WESTERN SELFISH WAY,
A CRITICAL (HUMAN) THING FORCES A DIFFERENT
VIEW US, RATHER JUST VIEW THEM.

A CONDITION THAT THROUGH SURVIVAL AND SEEKING
FOR A BETTER LIFE IS ABLE TO RE-MAP THE REALITY
AND FIND THE (ALTERNATIVE) ABLE TO RE-ENGINEER
THE SOCIETY TOWARDS A CULTURE OF WELCOMING
AND INCLUSION

(A SUFFERER BOUND
WITH THE ZONE) **EXILE**

→ IMBALANCE IS UNBALANCE

AN ETHICAL CHOICE,
BUT WE CAN'T BE
THE "GREAT BELLY"
TO RE-ABLY ALL
THE TIMES WE
GENERALLY SHOULD TAKE
FORWARDS A "WARRANTY"
IN ORDER TO FEEL

SOMETIMES IS A
BETWEEN RESPECT
SORT OF DISCOURAGE

A CONTRACT FOR
WITH MANY OUT

IT'S A PRIVILEGE
EVEN IF STRUGGLE
WITH AN IMAGE

IT'S A (HUMAN) TO A
IT'S A RIGHT TO FIGHT
IT'S A HUMAN BEING
RESPECTED FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS

CITIZEN

OCCUPATION

IN PALESTINE IS DOMINATION AND MURDER.
OTHERWISE IS A REORGANIZATION OF THE (W) USED FOR COMMON PURPOSES.
TANHR CHANGE OPENED A NEW IMAGERY IN THE ARAB WORLD.

RESOUNDS THE ACT OF COLONIZATION.
OCCUPY WALL STREET OPENED A NEW IMAGERY IN THE WESTERN WORLD.

IS IT WORTH FOR A REHABILITATION?
THE TERM ITSELF BLENDS THE TWO OPPOSITE, STILL VIOLENT.

HAPPINESS, I FIND A PLACE TO BE IN.
OTHERWISE I SLEEP IN THE PARK. IT'S A SOLUTION AT LEAST.

SOMEBODY WHO OCCUPIED MY SPACE
FORCED ME IN THIS SITUATION
(PAYING HIM BACK...)

MOVING PROBLEMS TO
OTHER PLACES, NEVER
TAKING RESPONSIBILITIES

AN ACT THAT DEMANDS ORGANIZATION,
IN ORDER TO PUT ASIDE A PERSON OR A
SPACE IN ACTIVITY. THE ETHIC DERIVES
FROM NEED AND INTENTION.
THE NEED FOR SHELTER IS A RIGHT,
A DUTY, BEYOND ANY IDEA OF RE-APPROPRIATION.
A BENEFIT FOR THE PLACE IF IT STOPS
DEGRADENCE AND IMPROVE FROM A
STATE OF ABANDONMENT.

STATE OF CONFUSION
AND INDIFFERENCE,
HEAVY FOR OTHER LIFE PROPOSALS

A LIFETIME
LIVES IN EXCHANGE OF

REFUSE
NOT FOR
UNDOING IS
THIS

REFUSE

NOT FOR
UNDOING IS
THIS

IN EMERGENCIES
ARE BY MEMBERSHIP

CAN'T BE CALLED
AN "ORGAN"

IT'S SHOULD GET CLOSER
TO UNDERSTAND SOMEBODY'S
NEEDS...

Border Thinking

I was one of several students of the ‘vocabularies’ group (that constituted one of five groups) for the Here We Are Academy. The group was comprised of people – by now friends – from Sudan, Egypt, Colombia, Chile, the Palestinian territories, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Australia; Diego Segatto and Isshaq Al-Barbary, from the experimental, Palestinian pedagogical project Campus in Camps, led the group. For the most part, we worked well together.

However, I think it’s worth dwelling on some of the less convivial moments of the Academy, especially during the last two days: these moments reveal the plurality of ideas within the Academy as well as some of the (as yet) unresolvable tensions, which over time, may turn out to be productive...Writing only a few weeks after the Academy, however, these tensions reveal the many borders that maintain a division between disparate subjects, between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The ‘vocabularies’ group – dubbed the ‘super-theory’ group by one of our members - was repeatedly dismissed by some, and I stress some, students of the Here We Are Academy, especially from those in the then newly formed group ‘right to be political/representation’ (two separate groups at the start of the Academy). The tension was most palpable on the concluding day of the Academy when these groups merged to discuss the proposal (forwarded by ‘right to be political/representation’) to launch a We Are Here political party. The political party was to be inaugurated by a speech and performance by Osman, the collective’s spokesperson. And the party was scheduled to launch on the same day that these discussions were taking place. For most of the members in ‘right to be political/representation’ there was a clear sense of urgency to finalise the speech, while the ‘vocabularies’ group demonstrated a clear hesitation at the very notion of launching a political party for We Are Here. How consultative had the ‘right to be political/representation’ group been with members of We Are Here regarding the decision to launch a political party under the name of this

collective? Given that no women from We Are Here were present throughout the Academy, were they consulted? Who of We Are Here and outside of We Are Here might this party represent, and how? Why form a party rather than a series of more fluid/ambivalent clusters of diverse groups seeking to critique the very system of democracy in (and outside) the Netherlands?

The formation of a political party – and all it represents – irked some and excited others in the Academy. Discussion was needed. But the ‘vocabularies’ group and those from ‘right to be political/representation’ were operating on two different temporalities, urgency and hesitation – perhaps the former temporality is understandable given the finitude and demands of the Here We Are Academy. We wanted to work with We Are Here to offer something for the challenges they face, but did it have to have to happen or manifest as something concrete or seemingly monolithic like a political party at the end of the five days?

Endurance: We Are Here have been working for a long

time on the right and politics to represent themselves and their plight – long before the Here We Are Academy and they will continue long after. On the third day of the Academy members of We Are Here presented one small part of this history. A video developed by We Are Here in 2015 (through a course on ‘Art and Migration’ for the We Are Here Academy led by Maria Hlavajova, Artistic Director of BAK) interrogated the complex inter-subject relations that usually manifest in news reports ‘about’ refugees, and turned toward making a space to self-represent. The Academy itself was a way to continue to explore and expand this strategy of self-representation – or to locate a way to make it sustainable, durable. One of the groups formalised this strategy into the slogan -- with a neat logo, for posterity -- that reads: ‘nothing about us without us’. This, coincidentally, is the same slogan adopted in 2009 by the only self-determined refugee collective in Australia: RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees, <http://riserefugee.org>). Refugees in Australia (where I live) face similarly draconian border protection policies, demonizing imagery in the news media and opportunistic rhetoric from

politicians as those in ‘limbo’ in the Netherlands (and Europe). The politics of self-representation is thus critical for offering counter-narratives and counter-histories, as well as for making a claim on the right to produce and circulate imagery/stories. However, the identity politics that structure the logic of the phrase ‘nothing about us without us’ is highly divisive. To my mind, it reiterates the (binaristic) division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – or refugee and citizen, or refugee and ‘illegal/illegitimate refugee’ (‘queue jumping boatpeople’, those in ‘limbo’, or ‘undocumented’). These are the kinds of divisions between subjects that We Are Here and many others before them have worked very hard to undermine.

In her 1943 essay ‘We Refugees’ – which was a set reading for the Academy – Hannah Arendt argued for the capacity to articulate oneself and determine one’s relations to others outside the structures of citizenship, determined by one’s birthplace or if/where one has been ‘naturalised’, and outside the nation-state, which creates endless borders between subjects. The We Are Here collective has

been quite effective in carving out a space that circumvents the limitations of the nation-state and ‘who’ constitutes a legitimate body politic or who can share solidarity. To put it simply, they have been effective in undermining the very binaries that politicians and the nation-state relentlessly reiterate.

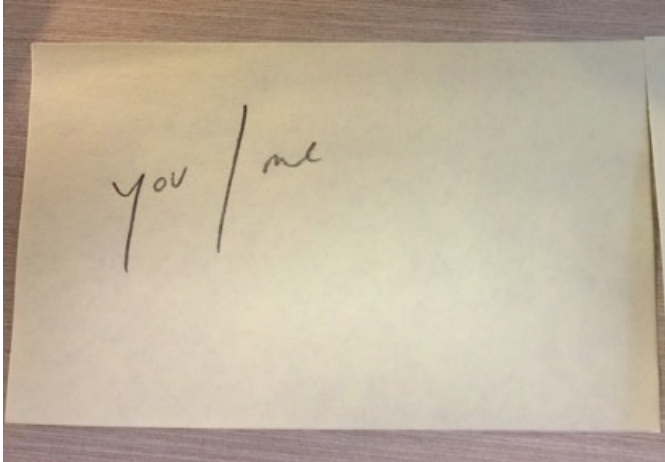


fig. 1

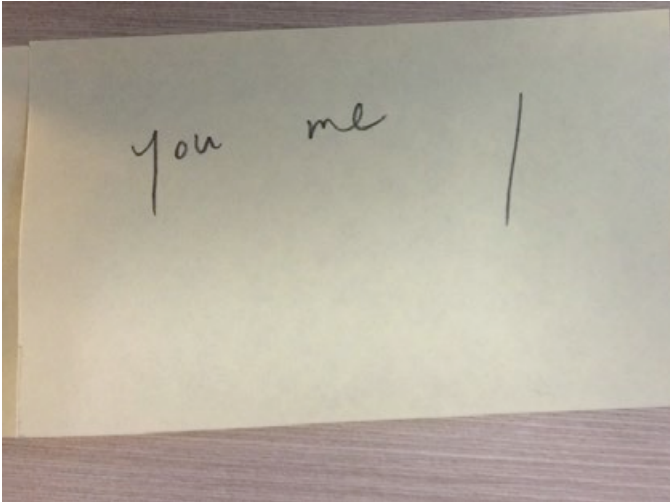


fig. 2

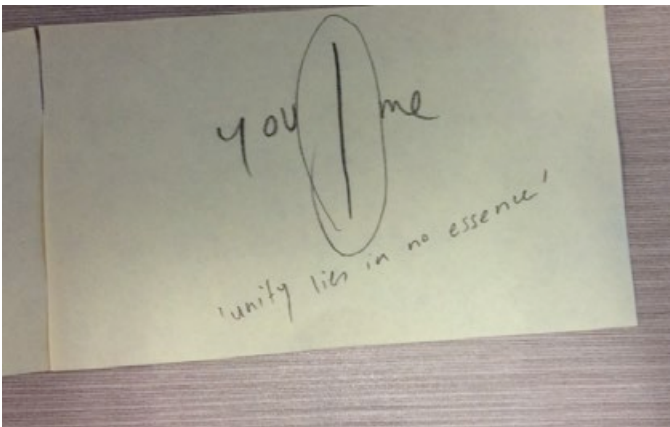


fig. 3

Yet, do we – and can we – simply do away with borders that divide you/me (fig. 1)? Would doing away with such a border (e.g. the slash '/') that divides you/me allow for a non-hierarchical division between subjects (fig. 2)? Or

do we maintain the border (eg the slash '/') not to stand on either side of it, but rather in order to occupy it (fig. 3)? A range of decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo, Gloria Anzaldúa and Boaventura de Sousa Santos have argued for the latter because it provides a productive grounds to think through the capacity to exist on the borders – of legitimacy, citizenship, colonialism, gender. In other words, occupying the border mobilizes 'border thinking'. It makes the border – that which separates us – the 'object of study' as opposed to the various, distinct subject positions that live on either side of the border (and supposed differences or similarities).

The politics of this kind of border thinking – which extend to living on the border of activism and theory – is dependent on working through why such divisions exist in the first place...but only if one can remain on the border rather than on either side of it.

Veronica Tello

day 03

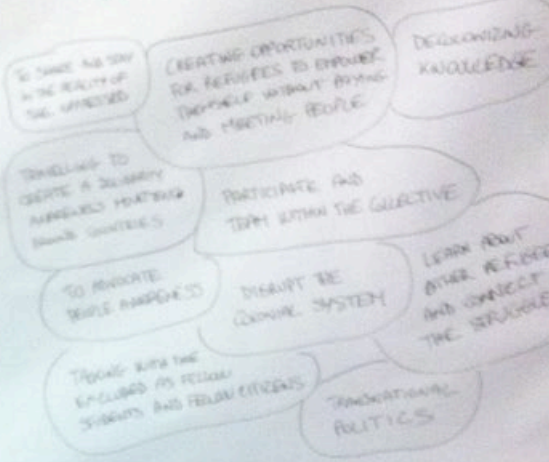
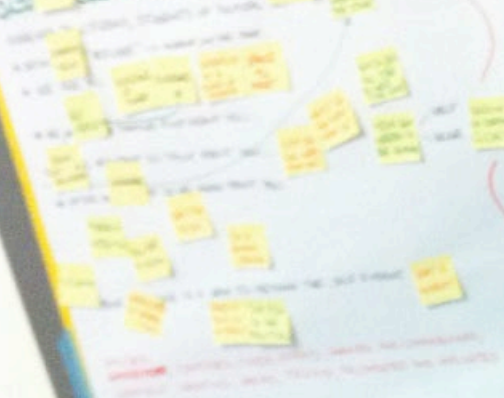
“DEAR REFUGEE”

—

RESPONSIBILITY

RESPONSIBILITY

REFUGEE



It might sound strange but the main feeling, the main atmosphere or image that has stayed with me from our week was the way one of the members of my group moved her mouth in combination with the expression her eyes took. It was, in a way, soothing, and I remember being faintly conscious of it during our time there, but not so much. I only realised later that this is the main feeling that I have kept from that week; the way her mouth moved in combination with the sparkle in her eyes, and how I could just stare at it, numbed by the honey-like feeling it gave me. I am currently taking a course about deconstructing the concept of genocide and my teacher, a very big American man, curiously moves his mouth in a similar way, which means that literally during every class I have to think of our week. Apart from Veronica's mouth and eyes, what has stayed with me is Hashim's gaze which to me seemed to be in the constant process of piercing mountains, a process only halted when he erupts in laughter and his amazing toothpaste ad smile makes everything around him light up. Then, it is impossible to forget Diego's face, which makes me smile every time I think of it, every time

I think of him, actually, as I have genuinely never met an adult whose face and eyes maintained so much of the kindness and beauty of childhood in it. Finally, I cannot forget the first moment I heard Isshaq speak, as the way he talks awoke the memory of cherished friends, conversations, smells, and reminded me of so many familiar moments, that I thought I had known him forever. Although I also really remember Diego and Hashim's voice, I don't think I will ever be able to forget Isshaq's voice, his way of articulating, the way he moves his hands and looks and the warm, brown and grey colours he brings to my mind. Being political, being human, would have been nothing without the stories of Felipe, his hopes, dreams and good, good, good brain and heart. It would have been nothing without Adam and his big smile, Mina and his energy, Samu and his beautiful face. It would have been nothing without so many people to look at, voices and words to listen to. That is the main thing that stayed with me, the specific people I saw and heard, their clashing hopes, ambitions, dreams, creating a very specific eruption of outcomes with contrasting directions — so realistic in a

non-consensus world — as the background.

Extending the feeling of this week should be by taking the risk to be more political, to try to switch perspectives even more, to not be afraid to disrupt more, in gentle ways, full of thought and empathy. I thank all I have and my eyes for having been there, and I thank all of you for having added your stories to mine and having become a part of who I feel to be.

Daphne Gambieraki







In the days following the workshop I've revisited a moment that occurred during the plenary session on Day 3, Thursday 7 April at the squat in Amsterdam. Yonas and Nasir from We Are Here were leading a session titled 'The Right to be Political' alongside John Jordan from the Laboratory for Insurrectionary Imagination, when a man in the audience who had not attended any of the previous sessions raised an issue that I'm sure had crossed many attendees' minds: Why were there no women representatives of the proposed party? I have since learned that this was Quinsy Gario, the founder of the Zwarte Piet is Racisme campaign. Quinsy's colleague, Flavia Dzodan, an Amsterdam-based writer, extended this query by pointedly asking: 'What role will women play in the party?' 'Why are they not here in the workshop?' Perhaps Yonas and Nasir were caught off guard, as they seemed to fumble for a suitable answer. 'The women are shy.' 'It is a cultural issue.' 'We Are Here are 90 percent men.' As I recall, the discussion ping-ponged for a while before Maria Hlavajova, founder and curator of BAK, put forth a resolution. She suggested that regardless of We Are Here having no

women representatives as yet, this did not preclude the party from being forthrightly feminist. Imagine Osman or another representative of the collective launching the party by declaring ‘We Are Here is a feminist party.’ Now, that would be a party that even Maria could join!

The uneasiness of this moment made it clear why a We Are Here party might be useful, as it had now become possible to (self-)critique the proposed organisation in its formative stages. We Are Here often emphasised that the party would be a social organisation open to all who felt disenfranchised by regular party politics, not only refugees. If so, then it must continue to confront the problems of representation and address the concerns of its supporters and potential members. Such criticisms should not be taken as attacks that expose the cracks in the edifice of the popular front, but rather confrontations that open up the movement to the promise of inclusiveness by engaging in necessary debates.

I do not live in the Netherlands, so I was curious as to

how a group of undocumented migrants were even able to consider forming a political party, let alone engage an art institution to workshop the process. Such a level of organisation and widespread support is unfathomable for the communities I have encountered in Bangkok and Sydney, whose conditions of stay are precarious at best. For many of these refugees, visibly critiquing the current system would compromise their chances of resettlement. Could a political party led by refugees in the Netherlands, with its culture of liberal public debate, be something they could also join? Might it provide for them a forum in which their concerns could also be aired and tools with which they could develop their own organisations?


So, to answer your question about how I would extend the practice of the Here We Are Akademie, my immediate response is “to say with care”. What I found most beneficial about our ‘vocabulary group’ was its inclination to slow things down and to think carefully about the language being used; to discuss our different understandings of these words and to be sensitive to the modes of power, hierar-

chies and divisions they revealed. Refugee, citizen, occupation, responsibility. By deconstructing these words we assigned them new associations and redeployed them with an expanded appreciation of the varied experiences, relations and people they describe. As we were engaged in a task of not only deconstructing but decolonizing language, I wanted to ask why all the words we unpacked were in English. Why did we not include words from Arabic, another language common amongst the group, or Dutch? Perhaps we could have invented new terms to include in a dictionary for our political praxes? If the party continues to develop, as something social and inclusive arising from We Are Here and Here We Are, then I think we also ought to debate, deconstruct and decolonize what it is we mean by 'We.'

Sumugan Sivanesan

day 04

POLITICAL PRAXES

- 
- **AUTONOMY**: quit agendas decided just by someone else, take the responsibility of my own activities
 - **LEGACY**: follow, connect and act with whom/what I care most as a human being
 - **UNDERSTANDING**: move physically and internally in order to get a deeper knowledge of reality
 - **RE-TOOL/RE-SKILL**: use and re-adapt expertises to support and construct possibilities, services, etc.
 - **CHALLENGE PARENTS/FAMILY**: political and cultural refusal
 - **SPEAKING**: challenge the leaders and supporters of destructive/controlling policies and goals
 - **SENSE OF SURVIVAL**: react in order to keep alive, safe and with possibilities to re-settle
 - **INFORMATION**: get and learn about the bureaucratic system (and the tricks behind) that can host you
 - **PERSEVERANCE**: keep on working and advocate for the cause that moved you displaced
 - **EMPOWERMENT/LEARN**: learn the tools and languages able to make your efforts work and evolve

ARTS & CRAFTS

DEMANDS:

- **POWER OF CHOICE**: be prepared to liberate yourself from traditional beliefs and follow your tensions (to freedom), without fixed destinations
- **RISK**: Using and exploit your privileges in order other people can benefit
- **REFUSE**: education in behaviour and beliefs, veneration
- **QUESTION**: images that embody power institutions
- **RE-BUILD**: the broken relations under a different perspective
- **CHANGE**: bring change inside of you
be prepared for something unavoidable

The 3rd day we offered a cue to work on: a letter addressed to refugees that caught Isshaq's attention for the form used by the writer. By starting with "Dear refugee" and by using other expressions stating complete unawareness not only about what a palestinian refugee is (but one could easily extend this geographical specificity) but also a certain naivety, we ran through the letter analyzing and deconstructing row by row, word by word. This was meant not as a destructive approach, rather to better understand the gap between people, isolated in a "knowledge bubble", and refugees, politically and physically constrained. Indeed, while deconstructing was pretty easy and precise, the group didn't succeed in offering a propo- sitive field of confrontation, that we identified under the realm of *responsibility*. It was rather literally stucked in un- derstanding what *responsibility* is at large.

This led us the 4th day to jump directly into that movement pressing any person in struggle, or in the will of change, to recognize thoughts and actions to free oneself from op- pression or uncomfortable situations. And *political praxes* were the right bond of *action* and *thinking* able to describe

concretely, pragmatically through personal stories, what it means to become a political agent of transformation in a society, would it be a refugee or a citizen.

Though the request was initially welcomed with suspiciousness, for most of the refugees have hardship or confidentiality to keep private, the surprise came from Mina, maybe the most suspicious amongst the participants because he is one of the most motivated to be careful. He started to tell us where his change come from, a very personal tale that briefly expanded like a wave the other refugees' availability to open themselves and explain us how they found, or built, their capabilities and skills to support their choice in refusing the existing.

These praxes are collected, synthesized from our direct experiences, in the board we inscribed collectively, while the details remain private in the participants' inner-selves. But worth a share is the fact that the "non-refugee" participants started feeling shy and limiting their tales since they had not such difficult lives. Sensitively, Isshaq suggested to take a 5 minutes break to avoid a direct comparison

between the two kind of “heritage” but, most surprisingly, Hashim and Adam reacted claiming: “Why? We have a lot of work to do... don’t waste time!”

Any people’s story should be worth to be listened to. No matter how easy or difficult a person’s life could appear. In fact we were not looking for comparisons since all of us traveled and wanted to be on that table just seeking for understanding, attempting for changes.

Diego Segatto





• INVENT: Solutions to address attention towards an issue, even by

↳ CONNECTING: people and resources

• FORESEE: uncomfortable and unethical futures

My participation in the *Here We Are Academy* has happened for a number of reasons. On the level of the personal interests, I temporarily needed to escape the everyday life that is filled with violence and oppression, which people and I in Beit Jibrin refugee camp are subject to by the Israeli settler colonialism. A reality that lacks the freedom of movement that had me imagine the Netherlands the place in which can actually compensate for this need as often friends suggested it to be, away from the reality of oppression, racism and rejection of others! Nevertheless, the main reason was due to an invitation that was forwarded from BAK for Campus in Camps; a program that I am part of. In this context, my participation came within a range of responsibilities, sharing and exchanging the experience of Campus in Camps with the participants of the gathering.

My desire from this participation was simply to share my story and the experience of the Palestinian refugees struggle. However, in parallel to that, I wanted to enjoy the process of working together with other refugees and students and to learn from their experience. Moreover, I wanted to

pass on the experience of the “Collective Dictionary” of the Campus in Camps program, which is centered on the idea of giving definition to terms and vocabularies but based on personal experience and stories. Thereby, with the support of my colleague and friend Diego Segatto we enjoyed the challenge to work in the setting of Mujawara – being part of a group – for five days workshop entitled *Future Vocabularies* that I like to call “future lesson stories”. We started a beautiful and extremely important learning journey together and it was very much needed, not only in the Netherlands but in so many other places. The experience triggered some thoughts – some good, some worrying – which are important to talk about in thinking our way into the future. What we were engaged in is a meaningful experiment in identifying ourselves and our environment as subjects of knowledge. Thus, we need to be as honest and as clear as possible.

My experience in the *Future vocabularies* group was very challenging, with mixed emotions and contradictions, but also filled with strengths and hopes. I could not help

but think while listening to the “We Are Here” individual stories and presentation and imagine the situation of my grandparents when they were forced to leave their places of origin due to the crime conducted against them in 1948 known as *Nakba*, which made them refugees. Having to live a similar reality to that We Are Here members are facing in the Netherlands today, starting from nothing after losing all that they have once enjoyed and entering a state of a struggle of establishing a new life fighting for recognition, rights and dignity.

I felt that it was not enough to listen to their experiences, but felt the need to challenge them and be critical. This is usually the way I come to connect with people. But this reality in context of today was in fact very complicated and conflicted. Simply because I am usually in their position when I am back home in the refugee camp. It is part of my work and life that I meet with people from other states and nations who come to visit refugee camps in the West Bank. I am the one who usually tells his story and the story of my people and the camp. This time, I am the white

person who comes to visit the camp, but here in the Netherlands visiting other refugees! How would I react to an outsider who comes to challenge me and is critical about my life and spaces I live within?

The experience of Campus in Camps over the past years has made a profound impact on the way I think and live. It has been a difficult process of “un-learning” but at the same time it has generated the space to be able to build my own forms of representation. It has challenged many aspects of my life, and enabled me to question myself and not take anything for granted. It gave me a language to critically understand what a camp is today; what it means to be a refugee today; how we want to perceive ourselves and how we want to be perceived by others. It gave me the critical tools to reflect upon, and understand the strong existing political and social life in which can help in articulating and shaping the future of ours. But to what extent can I really be that person in front of powerful but cruel living reality that members of the We Are Here are subject to in their daily life in the Netherlands?!

I tried several times to draw attention to the different understandings of the concept of refugee and the way we understand and articulate our future, whether as individual or as collective. The Palestinian refugees are one of the oldest in history. Over the past 68 years of living in exile, a new culture has emerged. My generation today does not only determine the right of return but also try to imagine a political community beyond the idea of a nation state away from categories such as public and private. We – Palestinian refugees- simply might not want to normalize our existence and become citizens but rather search for new possibilities of living. I, for example, am not willing to give up on the camp but rather wish to enhance its experience and give it the right recognitions for its historic achievements. It is not a place infected with disease but rather a space of possibilities, neither refugees are sick people, but rather active socially and politically.

On the other hand, the “We Are Here” members strive for recognition from the state of the Netherlands and their desire to be integrated within the Dutch society and become citizens had me think more about our differences

as refugees but at the same time aware of our similarities in many ways. The relationship between the members of the We Are Here and their “supporters” from the Dutch society caught my attention. This relation, I question, was it based on the necessity for helping the refugees and within the context of humanitarian help? Growing up as a Palestinian refugee I have been at the receiving end of developing projects all my life. I have been clothed, fed, educated and entertained at the mercy of international charity organizations. As a child, I experienced being the object of the pity of international visitors who came to tour the refugee camps in the West Bank in order to witness the plight of Palestinian refugees. I witnessed how I and my friends were turned into passive recipients of international charity projects. Growing up, I also experienced how we all gradually came to internalize and repeat this narrative of victimization. This is extremely costly and counterproductive to building a strong, self-sustainable future.

My background has given me a critical perspective on development and a desire to challenge the dominant de-

velopment narrative and its linkage of poverty with victimization. A perspective that I came to think about in the context of the reality of We Are Here members in the Netherlands today! A narrative that I once again came to question through my observation of the relationship between the We Are Here members and their supporters from the Dutch society!

One of the most important aspects for me has been the possibility to think about my past and my future at the same time. As a refugee I carry a traumatic past that is part of my identity but that I have to be able to incorporate into my future. However, in contrast to the We Are Here members, my refugee status was something I have inherited as the son of refugee parents who had inherited it from their parents as well. I did not need to leave from one place to another, neither experience that suffering to become a refugee, but was rather born a refugee in a refugee camp. It was at this stage that I start to think more about our differences as refugees but at the same time aware of our similarities in many ways.

Thinking dialectically, I haven't forgotten for a second about the conditions that brought me to the Netherlands, and their forced situation of coming here. We are both in a place that I came to enjoy, but they found it oppressing them! Hashim Gamal, a 33 years old Sudanese from West Sudan who came to the Netherlands seeking refuge narrated his story to us:

«I was born in West Sudan in a dry place called Darfur. I joined school when I was five years old. At the same time, I used to attend a different type of schooling that we call Khalwa or Kattab, where I received my Quran – Muslims holy book - education. I was not excited about school and education, so I would always go the Darfur Market to make money. Eventually, I quit school and shifted my life to making business at the Market. During that time I was the happiest person. I had enough energy to destroy a mountain. I grew up doing amazing things. I would ride my horse together with my friend and go hunting for deer until we reach Center Africa and beyond.

In 2003, the civil war broke-out in Darfur. In Darfur there exist more than fifty tribes. I come from the Arab tribe, known as Arabish whom are the minority. Due to the civil war, I ended up in a position where the situation enforced me to carry weapon; something I have rejected to take part in. It simply did not make sense at all. To fight and kill other people because they don't speak the language I speak! I tried to change my own people by addressing these thoughts and questions but failed. My refusal to take part in the civil war was faced with an arrest, punishment and eventually escaped to Europe. I thought that by coming to Europe I will be safe and welcomed. I thought I would no longer be forced to engage with war. Unfortunately I was mistaken. What I could not find in Sudan, I could not find it here in Europe neither».

While struggling with significant questions to understand the dynamic of reality, it is through Hashim and Adams' daily struggle and story that I came to develop a perspective on the social and political life they live. A perspec-

tive that is authentically their own, and derived from the very history and reality of themselves. A perspective that demonstrates the power of thought to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future. I was not sure if it was possible to develop these things if I was not physically connected with them! I found it essential to see their faces' expressions, experience the intimate relation from close distance in an honest and enthusiastic environment, which dismantled individuals' privileges and humbled us all in front of their powerful stories.

Isshaq Al-Barbary





day 05

PARTY

- IN WHICH EXTENT IS THERE ACTUALLY AN AGREEMENT AMONGST REFUGEE?
- WILL IT BE AN ACTION AS A SYMBOLICAL ACT? SOMETHING THEATER ORIENTED?
- WHAT WILL BE THE STRUCTURE/ORGANIZATION?
↳ OVER TIME...
- WHAT WILL BE THE AGENDA IN FULL RANGE?
EXTENT
- CAN IT BE TRANSNATIONAL?
- CAN WE INSIST ON THE PARADOX?
↓
- LOGO/NO LOGO: WHICH KIND OF IMAGE?

PARTY

- HOW TO KEEP UP TRUST IN THE ORGANIZATION?
- HOW TO ACT OUTSIDE OF COLONIZED LANGUAGE AND METHODS?
- CAN IT CHALLENGE THE DELEGATION SYSTEM?
↓
OF THE ELECTED
- WILL IT REPRESENT JUST REFUGEES?
↳ AND JUST FROM WE ARE HERE

POSITION VOICE COMMON
STAND REPRESENTATIVES
MOVEMENT COOPERATIVE

* model of the
Compositionalist part

- WILL IT BE READY TO SPEAK ABOUT AND FOR THE MANY CASES?
- WILL IT BE LEADED/ REPRESENTED JUST BY ONE PERSONS?
- CAN IT PRESERVE AND EXPAND THE ATMOSPHERE AND OPENESS OF THESE DAYS, AS A PRESENCE IN THE TERRITORY?

→ HOW TO BRING BACK VISIBILITY AND MAKE IT SAFE, PERMANENT, RECOGNIZED, IN THE PUBLIC.

- ARE WE READY TO MAKE OTHER PEOPLE READY?

E?

Thinking and Acting with We Are Here

We, participants in the Here We Are Academy workshop on “vocabularies,” spent a good amount of time discussing what it might mean to think and act with We Are Here. A basic principle of the Here We Are Academy was: “nothing about us without us.” However, this crucial principle is formulated only negatively. In hindsight, I believe that much of what we attempted to do in the workshop was to come up with a “positive” version of the principle, that is, to think a “*with We Are Here*” as an alternative to an “*about We Are Here without We Are Here*.”

Note that I’m just writing “a *with We Are Here*,” not “an *about We Are Here with We Are Here*,” or “an *about We Are Here by We Are Here*,” because the word “about” would suggest that the only concern of the Here We Are Academy was the *representation* of We Are Here. However, saying and demonstrating We Are Here seems first of all a political-existential claim, not primarily to representation of a “we,” but to equal participation in a “here.”

We Are Here is the name of a collective founded in Amsterdam in 2012. Their manifesto puts it as follows: “We are ‘We Are Here’—a collective of refugees whose asylum requests in the Netherlands have been rejected, but who cannot return to our countries of origin.”¹ Living in the Netherlands without documentation, they had become targets of the Dutch state’s so-called *ontmoedigingsbeleid* (“discouragement policy”), whose stated purpose is twofold: to make the lives of undocumented people so difficult that they will find some way to “return” to their country or region of “origin” on their own, and to discourage others from coming to the Netherlands in the first place. Initiated in the 1990s with the 1991 linking of social security numbers to residency status, which made it impossible for undocumented people to work legally, the 1993 Compulsory Identification Act, and the 1998 *Koppelingswet* (“Linkage Act”) that links the ability to enroll in

1 — “We Are Here Manifesto,” in *New World Academy Reader #2: Collective Struggle of Refugees. Lost. In Between. Together*. Ed. Jonas Staal in dialogue with We Are Here. Published by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2013, 22-23.

Full text available at www.bak-utrecht.nl.



health insurance plans and claim social benefits to legal residency, the discouragement policy, among many other things, also seeks to prevent unrecognized refugees from moving freely (particularly through frequent detention: between 1980 and 2006, the number of cells for the detention of aliens exploded from 45 to 3,954)² and from tak-

2 — To be precise, the number went up from 45 cells for 500 detainees to 3,954 cells for 12,480 detainees. See Martijn Stronks, “The Paradox of Visible Illegality: A Brief History of Dutch Migration Control,” trans. Renée in der Maur, in *New World Academy Reader #2*, op. cit., 65-76.

ing shelter (in 2007, the Secretary of Justice concluded an agreement with the Association of Dutch Municipalities that tied a one-time amnesty that gave legal residency to a limited group of undocumented people to a stipulation that municipalities would stop providing emergency shelter to undocumented adults; furthermore, the 2010 Squatting Law made squatting a criminal offense). The primary purpose of We Are Here appeared most clearly in the plenary sessions at the beginning of each day of the Academy, when We Are Here members seated throughout the room would complement the presenters in their responses to questions from other participants: a beautiful demonstration and production of collective knowledge. As it appeared in those sessions, the first purpose of the collective is for its members to navigate, circumvent, survive, and confront the state's discouragement policies together, sharing shelter, food, and intricate knowledge of the constantly changing and often arbitrarily applied legal procedures and administrative measures, and giving each other courage.

But We Are Here is not only the name of the collective: it

is also an assertion, a claim, a demonstration. The point of saying We Are Here, and of showing it through acts of gathering in assemblies, demonstrations, and abandoned buildings reclaimed for shelter, is for refugees whose presence has been delegitimized by the Dutch state to demonstrate that they are in fact present, that their presence cannot be dismissed as individual, exceptional, and temporary “problems” that will all ultimately be “resolved” through deportation, and that they can speak and act in meaningful ways, both individually and as a collective.

So what exactly does this demonstration of We Are Here mean? Everything hinges, it would seem, on the meaning of the word “here” in this demonstration. It would seem that saying and demonstrating We Are Here exposes the gap between a “here” understood solely as the juridical and administrative space governed by the Dutch state, whose laws, procedures, and decisions produce the “illegality” of the members of the collective, and a “here” understood as the common space where We Are Here members live and work and talk and act together with anyone else who is here. The task of thinking and acting with We

Are Here seems to be to transform the first “here” into the second “here,” to transform the bordered territory over which the sovereign Dutch nation-state claims exclusive jurisdiction in the name of a “we” that is primarily defined by birthright (the Dutch national community), into a common space for living, working, speaking, and acting of a “we” that includes anyone who is here.

What exactly such a transformation might look like is of course a huge question that requires continual reflection and experimentation. It is also a very urgent question, and thinking and acting with We Are Here requires responsiveness to the urgency of the situation of its members. Therefore, it is not enough to celebrate We Are Here for already instantiating the second, inclusive, common “here.” It is true that the Here We Are Academy did instantiate such a space in important ways, like many other We Are Here initiatives. Hosted partly in an abandoned Amsterdam office building recently squatted to provide shelter for part of the collective and named “Vluchtmaat” (“flight mate,” playing on the name of the neighboring construction materials

retail store Bouwmaat)³ and in basis voor actuele kunst (BAK), a space for art and politics in Utrecht, the Academy temporarily created a common space for sustained thinking, listening, discussing, imagining, working, eating, and planning with We Are Here. But for those of us who are not refugees—I'm not—it is easy to forget the extent to which the legal exclusions and administrative powers of the state's discouragement policies, as well as the racism of anti-refugee discourses in politics, in the media, and on the street, undermine both We Are Here members' day-to-day existence and their ability to plan their lives. Thus, it is important to remember that the squat that became such an exhilarating space for discussion and conviviality also had no heat, and that it was only a matter of unpredictable time before the group would be put out on the

3 — The way in which We Are Here has named the numerous squats all over Amsterdam where they have taken shelter, by adding the word *vlucht* (flight) to the building's former name or function—Vluchtkerk (Flight Church), Vluchtgarage, Vluchtgemeente (Flight Municipality, in a former district council office), Vluchtmarkt, Vluchtschool, Vluchtmandela (after the neighboring Nelson Mandela Park), to name only a few—is an integral part of their ongoing demonstration.

street again, as had already happened dozens of times over the past four years.⁴

It is also not enough to celebrate We Are Here's "insurrectionary imagination." The first moment of tension that I witnessed during the Academy occurred during a plenary session at the beginning of the third day, when an invited guest speaker gave a presentation on creating "new forms of disobedience" through art. The speaker argued that what makes people want to change things is not the truth, but desire, and that activating desire for change requires "thinking theatrically." His myriad examples, shown through photos and videos projected on a screen, included a techno street party/occupation of a West-London highway that involved drilling holes and planting trees in the asphalt; "electoral guerilla theater" parodying parliamentary elections such as Michael Moore's campaign to run a ficus for Congress in the U.S.;

4 — A couple of weeks after the end of the Academy, on April 19, 2016, the group did manage to reach an agreement with the owner of the building, allowing them to stay there for two years. The agreement was brokered by a new foundation called Noodzaak (necessity).

a cleverly montaged web video ridiculing Australian far-right politician Pauline Hanson; and the campaign to get oil money out of art sponsorship by pouring oil over activists in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, covering the floor with charcoal writings warning against climate change, and carrying a 16-meter turbine blade into the museum as a "donation." In this sequence of recent activist performances, the speaker also included a photograph from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, showing a young black man sitting in a chair with two black men blowing cigarette smoke in his face. He explained that the men were "rehearsing" for taking a seat in a soda bar reserved for white people, anticipating that white people might blow cigarette smoke in their face in order to force them to leave. At this point, an audience member interrupted the presentation, objecting that he was trivializing the Civil Rights Movement, and that he should be particularly careful in his interpretation of such photographs considering that he was a white man. Recalling that people risked their lives for the movement, she suggested that the actions of Civil Rights Movement activists

should not be reduced to theatrical performances. Indeed, while all the world may be a stage, We Are Here, like the Civil Rights Movement, is not a political prank, and its objective is not to “disobey,” “undermine,” or “sabotage” “the system.” If anything, saying and demonstrating We Are Here might be considered an act of civil disobedience rather than of disobedience as such, insofar as the members of We Are Here transgress a specific law openly and in concert with others, not to undermine the civil order but in order to transform it: their constructive orientation towards an inclusive “here” is essential.



However, it might be questioned whether “disobedience” is the right word for the primary “transgression” of the members of We Are Here: although their presence in the Netherlands constitutes a violation of Dutch administrative law, only the Dutch authorities consider this violation a matter of choice. Like the vast majority of Dutch nationals, who were simply born here, many refugees have never chosen to come to the Netherlands but were “thrown” here by contingent historical, political, economic circumstances, and they don’t believe they have a choice to leave the country where they have often lived for years, and “return” to war-torn countries like Somalia or Sudan where they also never chose to be born and which are definitely not their “home” countries (if the countries where they were born even still exist and have a minimally functioning government whose embassy or consulate is able and willing to provide them with travel documents). Nevertheless, it might be argued that what the We Are Here collective chooses to disobey is not the juridical command to leave but the unstated yet perhaps most forceful command of the state’s discouragement

policies: the command to be invisible.

The second moment of tension that I experienced occurred on the final day of the Academy. Our workshop had joined with two of the other workshops to discuss the draft of the speech that Osman, a charismatic founding member of We Are Here who frequently acts as a spokesperson for the collective, would give during the public session at the end of that day. It turned out that the idea of the speech was to launch a new political party with the name “We Are Here.” Anyone can found a political party in the Netherlands, but only Dutch nationals can vote for, and be elected to parliament. The question was: was founding a political party only intended to expose the inability of We Are Here members to be represented in the Dutch parliament, and thus to expose a democratic lack in the existing political system? The powerful symbol designed for the party during the Academy, an empty parliamentary seat, pointed in this direction. Or was the intention to actually found a political party that would *represent* people? Predictably, the latter option set off all the alarm bells among

many of the participants, some of whom had had especially bad experiences with political parties in countries like Italy or Palestine.

What was equally worrying to some was that the speech presented eleven articles that are filled with human rights language, which seems a significant departure from the initial manifesto. The initial manifesto primarily demanded *recognition* (“We are living in a political and legal vacuum—a vacuum that can only be filled by the recognition of our situation and our needs”) and grounded this demand in the political-existential fact that We Are Here is here; the final line reads: “We are here and we will remain here. Be with us.” By contrast, the speech primarily demands *rights*, and grounds this demand in a humanist essentialism. To me, the manifesto’s language of recognition seemed much more productive for concrete political transformation than the speech’s human rights language, which risks depoliticizing issues and leading We Are Here into the dead end of humanitarianism and NGO-ification. At the same time, however, the language of human rights is still dominant and could perhaps also be used strategically.

These enormous questions were left unresolved during the Academy. But it seemed that they point to a need of We Are Here, four years into their existence as a collective, to think and enact a political transformation that gives some *institutional* shape to the common space of what my favorite part of Osman’s speech called “inclusive democracy,” which would enable We Are Here members to make a home, work, learn, be heard, act in consequential ways, build a life. To figure out what such a transformation might mean, concretely, demands sustained thinking and acting with We Are Here.

Michiel Bot

POLITICAL

Collective Dictionary

CONTRIBUTORS

Isshaq Al-Barbary, Michiel Bot, Daphne Gambieraki, Diego Segatto,
Sumugan Sivanesan, Veronica Tello, Felipe Zapata Zuluaga

EDITORIAL COORDINATION

Diego Segatto

SUPPORT IN TEXT EDITING

Michiel Bot

BOOK DESIGN

Fabio Franz, Sara Pellegrini, Diego Segatto

EDITION

Printed in July 2016

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