
Migration and Art

Migration and the wind of change: the role of the artist,
and of museums in the spirit of humanitarian aid.

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Migrations are traumatic in the event of natural disasters and wars where people have to leave their homes unprepared and involuntarily. The circumstances compel people to accept a new situation and to flee without security. Displacements in the 21st century are higher than ever before. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), also known as UN Refugee Agency, 79.5 million people are on the run from war, conflict, and persecution. Those who are forced to emigrate due to poverty, exploitation, ecological crises, or lack of prospects are not counted.

People lose their safe environment due to traumatic experiences and may never be able to return to their homes. Migration means the separation from family and friends as well as old and loved habits. The places of their memories—where they were born, where they played as a child, where they felt their first adolescent love, where they went to school, or where they ate lunch together with friends in the playground—are irrevocably destroyed. They are uprooted from the streets of their homeland. They can take limited material possessions on this one-way trip. The displaced are left with only fleeting memories, feelings, and thoughts of a bygone era.

Migration changes all of life. Refugees no longer have control over their lives. All is left to chance while life wishes and plans vanish. Migration makes life a struggle for survival. On the run, disenfranchised without a residence permit, they are exposed to unexpected dangerous and inhumane situations. Hunger and thirst are constant companions. These conditions often lead to illness, homelessness, or life in refugee camps or prison. Again and again the question arises: will there be someone to help or are they at the mercy of a heartless fate—a cold inhumane world of racism and bureaucracy—a materialistic world unable to share its wealth? Migration does not guarantee a better life. To reformulate a life means to rethink longings, desires, and dreams.

DEFINING NEW SOCIETIES: THE ROLE OF ARTISTS

Migration always has to do with change and in times of change, artists are inventive. They do not think linearly or in goal-oriented modes but are creative and develop new spaces for thinking and designing. Art allows for individual sensations and enters immaterial and imaginary spaces. It connects the real world with the spiritual world. Ideas are reformulated in a different context to form a new work of art. Artists and their artworks are often misunderstood in their time.



Statue of Liberty. Photomontage,
Tammam Azzam, 2016.

Art (from Latin: knowledge, practice, perception, imagination, and intuition) gives new impulses for change in society. It can trigger understanding, harmony, pity, compassion, or even horror in the viewer. Art encourages the viewer to question their view of reality: questions about identity, origin, interpersonal relationships, humanity, the environment, and rephrases them using artistic means through the disciplines of literature, music, dance, and visual arts. Artists can use their works to make visible the situations that might be hidden for political reasons, e.g. racism, inhumanity, migration. Art offers the viewer new narrative moments that he would otherwise not recognize. It enables him to create new spaces for visual experiences and thus opens new insights about humanity.

Artists have dealt with the topic of migration in all decades because migration is not new in history.

ART ENCOURAGES THE VIEWER TO QUESTION THEIR VIEW OF REALITY: QUESTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY, ORIGIN, INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, HUMANITY, THE ENVIRONMENT.

It belongs to the constant history of mankind. In each epoch, works of art have been created on this subject. Migration's story in the 21st century is shaped by the wars in the Middle East, in particular, the decade-long Syrian conflict and, more recently, the Yemeni conflict and humanitarian crisis.

TAMMAM AZZAM

The Syrian artist Tammam Azzam, born in Damascus in 1980, emigrated

to Dubai in the wake of the conflicts in 2011 that led to the Syrian exodus, and later on, moved once again to Germany.

In his *The Syrian Museum* series, he creates collages of famous paintings by old masters with photos of destroyed cities across Syria. Azzam casts the viewer's gaze at the horrors of the Syrian war by tracing the images of the war by the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya (1810-1814) who portrayed the horrific atrocities committed by Napoleon's soldiers in the struggle with the insurgent Spanish population against the French occupation. By overlaying Goya's *The Third of May 1808* on a photograph of a destroyed street in Syria, Azzam is able to give Goya's subject a new topicality.

In another piece of the same series, Azzam projects Gauguin's painting *Women on the Beach* (1891), which depicts uprooted women from Tahiti, onto a refugee camp photo from the UNHCR.

The image of the *Mona Lisa*, which radiates harmony and love, forms the framework that is in total contradiction to the destruction of the Syrian cityscapes.

His picture *Freedom Graffiti* is a projection of the passionate painting *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt onto the facade of a bombed-out house facade, the walls of which are only preserved as skeletons made of steel and concrete. Azzam's works show the dramatic state of war in Syria juxtaposed with the reality of the human condition.

In *The Syrian Museum*, Azzam contrasts the traumatic photographs of war with idealistic paintings. Azzam's collages are undoubtedly a silent criticism of the world that is unable or unwilling to come up with political solutions to brutal conflicts—in this case, speaking for Syria. In his view, as an artist, art is his own way to fight for his country and to raise awareness on the problems of his country: "If the world does not come to Syria and does not look at Syria, then Syria comes into the world," says Tammam Azzam. The artist gives the viewer new insights through his works of art. He combines contemporary photographs with traditional Western works of art. The collages create new transnational and transcultural perspectives for the viewer.

The Statue of Liberty, stands as a symbol of freedom. Tammam Azzam reshapes the body of the statue and replaces it with pictures of destroyed Syrian house facades: the body of Azzam's *Statue of Liberty* is made up of ruins, a pile of rubble. In the 20th century, America was a symbol of freedom and human rights for the poor from Europe. According to Azzam, the *Statue of Liberty* has lost its symbolic power in the 21st century. He explained: "The *Statue of Liberty* in New York does not represent US politics and I used it only as the symbol of freedom."

MUSEUMS: DEVELOPING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Emigrated artists, researchers, and scientists have established

themselves in Europe and around the world, where they started to present their stories in diverse ways in galleries, exhibitions, or museums. Museums, in particular, are taking up the new role of developing social responsibility towards the migration crisis.





Klimt, Freedom Graffiti.
Photomontage, Tammam Azzam, 2013.

Migration can also open up new perspectives on life: when people are mobile, things, objects, or ideas are also set in motion.

In Berlin, the Museum of Islamic Art, part of the Pergamon Museum, shows a successful example of how cultural institutions deal with the challenges of migration. The museum offers a platform where emigrants can express themselves and is committed to being a place of "cultural education and social responsibility," says museum director Prof. Stefan Weber. An important task of the museum is to exhibit the integrative power of the dialogue between locals and migrants.

It offers guided tours with migrants and for migrants in Arabic as part of the project "Multaka: Treffpunkt Museum, 2015". The project started in 2019 to build an international network where these ideas are carried on. Art and history are valuable when used to create bridges between cultures.

With its "Syrian Heritage Initiative", the museum researches and reconstructs the destroyed Syrian city of Aleppo.

The TAMAM project of the Museum of Islamic Art is a cooperation between the museum and mosques in the city of Berlin, where visitors can react together to changes in society.



Mona Lisa.
Photomontage,
Tammam Azzam, 2013.



Goya. Photomontage,
Tammam Azzam, 2013.

THE WIND OF CHANGE

When the wind
of change blows,
it is said in a
Chinese proverb
that some build

walls and others, windmills.

Migration can also open up new perspectives on life: when people are mobile, things, objects, or ideas are also set in motion. In the course of this development, new spaces for thinking and designing are created. Migration movements and the associated social changes sometimes overwhelm a nation's politics and society leaving a feeling of being unprepared. Then, instead of reacting to social challenges and finding solutions, walls are often raised: no space is given for new discussions or developments and new ideas.

Migrants struggle to be accepted and integrated in their new communities: the displaced are often minorities who are marginalized in society and politics that rely on electoral votes are reluctant to address such an unpopular issue.

With their works of art, artists take a position on the social injustices of the world. The protection of cultural heritage, the preservation of cultural diversity, and dialogue between cultures count on art and cultural exchange to promote intercultural thinking and prevent racism, which is the cause of yet many injustices, displacement and conflicts. Art cannot implement something through action but it can change thoughts that can then lead to socially relevant political actions.

