

Bare Lives: A Conversation

English edited by Marion Claire Wasserman

On Feb 15th, 2017 Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (BN) and Solveig Helweg Ovesen (SO) joined up with Jonas Tinius (JT) for a conversation with Mario Rizzi (MR).

BN : Your title is a clear reference to the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Let's therefore begin with it. How does the notion of *bare life* relate to your show?

MR : Since many years my work has been connected with the idea of *bare lives*, with people that are subjected to forces that are beyond their control. No doubt, uprooting neoliberal forces are compromising the life of most of us, but more radically they collude with the condition of people being refugees. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt highlighted the phenomenon of the migration of displaced persons in Europe between the two World Wars. Seventy years later, the western democracies have still not adjusted to the conditions created by their own self-proclaimed privilege in the world as democracies, as polities promising »life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness« or »liberté, égalité, fraternité«. Refugees are people who are fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Because it is dangerous for them to return to their home countries, they need refuge elsewhere. But once they leave their homes, it is like they get divested of political status and reduced to *bare life*. And this *state of exception* becomes a chronic arrangement that remains continually outside the normal state of law. They have to pay with their bodies for the crisis, which is not their fault. A migrant occupies a precarious position even if her/his rights are guaranteed by EU citizenship, as s/he is perceived as belonging neither here nor there, which leads to a questioning of both the culture of origin,

and the newly encountered culture. Logically the question here is: »Who has the right to move?« Achille Mbembe has recently suggested that the government of human mobility might well be the most important problem to confront the world during the first half of the 21st century. Movement, literally and metaphorically speaking, is also one of the unifying themes of the exhibition *Bare Lives* (2017): the Syrian refugee Ekhlas Alhlwani moves to seek refuge with her children at Zaatari; the Tunisian activist Kauther Ayari inspires her fellow citizens to move towards democracy; the Yazidi women in the portraits of August 3rd resiliently move on with their lives notwithstanding Daesh's (the self-defined Islamic State) massacres, enslavements and humiliations. Coming back to the concept of *bare life* in my work, it became central since I first went to Palestine, and realized that it is possible for people to be obligated to live in a permanent condition of apartheid, in a condition marked by the absence of rights, a condition in which they are reduced to being *homo sacer*, somebody who can be killed by everyone. Actually, this is today the normal condition of human beings in many parts of the world; the exception has become the new normality.

BN : What becomes obvious in your films is an effort to expose certain humanitarian values. What I noticed, to put it differently, is that you don't build on certain sensations, which you find quite often when people work on states of exceptions and emergency. Because we tend as human beings to push things to the extreme to make things very obvious and to sensationalize people, but in your case you try to go the other way. You show some ...

MR : ... basic human values.

BN : How do you even get to that point, in your films and your work? These situations are intense, also as an observer –what does it mean for you to take on this role in such a state and such situations?

MR : Since the beginning, my research has taken the *other* as its pivotal theme. I am particularly interested in people from cultures others than my own, mostly from the Middle East. Getting back to Agamben, in his Remnants of Auschwitz, the central figure of the Muselmann is what best represents the condition of *bare life*, of the living dead, both bearing witness and being witnessed at one and the same time. I believe that in our contemporary world, not only in the extreme conditions of a Syrian refugee camp, Agamben's Muselmann becomes a Muslim. When I approach the Muslim world, I openly show my genuine curiosity but also investigate my intentions, as my priority is to be respectful of their lives. I do realize my privilege, of being a European, white, Christian, outsider, that is to say, someone that comes from a culture, which in most of these countries was involved in colonial projects. I try to erase presumptions, to become, step by step, more of an integrated insider. I can do this only by spending much time with the people with whom I work, being as close as possible to their everyday life, but also aware of the line between intimacy and privacy. I cultivate empathy for their lives, always careful not to exploit the trust they generously give me. I often feel uneasy, even disgusted, by the media approach to the refugees' tragedy. They indulge in creating monsters, instilling fears by stressing cultural or often religious differences, to reassure western audiences that their lives are better. By lacking real interest about those they approach, they seem to ignore their responsibility towards their audiences. Let me give you an example with reference to my film Al Intithar (2013). When I shot it, I was aware of my privileged condition, since I was allowed to live with Syrian refugees for seven weeks, in Zaatari Camp, which is close to the border between Jordan and Syria. I was there every day from early in the morning until late in the evening, only sleeping outside in a nearby village. Often I questioned how international media could claim to report the real condition of the refugees when they were never spending more than three hours in the camp, always escorted to the same tents down the main shopping high street, which the refugees named »Shams-Élysée«.

SO : It is interesting to see that the child is rather well in Al Intithar. Judging from my values, I get the sense that she is a good mother. You still somehow sense the constant state of depression among some male refugees in the camp. Why did you choose to focus on the mother?

MR : First of all, 80% of the people in this camp are women and children. This is logical after all as men usually remain to fight

BN : ... or they go abroad.

MR : Exactly! When I filmed Al Intithar at the end of 2012, most of the men were staying behind to fight in their country, and those who were in the camp felt a great sense of frustration, as if they had shirked their responsibility to defend their *bayt* (home). The most important reason why the protagonists of my film are women is that without them there would be no living conditions in the camp. Women were able to think about everyday matters, the real necessities of the family, what to eat the next day, how to dress their kids, how to avoid risks for their family. Ekhlas could keep her family together through their story, through the family spirit that she, as a woman, was sustaining, even in those prohibitive conditions, living in an anonymous tent in the midst of strangers. We might even say that the life of the camp further revealed the cohesion of their family nucleus. Women, apart from caring for the family, grant themselves more space for culture, for civic commitment, precisely the aspects I am most interested in exploring when I try to approach and enter into an environment that is not my own. I have always been aware of this in different contexts and latitudes. For example, two years after Gezi Park Resistance in Turkey I filmed The Outsider (2015), exploring the new forms of public agency and performative action and the social contract established in the Gezi community. Also in Gezi Park, women were the majority and the most creative activists in defying political authoritarianism and rejecting neo-capitalism.



BN : Notwithstanding this, women are often written out of the narrative!

MR : I totally agree with you. Kauther Ayari, the protagonist of my film *Kauther* (2014), is certainly a good example of the way a woman can be totally written out of the narrative, as you say. In fact, in contrast to western biased narratives, women have been at the forefront of Middle East revolutions and the most active organizers and leaders, both on and offline, since the early days of the so-called *Arab Spring*. And Kauther was the first activist to make an impassioned speech to the crowd in Tunis at the start of the Tunisian revolution, urging freedom and social justice, six days before the fall of the dictator Ben Ali. Control over what was happening at Tunis was fundamental for Ben Ali. The movements against him had already begun some years earlier, in the south of the country, in the mining district of Gafsa, with a general strike that involved the whole population for six months in 2008. But the

capital had always been protected against demonstrations, using force. At the start of January 2010, on the other hand, the situation collapsed, and a group of about 150 activists gathered in Place Mohammed Ali, in Tunis, in front of the trade union building, surrounded by an impressive number of policemen. They protested about the lack of jobs, rising prices, corruption and the indifference of the authorities to the state of things. The president of the union came out and tried to disperse the crowd, saying that the dictator would make concessions if they would return to their homes; otherwise, the demonstration would be broken up by force. At that point, Kauther Ayari began to speak and urged everyone to continue the struggle, also addressing the policemen, saying that the cause of the demonstrators was also their cause, that they all had children who had no bread. This was the detonator of the revolution. The crowd moved to Avenue Bourghiba, growing larger, and a few days later the dictator was forced to leave. As Kauther says in the film, the people who took to the streets in those days were not women wearing veils and bearded men. It was a lay movement, of the left, in which members of the Muslim Brotherhood were not involved. In the months to follow, however, things moved in a different direction and Kauther, disappointed by the return to power of the usual figures, and by the religious drift, decided to return home, to stop her activism. Today she has four children—at the time she had just one—and lives in the poorest neighborhood of Tunis. She has been completely forgotten, even by the international press, which when it wants to talk about the start of the revolution seeks out more political personalities, mostly men, who were not active in the revolution like Kauther, but have been able to shape their image through the social media. I came across her after a two-month in-depth research on this topic, when I heard about her story from other Tunisian activists and obviously not from the media.

BN : Can you tell us something about the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani and the way he has influenced your work, since I know you are preparing a film on him and particularly

on the life of his wife? I am particularly interested to hear more about the beautiful example you gave of the light, the sun coming into the palace. It is a story of people breaking down walls to be able to organize themselves. This is basically what you see in Al Intithar, this capacity to build structures. These kids, these women build new social structures. As part of this, what is the role Kanafani's wife plays in organizing these pedagogic structures, such as kindergartens, in Palestinian camps?

MR : Ghassan Kanafani was one of the most important Palestinian novelists. He was born in 1936, killed in 1972 in Beirut by the Mossad. He was a leading member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine but he was a writer, a theoretician, not a fighter. His main idea was that nothing can change if it doesn't come from the bottom, from the people. The fairy tale you refer to is called *The Little Lantern*. Every year Kanafani would write and illustrate a book for his niece Lamis on her birthday. *The Little Lantern* tells of a princess whose father died leaving his daughter a will in which he stated that she would become a queen only if she was able »to bring the sun into the palace«. She searches ways without success until an old man with a little lantern comes to the palace asking to meet her. The guards send him away but the princess asks the guards to find him. In order to let all the men with a little lantern enter the palace, the princess tears down its high walls. This eventually results in bringing the strong rays of the sun inside the palace. My next film will start from this fairy tale to focus on Anni Kanafani, his Danish wife, who has spent her life creating kindergarten in many Palestinian camps of Lebanon, remembering that also for Ghassan education meant awareness and empowerment and that a new class of Palestinian citizens can be formed, notwithstanding their enduring the *state of exception* in the camps. Anni Kanafani was 26 years old when she first met Ghassan. After one month they married: it is a wonderful story of love, engagement and commitment. But we are not to forget that this idea of education from the bottom up isn't only developed in Lebanese camps. Think for instance

about the *Freedom Theatre*, a Palestinian community-based school of theatre in Jenin refugee camp, initiated by a Jewish woman, Arna Mer Khamis, to empower Palestinian kids by allowing them to act out their anger. This theatre still exists today and it is the main cultural centre in Jenin camp. This pedagogical approach, which works by rejecting existing power structures to find new ways of solidarity, is one that functions in a non-colonial way and builds a new class of people through education. This is what the tomorrow will be, because it is about the organization of the now. They are the new citizens, the new Syrians, the new Palestinians. If we refer again to Hannah Arendt, the refugees are the first citizens of the society of tomorrow.

BN : I would like to ask you about documentation as an artistic model and process. How do you find poetry in that?

MR : I think the role of the artist in a period of cultural and social crisis is not to predict the future or to indulge in purely aesthetic research, but to interpret things, to read the present, and, in this perspective, the idea of *documenting* is certainly a major stimulus. Not in the sense of reporting reality, but of its deconstruction, making it incoherent, and then restructuring it to see what happens and if the process can help us to understand the hidden or less evident parts. It is a work of visual research, also aesthetic, of course, but with an aspect of social responsibility, of engagement, because I think it is intolerable for an artist to live far from the world, without paying attention to the present, without contributing to change, also in semantic terms. My works present fragments of very personal stories, intimate narratives that do not attempt to be complete, but instead offer a moment of empathy between the audience and my characters, giving the latter the chance to represent themselves, also through the filter of my gaze. If we talk about film languages, I don't think my work can be considered documentary in the narrow sense, and I say this without any prejudice regarding documentaries. I do film the real and I do not create situations of fiction, but for me the real is a starting point to create new narratives

that certainly reflect the story of my protagonists, but also take on a symbolic value that is not necessarily confined to the events of their lives. I love reality because it is much richer than any narrative structure I could create *a priori*, offering infinite facets to analyze and interpret. It creates a *contemporary* condition that escapes from being only contemporary and tries to take on a universal value. It is not up to me to say if it succeeds or not. Of course the story I build also becomes autobiographical, because, like it or not, it reflects me, my passions and curiosities. A consequence of my approach to reality is that often not knowing the language is an advantage. When I film, in fact, and I understand what the people I am filming are saying, it comes naturally to focus on the meaning, while if I do not understand, I can concentrate on body language, human relations, psychological nuances. I too am amazed sometimes by how I happen to focus my attention on important and meaningful moments of the action in a totally instinctive way. I am convinced that if I were to pay attention only to the verbal language, I would be led to neglect aspects that arise as an unexpected, sudden gift in my attempt to get closer to my subjects, to understand what is there between the lines, not just the language of words, but also that of emotions. A great Brazilian documentary filmmaker, Eduardo Coutinho, who always supported me, wrote that I know how to make interesting films only when I do not know the language of my subjects.

SO : We can relate your description of this practice concretely to the photographs which will be exhibited here in Galerie Wedding: August 3rd, for which you have selected five images that will be shown on paper, and Bare Lives, an 80-photo slideshow with images of informal camps in Idomeni and an established Yazidi IDP (internally displaced people) camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. Could you tell us more about how you approached this series, in particular the portraits of Yazidi women?

MR : We all know the tragic stories of Yazidi women. When Daesh occupied Sinjar in 2014, the northern Iraqi region where this little ethnic community lived, most men were killed, 5000 to be precise,

and many women who failed to escape were kidnapped. When we speak about them or look at their portraits, we are unconsciously tempted to frame them again through the sensational idea that they may have been traded as sex slaves, another act of violence against them. I decided to live in a Yazidi camp, as I wanted to learn their culture, their traditions, their dreams. I was very impressed by the resilience of these women, and by their modesty. They are powerful, hieratic and sublime, as the events they went through empowered their spirit and enhanced the grace of their femininity. That's the way I want to present them in the gallery. One of the photographs on paper is an image of tents in the same Yazidi camp. August 3rd, 2014, the day of Daesh's invasion is marked on one of them. Marking is a form of writing history and remaining united with the other members of the community. It is a permanent tattoo that casts out the fears of the past, as it constantly affirms that you are still standing. Yazidis state that they suffered 72 massacres in their recent history. The date of the last one is marked as a historical date for the entire community, and of course on individual bodies, by sovereign violence. The photographs taken in Idomeni, on the Greek-Macedonian border, in spring 2016, are very different from those taken in Iraqi Kurdistan. Here, the conditions of life were even more precarious, no international organization was allowed to formally support or structure this camp because the European Union leaders had proclaimed the closing of borders along this main migration route towards northern Europe. But people were still hopeful—that the word democracy still had meaning, and that they would continue their voyage towards a new life. These people still believed that their visions were wholly implementable. They had evaded registration on arrival in Greece (as the European Union law requires under the Dublin Regulation), even if it required burning off their own fingertips. Idomeni was like a stateless, lawless, homeless limbo, not here, not yet there, where their existence was suspended. The border never opened and they were forcefully evicted with the bulldozers of the police.

BN : I am forced to think about what power does to bodies, to

singular bodies, and to populations. This takes us to the idea of biopolitics as articulated by Foucault and Agamben. What does the power of sovereignty do to individual bodies and to collective groups of bodies? And not unrelated, what do other power structures, such as religious ones that inspire groups like Daesh, do to bodies? This seems especially pertinent in a situation in which sovereignty is a very complicated amalgam of religion and state power.

MR : The best way to deny someone is to deny their body. Every day we see more and more people killed in wars or refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea and it seems like their bodies do not matter. No mention of Hamid, Khalil or Fatima—we only count the numbers. The concept of the *state of exception* has often been discussed in relation to Nazism, totalitarianism and the concentration camps. We know what the power of sovereignty can do to collective groups of bodies. This *necropower* is today more widely exercised and in a more subtle and often subliminal way. It is like some individuals, or some classes of people, and some ethnic groups, are entitled to decide if, where, and how long other human beings are allowed to live and even their living conditions. We witness an unprecedented form of biopolitical government implementing various technologies of control to strategically subjugate and discipline through economic pressure. In his essay Necropolitics, Achille Mbembe considers the ways in which the political power, appealing to exception, the state of emergency and the »fight against terror« justifies the murdering of the enemy as its primary objective and theorizes that the sovereign power dictates who may live and who must die. This control presupposes the distribution of human species into categorical groups to establish a profound human divide between the chosen and the others. This is how Foucault labels the term *racism*. Coming to the second part of your question, I believe that in an ideal society religion and state power should be separate. By saying this, I'm not only referring to the societies in the Islamic world struggling to find new ways of articulating faith and pluralism, while their leaders use religion as

a tool to divide, control and rule with authoritarianism. When Trump bars refugees and citizens of Muslim countries from entering the USA, isn't he using religion in the same way as Erdogan does in Turkey? Enmity seems to have become the sacrament of our time. Religion is the primary base to unite people in moments when a state structure is weakening but it also serves to suppress freedom. First to recede are women's liberties by limiting their ways of living, their dress, their dignity. Women's bodies are always the first target of humiliation.

BN : Listening to you, I had to think of social death as well.

MR : I guess you refer to Orlando Patterson's studies on the nature of slavery and social death. Social death implies a loss of social identity, a loss of social connectedness and the disintegration of the body. Zygmunt Bauman, referring to the Holocaust, describes the exclusion of Jews as a process of social distancing, which begins with social segregation and ultimately leads to physical death. In a time when the exception has become the new normality, social death is the result of neoliberal policies that preserve a privilege by the dominant classes. The case of the Yazidi women, and that of the refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, are clear examples. But think also about the never-ending condition of occupation in Palestine and the effects on people's dignity. (Achille Mbembe refers to Gaza, the world's largest open-air prison, as »the normalization of abandonment«). Think about the actual annihilation of the opposition and of the Kurdish and Alevi population in Turkey or, even closer to us in Europe, about the huge number of illegal refugees, who have no right to health assistance, social benefits or even to a simple job. Actually, I have a little anecdote about this. In 2007, Dan Cameron invited me to the United States to create a new site-specific project for the exhibition Something from Nothing in the Contemporary Art Center of New Orleans. I decided to work with Latin American *ghost citizens*, who were actively rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. I employed them to reconstruct, refurbish and reactivate the previously flooded



restaurant of the museum with their photographs and recordings, upscaling it to a modern and efficient taqueria. Undocumented immigrants in the US were hired as cooks and waiters/waitresses, including a deejay from El Salvador. These illegal immigrants were not allowed to have a bank account, to rent a house on their name, to own a car or even have a driving license—now were employed through art and culture. And yet, without them New Orleans would still be wrecked and in ruins. They were absolutely invisible to the political power and even to the American citizens. Ironically, in those days a shirt was very popular on street stands with the acronym FEMA, which originally meant Federal Emergency Management Agency, now jokingly translated as Find Every Mexican Available. And now, by the way, these same *ghost citizens* are the ones who are most threatened by Donald Trump's anti-immigrant policies.

SO : Your work concentrates on collective memories and individual stories, often highlighting forgotten events. How important is oral history in your research?

MR : Your question refers to three different aspects of my work. I'll try to answer to all of them. Film has become my privileged medium probably because it allows me to focus on everyday stories, individual experiences, and personal memories. Projects begin with some preliminary research, but primarily through a direct relationship and an emotional interaction. I am particularly interested in the lives of unknown people, those forgotten people who make history without being mentioned in history books. I deconstruct these storylines and entangle them with each other. I feel the need to tell these stories, to create a narrative thread through these collected memories and to convey them to the spectator. In a talk about my work, a Turkish curator said that I am like one of these medieval Italian storytellers who traveled from city to city. I love this comparison. Knowing the *other* is a process of endless approximation, which never reaches an objective reality. Storytelling is my way of filling the gap.

The second part of my answer is about my *modus operandi*, as I often adopt an anthropological gaze and even employ methodologies, such as fieldwork, providing a kind of scientific approach. I seize any tool available to better understand the *other* and to build bridges between me and the people I am filming. I find that multi-disciplinary *contamination* enriches my work adding dimension and multiple perspectives. I am aware that my films can also be read from an anthropological and sociological perspective, maybe even a historical one. I am also aware that my early studies of psychology provide me unique tools to employ in my creative process. So I wouldn't disagree that my approach to art is not unlike that of an anthropologist. And currently anthropologists are also starting to explore new forms of visual research and representation beyond written texts. But there is a substantial difference between an artist and a scientist. A skilled anthropologist must remain impartial, listen, and stay in the background. An artist is free of these constraints. I use the registers and the methodologies, which are the most appropriate, both to respect the protagonists of my work and to construct my own narration. Within the work, I express empathy and consider people's stories a process not a product.

The first time I had to confront myself about my role as an artist was in 1999, as an artist in residence at The Fifth Season within a functioning psychiatric hospital near Utrecht, in the Netherlands. I elected to interact with the patients of the psychiatric judicial facility, the so-called TBS, i. e. those committed to involuntary treatment determined by the Ministry of Justice. Art therapists were also working in that pavilion. How was my work different? I soon discovered the distinction between the epistemological aspects of my work and the ontological ones, the embedded meaning. As an artist, I was free



to live with the patients, intimately sharing their activities and private moments. But I still was »the patient with the key«—I could choose when to leave. I realized that I would have never been able to portray their real selves. So I gave them disposable cameras with which they could decide what to do—they could sell, destroy or use them to photograph whatever they liked. They received all the photos back plus one, which was enlarged and framed, and a new disposable camera. Fifty-five photographs became a book, entitled *They tell me I am sick, but I function good*.

And finally, I will try to answer the third and most relevant part

of your question: about oral history itself. I am always aware of the exigency of people to tell their stories so that they are not forgotten. Somewhere I read that histories have to be told or they die, and if they die, we can't remember who we are or even why we are. The frenetic pace of contemporary life has left little room for oral history to be told. This is a great loss, as oral histories can provide insights not normally found in more traditional reviews. As an artist, I do believe I should contribute to preserving these stories. The forgotten story of Kauther Ayari in my 2014 film is a clear example. Three other works of mine consciously highlight oral histories. During summer 2003, I lived and traveled with the Roma of Albania throughout the country. In various occasions, storytellers were filmed and recorded in their native Romani language while narrating their *paramisa* (fairy tales). The Roma tell these stories to link the present to the past and to reflect their philosophy of life. *Paramisa* have a dramatic element of fantasy, and a bitter sense of reality. The resulting 10-screen video installation, *The Darker the Berry the Sweeter it is* (2003), was presented on the occasion of Tirana Biennial at the National Gallery (in the room reserved for the bust of the country's illustrious men) to comment on the oral tradition, values and customs of an ethnic group that has often been considered marginal, simultaneously creating an acute confrontation between official and officious history. Not to forget that the Roma are surely living a condition of *bare life* in our society and are often brought to the extreme of social death. Today, the Roma are one of the most marginalized groups in Europe and *Romaphobia* is on the rise. My film *impermanent* (2007), is another piece where oral history is an important component of the work. It was also the first film of mine that was shown at Berlin Film Festival in 2008. It consists of a long monologue, given directly to the camera over the course of a few days, by Ali Akilah, a 96-year-old Palestinian refugee living in Amman. With unconcealed intimacy and amazing irony, Ali tells about himself, his youth, his medical studies and the decisive moments in his life. He recalls fleeing from Lifta, in 1948, the Palestinian village whose area today corresponds to West and North Jerusalem, and from Qalqiliya, in the Occupied Territories,



in 1967. His personal story is also the story of Palestine, a story that many today wish to erase. While narrating with an incredibly charismatic voice, his gaze is out in the void, almost like watching the film of his life. His words are infused with a deep sense of uprootedness and impermanence. I already mentioned my film *The Outsider*, which delves into the social contract established in Gezi Park Resistance and particularly focuses on three civil rights movements: Northern Forests Defense, an environmentalist group; Kamp Armen, a non-violent occupation protecting an old Armenian orphanage; and the Istanbul's LGBTI community, which acquired a higher social visibility after Gezi. In 2015, while filming, I was fully aware that collecting their stories, and using activists' private footage of the 2013 events in my film, would preserve the story of a utopian civil movement, which could easily be removed from official history books. Current events in Turkey demonstrate that this is now happening.

JT : It sounds like sometimes you give away, or put aside,

your way of thinking to create a form of *tabula rasa*. What you describe is a form of unlearning.

MR : Yes, it is precisely a form of unlearning, of giving away and being in a listening mood. Trying to understand what is there that I wouldn't otherwise be able to understand, and finding the way to better walk in somebody else's shoes. Unlearning interestingly doesn't mean that I'm losing something. It is absolutely not a passive activity, it requires a lot of commitment. Biases are always there ready to slip in. Unlearning my way of thinking allows me to understand the richness of another point of view. My work is just about this—creating bridges, connecting narratives, preserving stories.

JT : This raises the pertinent question also posed by the *Unsustainable Privileges* curatorial program at Galerie Wedding: where do we go from this? What you seem to be suggesting is a way in which to unlearn some of the differences, to see beyond the marking of someone else as different, say as a refugee, as a migrant, etc., and to go back to the more fundamental aspects of human-ness.

MR : Everyone is a refugee because we are all hybrid. I find that if we all analyzed ourselves and realized the complicated mixture of different cultures and worlds that we all are, we would be more open and less afraid of others, particularly of refugees and migrants, because we would see that they are humans too. In fact, we should be curious to enrich one another by getting to know the human being in one another. This is the only recipe for a free, democratic society.

SO : Do you believe art can contribute to changing a reality that interprets cultures as conflicting parties and Europe as a closed space?

MR : I don't think I could do the type of work I do unless I believed in the ability of art to enter minds, to create a need for change, to



stimulate growth, and expand attention to otherness. Of course, I am aware of the fact that the art world is aimed at an elite. But very often what happens in one part of society (even if it is a minority group) is that it grows, promotes questions and reactions, and a new sensibility gradually expands and infuses dynamism. Being an artist, for me, does not mean thinking I can reach everyone, but knowing that I can create critical awareness in someone, thus activating a process that can reach other people and even alter reality. Art has this creative potential to imagine a revolutionary yet achievable utopia. To end this conversation, I would like to quote a phrase from *What Is Philosophy?* by Deleuze and Guattari: »It may be that believing in this world, this life, becomes our most difficult task, or the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered.« Believing in this world, with all the populisms and intolerances, which surround us, is certainly a difficult task. I am an artist as I am optimist, I believe things can change. And, yes, I believe in utopia!

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