

## ESSAY

### *'Independent People'*

by Blessy Augustine



Zhao Zhao, *Cobblestone*, 2007. C-Prints, each 40 x 60 cm.

### **Introduction**

A truant pebble disturbs the otherwise clean, unwavering lines of the pavement in Tiananmen Square. One feels the urge to push it aside, restore the harmony of the composition. It's impossible to do so as a viewer standing in front of an image. It also must not have been an easy task for those standing around while the image was made. As the next photograph demonstrates, the pebble has been glued to the spot by an insoluble adhesive. Passers-by would have tried to pick it up, kick it, and given up. The two photographs are part of Chinese artist Zhao Zhao's work titled *Cobblestone* (2007).

In another performative work, *On Guard*, Zhao, dressed as a police officer, stood at attention "guarding" the Tiananmen Square for several days. Both these works were showcased at MoMA PS1 in 2013 as part of the group exhibition 'Zero Tolerance'. A little after the opening of the exhibition, the Chinese government held Zhao in investigative custody for 12 days.

Zhao's work, like many others included in that exhibition, redefined, for me, the idea of protest. In an interview for *VICE*, Klaus Biesenbach, the exhibition's curator, explained that going back to Joseph Beuys we acknowledge that all actions are political, whether it's voting or picking a means of transport. But to be truly political today, you have to go a step further;

you have to do something very public that is of no direct productive use: you stand somewhere for hours or sit in MoMA's atrium for weeks, and this is immediately political as it is considered a disruption.<sup>1</sup>

This idea of disruption, roughly speaking, is a way of questioning someone's power without reinforcing that person's authority. While I began my research by looking at works that I believed are disruptive, I soon became interested in projects and artistic gestures that went beyond. I began considering works that are not only disruptive but also emancipatory. I borrow this concept of emancipation from Jacques Rancière and use it to signify the ability to operate in a way that disengages from authority.

Any disruptive act is an attempt at asserting one's freedom. But freedom is a slippery concept, an idea of boundlessness that we have learnt to define mainly by imposing boundaries on it. My attempt is to understand it in relation to the tenuous relationship it shares with labour and forms of government. The works that I discuss in this paper — Baltensperger + Siepert's *Desti-Nation*, Wachter & Jud's *Hotel Gelem*, Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border*, and Roland Roos' *Free Repair*—allow me to articulate this relationship better.

### ***Desti-Nation***



Stefan Baltensperger + David Siepert, *Desti-Nation*, 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Stampler, "Klaus Biesenbach on 'Zero Tolerance'," The Creators Project, 19 November 2014, [http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en\\_uk/blog/klaus-biesenbach-on-zero-tolerance](http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en_uk/blog/klaus-biesenbach-on-zero-tolerance)

Stefan Baltensperger and David Siepert are Zurich-based artists who have been collaborating since 2007. They work with different media and usually offer critical reflections on socio-political issues. As young artists, Baltensperger spent time in Southeast Asia and Siepert travelled around the Middle East. Several of their works are influenced by these travels. For this paper, I will be focusing on their 2013 project titled *Desti-Nation*. As exhibited at Museum Abteiberg, the installation has three components to it. One is a metal buoy; it is approximately 8 feet in height and is designed as a prototype to guide refugees coming from the coast of Africa to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. The other two components are short videos. The first one is an animation produced by Next Media, an organization that creates animated footage for news corporations worldwide when there is no real footage available. This animated video explains how the buoy can be booked and how exactly it works. The second video is a segment of a staged news bulletin in which the anchor first reports how the buoy is guiding refugees through the Mediterranean and then discusses the phenomenon with an expert from the fictitious International Institute of Cultural Relations. The installation has been exhibited at various museums and art fairs and the buoy has a price tag of 185,000 USD, with the assurance that if anyone buys the prototype, another functional one will be made and actually sent into the Mediterranean. The buoy remains unsold.

At first glance, the buoy seems to offer an effective solution to the serious problem of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean. The buoy will allow refugees to self-organize and not rely on traffickers who endanger their lives, mostly, by overfilling boats. The two videos reinforce this idea. Initially, all of this makes sense because we have been repeatedly exposed to the *problem* of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, as that is what makes it to the news. But over the 6 minutes that it has taken us to engage with the installation, we begin to see the absurdity of it all. Wouldn't using existing ships or aircraft be more efficient in ensuring the safe passage of those seeking refuge?

Because *Desti-Nation* is a "fake" solution, it allows us to consider the many realities of the problem. It makes obvious that ensuring safe passage of people between two continents is not the issue. The passage is made dangerous because of European laws. You can apply for asylum in countries like Switzerland only at the designated asylum centres, in person. But

due to visa restrictions it is illegal for citizens belonging to several countries in Africa and the Middle East to travel to Switzerland and other parts of Europe. The journey itself is illegal.

Through years of socio-political discourse, we have come to think about this movement of people as problematic. Either we focus on the possibility that asylum seekers usually come from impoverished regions and, hence, this movement is an issue. That is, we reduce it to only as an escape from a difficult situation. Or the problem is that we don't want them here, the 'here' could be anywhere. This second acknowledgement is an acknowledgement of hostility but it is also more than that.

Except for the 10,000 years of the Neolithic Age, man has always been moving from place to place.<sup>2</sup> This movement is usually in search of better or more opportunities. It manifests either as colonization or as migration, and these categories are not mutually exclusive. Colonization falls outside the purview of law and can only be self-regulated because the colonizer's authority—largely dependent on the economic and/or military resources available to the colonizer—is greater than the natives. The migrant, on the other hand, moves in search of labour and, hence, his/her movement can easily be regulated by the local. This control of movement can fall anywhere in a broad spectrum of hostility. Criteria such as educational qualifications, economic status, etc. are all legally sanctioned methods of practising hostility.

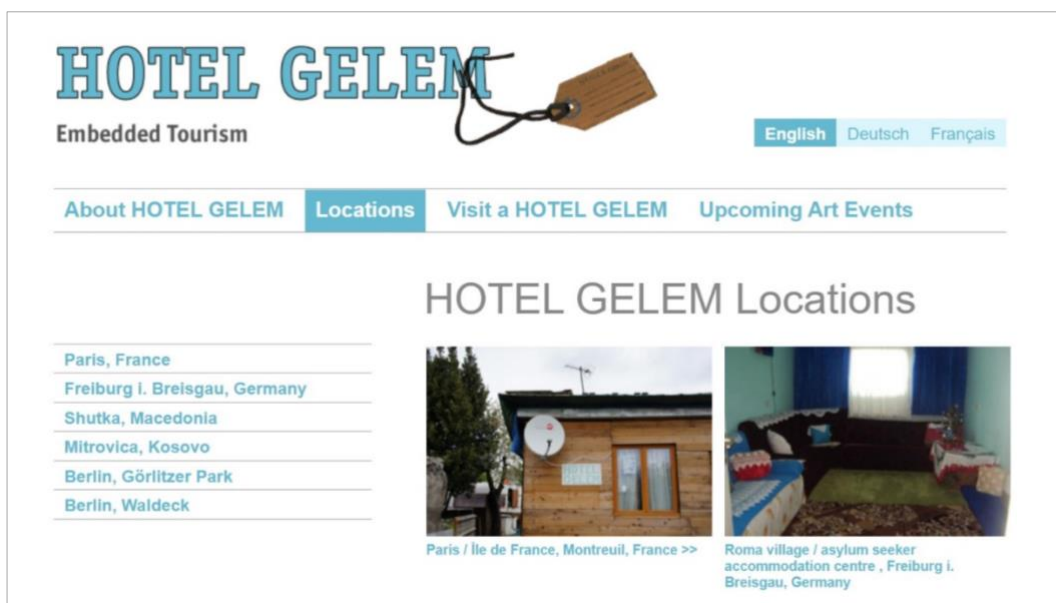
While this hostility appears in the form of racism and xenophobia, I think it is also intrinsically tied to our difficult relationship with freedom. It is difficult to define, or set limits to, the concept of freedom but we can attempt to understand it by considering it in relation to other associated ideas. We primarily understand freedom as rights guaranteed to us by the nation state we belong to. This means that our freedom is conditional on our belonging to a nation state, that is, it is conditional on our citizenship. While citizenship does not appear as an unstable concept to most of us, I think it helps to examine it by looking at the exemptions to it, such as asylum seekers.

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<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, "The Challenge of the Migrant", in *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, ed. Anke K. Finger (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 2.

Asylum seekers have neither the rights guaranteed by the state they left nor do they have rights guaranteed to ordinary citizens by the state they find themselves in. They have rights that we think of as human rights, rights that should be fundamental to every human being, but we increasingly find that nation states are not capable of ensuring these because they only know how to deal with people as citizens, and not as humans. Additionally, the aim of any political system is the maintenance of the system. It will look for opportunities to reaffirm the system's indispensability and legitimacy. In moments of crisis, the state will suspend rights and in extreme cases denationalize citizens. The two main rights it will take away from someone denationalized is the right to work and the right to own property.

## Hotel Gelem



Christoph Wachter & Mathias Jud, screenshot of Hotel Gelem's website, 2010 to present.

Berlin-based artists Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud began their project titled Hotel Gelem in 2010. Under this project, tourists from anywhere in the world can apply to stay as guests with a Roma family in select settlements in France, Germany, Macedonia and Kosovo. The tourist, through Hotel Gelem's website or personal contacts, applies to stay in the location of their choice and, depending on the particular situation that the Roma host family finds itself in, the application is either accepted or rejected. Some of these settlements are derelict cottages, old trailers, caves or just tents. If you are accepted, you

can avail of whatever space and facilities the family provides you with for the time period that both parties have agreed upon.

The Roma are an ethnic group of people who continue to be persecuted in much of Europe. Traditionally, they have been livestock traders, animal trainers and exhibitors, metalsmiths, utensil repairmen, musicians, fortune-tellers, and entertainers.<sup>3</sup> They are considered nomadic because they travel from place to place performing these jobs. Their nomadism has always been looked at with suspicion through the centuries and they have been easy “scapegoats”. I’m using this term in the way René Girard defines it. According to Girard, in times of crisis, the relationships that regulate a society dissolve. Distinctions disappear. When distinctions disappear, they disappear even in terms of self-identity. In such a situation, it is pointless or impossible to look for the origin of the crisis. Instead, to restore order, it becomes important to find someone to blame for the crisis. Identifying one group as guilty is a form of differentiation. A new “us” and “them” is created. The guilty, or the scapegoat, thus, allows us to redefine or reaffirm our identity vis-à-vis his own.<sup>4</sup>

The Roma have been fulfilling this function of being scapegoats in every region of Europe that has had to reimagine itself or re-nationalize itself. Especially in countries in the Balkans where very conscious decisions had to be made as to who belonged to the nation of Romania or Bosnia and Herzegovina etc. The Roma, and any other such group, present us with another dimension to the question of having political rights. The nomadism of the Roma sets them apart from asylum seekers and other migrants as well. Most asylum seekers and migrants leave “homes” and are in search of new homes. Their movement is projected as temporary. And the host countries, too, are eager to present them as temporary problems. Depending on the political leanings of the state, the solution is to either assimilate the migrants or expatriate them. After the migrant or refugee is accepted, the aim is to set roots, that is, buy property, because it is only when one owns property that he/she will be allowed to have political rights. The native feels the need to have a say in the matter of who gets to buy property because, once someone owns property, they are, in

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<sup>3</sup> “Roma”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 11 November 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rom>.

<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, “On the Alien”, in *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, ed. Anke K. Finger (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 17.

most scenarios, entitled to the same rights as others. This is why we make it harder for a group we consider as “guilty” to own land. So, it is a situation where the Roma’s nomadism is problematized but you also make it impossible for them to have roots.

Hotel Gelem works on many levels. Firstly, it inverts the situation of the Roma. The Roma are generally stigmatized because of their movement and are unwelcome in most places. With Hotel Gelem they find themselves in the position to be hosts, to welcome travellers. It is important that this hosting occurs outside of a purely transactional logic. The accommodation is not a service that is provided. It is about sharing resources you don’t actually have much of in the first place. This, I believe, is an example of being able to exercise an agency that is generally not available to the Roma. It is an agency that allows the Roma to navigate around rules and laws. A rule or a law creates a framework for action. Whether you abide by the law or not, you are still operating within the framework. In this context, exercising agency is to think beyond the either-or possibilities of the situation. It is the ability to do a third thing and this ability is emancipatory in nature.

As a project, Hotel Gelem has two lives. One exists in the settlements and the other in exhibition spaces. For Wachter and Jud it is also important to keep bridging the gap between the two spaces. When they are invited for exhibitions, they try to involve the local Roma community in their projects. Sometimes they insist on doing this in a very formal way and make institutions work out contracts with the Roma, in the same way that assistants and technicians would be given contracts. This is not an easy thing to do and now the institution is forced to figure out how to get paperwork done in this situation because, depending on the legal status of the Roma, they may or may not have work permits. This inconveniencing the institution is one way that Wachter and Jud choose to problematize an easy consumption of marginalization. There’s the need to exhibit the work but it is done without romanticization and also in a way that lets the Roma be participants. It’s again related to the idea of having agency and this is an agency related to representation.

Many Roma have photographs of their ancestors and these photographs are records that were made by states and used as identifiers for the purpose of extermination. Their representation has been for the purpose of criminalizing them and/or committing violence.

The other kind of representation that we are familiar with is to present them as deserving of our sympathy. And this is true of the representation of asylum seekers as well. So, for Baltensperger + Siepert and Wachter & Jud, the idea of representation is important and there is a conscious effort made to not reinforce either stereotype. A sympathetic portrayal reinforces an us-versus-them categorization, we who are privileged versus they who are not. Every emancipatory representation has to be one that moves away from these categories.

### ***Performing the Border***

Going back to the idea of rights, as mentioned earlier, a crucial right the state takes away from someone who is denationalized is their right to work. Working as an exercise of our freedom has also become a slightly paradoxical concept. Hannah Arendt explains this succinctly in her discussion of labour and work.

Labour designates a toiling body that needs to repeat its actions and that does not lead to a finished or permanent product. In ancient Greece, labour was the destiny of slaves. Work, on the other hand, was proper to “men”, as it depended on man’s unique ability to imagine and then fabricate objects. Free citizens could work, but the ultimate goal was to allow citizens more free time to participate in political life. Slaves, because they spent all their time labouring, did not have time to be part of politics and, hence, could not have the right to vote or have other political rights. This was why slaves could be tortured but not free citizens. Causing pain to a body was, thus, in the realm of politics and not ethics.<sup>5</sup>

Arendt believes that in the modern age there is no real distinction between labour and work. With a few exceptions, we are all engaged in a process of labouring, producing and consuming with “purposeless regularity”.<sup>6</sup> That is, we are all labourers. But instead of being considered slaves, we are now elevated as having labour power. Unlike the slave labourers of ancient Greece, we do have political rights—if we are citizens—but we don’t usually have the “free” time or means to exercise these rights or rather we don’t have the time or means

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, “A Consumer’s Society,” in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 129.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Labour and Fertility”, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 106.



to experience our freedoms. I believe that this is because our labour is progressively being tied to productivity. Increasingly, we exist for the nation state not as humans or as citizens but as productive citizens. This takes us back to the point about why our hostility towards migrants is more than just racism and is related to our own difficult relationship with freedom.

Labouring is fundamental to us—it definitely plays an important role in our survival as a species—but it is also an essential part of our very being. But it often becomes the means for our exploitation. Here too, it helps to consider the exceptions.

*Performing the Border* (1999) is a 43-minute video essay by Ursula Biemann. The essay is set in Ciudad Juárez, which is a desert city on the border between the United States of America and Mexico, and is an export-processing zone. The city has hundreds of US assembly plants where young Mexican women solder chips for electronics. Biemann presents this zone as a gendered and eroticized one, where white male managers control the bodies of the women through forced birth control and pregnancy tests. The women also engage in sex work on the weekends to supplement their income. Juárez is a transnational space created for maximizing the US's profits, this means that it is outside a juridical framework.

Juárez is also the site of a horrific series of murders. Between 1995 and 1998, 400 young women had been killed in a similar manner—physically and sexually tortured and tossed into the desert. Biemann, in the video essay, does not look for clues to solve the case. Instead, she presents the phenomenon in poetic terms. The border is presented as a site of a wound, the murders the pathology of a man in crisis, a man who has lost his sense of identity and inflicts violence based on the only difference he recognizes, the difference of gender.<sup>7</sup>

Biemann mentions the presence of certain subversive figures in the region—women who are well versed with the gaps in the border and who help pregnant women cross over just when they are about to give birth so that the child is born as a US citizen with rights.

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<sup>7</sup> Ursula Biemann, "Making the Transnational Intelligible: Performing the Border," *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field* (Bristol: Bildmuseet Umea/Arnolfini, 2008).

Juárez is made into an extra-juridical space so that neither the US nor Mexico has to ensure or enforce political rights. Though framed using terms such as economic growth, development and productivity, in effect the US and Mexican governments have denationalized the space and denationalized the citizens. Juárez appears as an exceptional site but, as we are slowly and steadily reduced from humans to citizens to productive citizens, the exceptional conditions that exist at the margin begin to permeate the whole.

### ***Free Repair***



Roland Roos, *Free Repair*, 2008-2010. Documentary photograph, one out of a series of 100.

Roland Roos began his project *Free Repair* as a reaction to the pressure to constantly produce works of art and be part of gallery exhibitions. The project began in April 2008 in Bratislava and was concluded in March 2010 in Warsaw. During these two years, Roos went around 20 European cities and did a hundred “free” repair jobs. He did these repairs without being asked to and for free. He usually fixed useless things, objects like neon signs and loose tiles whose damaged condition did not interfere with the place’s functioning and, hence, remained overlooked by the owners or city officials. He took “before” and “after” photographs of these and sold the print for 320 CHF—the average amount each repair cost him in terms of material and labour.

As the project progressed, Roos repaired more and more useless things, like joining two pieces of a discarded, broken shelf door, the shelf nowhere in sight. It was important for him to not be seen as someone who does work “free” of charge. He did not want to take

away from someone else's actual income and he did not want anyone to be able to profit from him.

To give some more context, in 2008, Roos was on an art residency in Bratislava. He was living in some sort of a protected structure and whatever he proposed to do with the building was rejected by the owners. So, unable to realize his ideas, he went around the city doing the "free" repairs. Roos' project, I believe, is again an example of being able to exercise an agency that is generally not available to us. In a system where your labour is both your destiny and the reason for your bondage, the only way to exercise agency is to labour unproductively.

### ***The Ignorant Schoolmaster***

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, who, in 1818, went to teach French Literature to a group of Flemish students.<sup>8</sup> Jacotot spoke no Flemish and his students spoke no French. As a way of getting around the problem, Jacotot assigned them a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* and, with the help of an interpreter, asked them to read, recite and learn French using the Flemish section.<sup>9</sup> The students laboured, reciting, "Calypso," "Calypso could," "Calypso could not."<sup>10</sup> After several weeks, when he asked them to write responses to the book in French, he was unpleasantly surprised to discover that their essays were as good as any. Initially, Jacotot rationalized the situation by equating it with how a child learns her mother tongue and that this learning does not mean that the child understands. But is there really a difference between learning French by reading *Télémaque* and understanding French by reading *Télémaque*? Jacotot came to the conclusion that learning and understanding are two aspects of the same act of translation—the capacity to say what one thinks in the words of others. Jacotot becomes a new type of pedagogue: an emancipatory one. Pedagogy is explicative when a teacher supplies the will and intelligence lacking in a student. It is emancipatory when the teacher supplies the will

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> *Télémaque* is a 24-volume novel written by François Fénelon in 1699. It recounts the journey of Telemachus, accompanied by his guide, Mentor, as he attempts to find his father, Odysseus.

<sup>10</sup> Calypso is the goddess who detained Odysseus on her island for seven years. Her name means "she who conceals knowledge".

but the intelligence is derived from the book. In this second scenario, the will obeys another will but the intelligence obeys only itself.

Jacotot became a popular teacher. Students from everywhere came to hear him say: “I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you.” Emancipation, thus, is becoming conscious of the power of the human mind—it is not related to learning but knowing that you can learn. So, the emancipatory teacher does not worry about what the student learns. She will learn what she wants, maybe nothing. Jacotot’s crucial assignment came in the form of making something out of his printer’s mentally retarded son. Jacotot taught him Hebrew. The child later became an excellent lithographer. He never used Hebrew for anything except to know what more gifted minds did not, and that was not Hebrew.

### **Conclusion**

We labour now so that we can rest in the future. We follow the will of the state so that we can be free later. We may have rights but not always the agency to assert them. Being free or rather being human is a condition that is always postponed to the future. Artistic gestures, because they can exist outside the logic of society, can be emancipatory, allow us to recognize our own agency. My research is an effort in thinking through some of these gestures.

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**Biography:**

Blessy Augustine is an art writer currently pursuing her PhD in Art and Visual Culture at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. She has an MFA in Art Writing from the School of Visual Arts, New York, and an MA in Arts and Aesthetics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is the recipient of the Art Writers' Award 2019-20, presented by Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council and Take on Art. Her writing on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale was a runner-up for the 2017 Toni Beauchamp Prize in Critical Art Writing. She has written for publications such as *Art in America*, *Degree Critical*, *The Hindu Business Line*, *Mint*, *Reader's Digest India*, *Blouin Artinfo* and *Time Out Delhi*.