

Courage by Olga Flor

On the exhibition "THEY WON'T BEAR HIDING BEHIND WALLS AND FENCES" - Guerrilla of Enlightenment

I'm trying to find some courage for myself here, probably. Inhumanity is currently being sold as a practical approach to the challenges of our times, and it is becoming the norm. It is precisely against this normalization that the works in this exhibition are directed: they expose us to the monstrosity.

Our consciences may stir, of course: I remember as a teenager reading books that described slavery in Rome or in modern America, and wondering how as a Roman patrician woman, say, you could live with the knowledge that someone was working under your own roof in appalling conditions, and had no rights – only later did I realise that, actually, these Roman wives themselves lived at the mercy of their husbands. And yet what shocked me, and what I notice in myself today: despite all this a certain fatigue, a resignation in the face of blatant, outrageous injustice. Injustice like the indirect injustice of the global value chain, which marginalises a large part of humankind, forcing them into exploitative working conditions so that another part of humankind can consume cheap products and, what's more, making them dependent on this form of consumption. There are of course areas where the two groups intersect, i.e. people who work in appalling conditions AND are at the same time interesting as consumers. Or in the face of more directly visible and tangible injustice, indifference towards people who, for whatever reasons, are trying to escape suffering, who are forced to entrust themselves to human traffickers, and who then drown in the Mediterranean before the eyes of an unmoved European public.

The wind of discourse has turned, the moral compass is deranged: it is no longer seen as abhorrent to let people drown. On the contrary – it seems that increasingly images of capsizing and drowning are accepted almost nolens volens by politicians as a means to deter refugees, while anyone who speaks out against the drowning of people in the Mediterranean is smeared as naïve, as a lefty: because right is the new centre, and everything that does not fit there, or even the part of the political spectrum that used simply to be called "the centre", is therefore lefty, or, because it sounds good, "left-of-left", and the stuff that's written about it in the asocial media doesn't even bear thinking about. With the "right-of-right", on the other hand, there are fewer qualms. In fact it's cool, since it means the basis of all actions can be your own short-term advantage at the cost of others: who would not recognise this principle in a society attuned to self-optimisation? And so we see the mainstreaming of ideas such as deterring people from flight and migration by intentionally leaving them to drown, or at the very least allowing their humiliation and their misery – all featured in the media as widely as possible in order to enhance the learning effect.

In his speech for the opening of this year's Bruckner Festival, Daniel Kehlmann referred to his own play, which explores a historical event: "how in 1939 a ship carrying almost a thousand refugees, including many Austrians, was prevented from docking first in Cuba, then in the USA – the reasoning almost identical to what we read in today's newspapers: the boat was full, absorptive capacity was exhausted, the culture of these people was just too foreign. Of course, nowadays this seems absurd: the United States of America, incapable of absorbing one thousand people? But at the time it did not sound like a joke, it just sounded like political realism."

Today, this “political realism” has gone so far that the notion of actually existing European outposts in North Africa rouses Rommelesque colonial superpower fantasies in some hard-right FPÖ officials, making them babble about military operations in North Africa. This comes as no surprise in itself – officials like these have never made a secret of their attitudes, have made no bones about their desires, even if that might sound a bit provocative in this context. Unlike Germany, where such opinions are more likely to be expressed on marches for Pe-, Le- or whatever the -gida, in Austria not only do advocates of these views sit in parliament, their party even forms part of the government. But what is shocking is that, as usual, there is no reaction on the part of the Austrian federal chancellor and current president of the European Council: because as we all know, if you please, silence is a virtue, if you are reliant on your coalition partner and do not wish to accept any kind of moral basis or political ideas beyond a mantra of isolation, or any fundamental democratic understanding of human rights and human dignity that include that of refugees, and to this end prefer, as Daniel Kehlmann so aptly put it, to fraternise with “wannabe dictators” like Victor Orban. Or, as I would like to add, if you are prepared to kneel down before genuine autocrats and so provide their media with an invaluable service – because the power of an image lies, as always, in its immediate effectiveness.

This means those responsible for policy-making no longer practise any kind of responsibility or even show understanding of the rights of all people, including those who are refugees or seeking a better life for economic or environmental reasons. It might be smarter to maintain a tactical silence in the short term than to display your own moral cluelessness openly, but it is not acting responsibly, nor does it present a long-term credible strategy.

So basic humanitarian principles are now up for grabs, and along with them the fundamental civilising consensus of our European Union.

Against all economic and macro-economic sense – because what sensible macro-economy would invest in training, only to decide that the trainees with all their knowledge and skills should promptly be deported? Irrespective of the interests of those businesses urgently looking for employees, let alone the humanitarian considerations – the Austrian government has terminated asylum-seekers’ access to training as well as the halt to the deportation of trainees, because they are doing it for ideological reasons, because they are preventing the integration of people who want to integrate, something that is precisely what’s demanded of asylum-seekers otherwise. They do this in order to keep the discussion and media interest in refugees simmering: because it is ultimately their key political issue – their brand identity, as it were. This is a political caste that is proud of its steady closure of increasing numbers of new alleged and genuine refugee routes, that used it with success in the election campaign: what would they do without asylum-seekers and migration, after all? Without the people they insist on describing as “illegal”, in order to justify their reputation? Without refugees there would be no politically expedient theme, and so no reason to vote for a party whose success to a great extent is down to this exploitation of human tragedy – and of course its causes. And, incidentally: What constitutes illegal flight, exactly? What do the leaders of the Austrian government think legal flight would constitute?

The intentional prevention of integration, which also shapes the Freedom Party’s schemes, is achieved by detaining asylum-seekers if possible in camps without physical contact with the outside world, without meaningful work and training opportunities, so promoting the isolation and the psychological problems of the people isolated in this way, and not least criminality – because visible ghettoisation, exclusion and increased crime levels increase the move towards right-wing

populist parties – who can then continue turning the screws of security and envy with relish, in turn increasing the pressure on the socially excluded, and so on and so forth: a humanitarian downwards spiral of shameful, Machiavellian simplicity.

But: these Freedom Party strategies are supported by both of the parties in the Austrian government. The ÖVP is at least equally responsible for the situation, and this is perhaps the most shocking thing of all: a major part of the population who usually see themselves as belonging to the pragmatic mainstream seem to be accepting all this without complaint.

On the plus side: there are people everywhere who are prepared to speak up, a phenomenon that earns my deep respect. Courageous women and men are appealing for minimum civic standards, often risking life and limb in order to call attention to negative social developments and injustices. In many places they are persecuted and threatened, sometimes even with death, as in the case of Egyptian activist Mahmoud Abou Zeid (Shawkan), now sentenced to “only” five years in prison. And yet they still keep speaking up. Finally allowed to leave Turkey after months of imprisonment, German journalist Mesale Tolu stated that she simply wanted to be courageous and travel back there for her trial on charges of “supporting a terrorist organisation” (why can’t the Turkish justice system ever come up with any other charges? one could ask, incidentally, when undesirable journalists need to be muzzled – apparently this is what they are per se, i.e. undesirable to the regime, simply because they have the impudence to pursue their profession). And yet, despite all this, they still cannot airbrush out courage and the sense of what matters in a truly representative democracy – the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and parliament, as well as a free press that can report on them, freedom of expression.

On 12.09. a two-thirds majority of the EU parliament voted to trigger sanctions procedures according to Article 7 of the EU Treaty (and following an ideologically charged and nationalistic speech given by Orban, in which he interpreted the protest against the erosion of the rule of law as an attack on “the Hungarians”, so also crudely taking the population of Hungary hostage) – due to the “systemic threat to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary”. This is a definite sign that the EU parliament – after much hesitation – recognises the value of democracy and is at last taking action.

Immigration must be regulated according to clear principles in order to maintain social peace in the receiving countries, that seems obvious, and apart from the implementation of the human right to asylum – a right which, as must not be forgotten in this country especially, was declared not least as a reaction to the crimes of the Holocaust and the handling of refugees at that time – other legal options for immigration are needed. To this end it should also be recognised that apart from fleeing wars, persecution and destruction as well as environmental degradation, there exists migration for economic reasons, which all too many Europeans and also Austrians saw as the only way forward for themselves in the century before last, and which should not be condemned per se – on the contrary. Environmental degradation due to climate change is today also an essential reason to flee, in all likelihood leading to even stronger migration flows in the future, and the citizens of the consumption-hungrier “West” are also responsible for causing that climate change.

And yet first and foremost migration must be accepted as a matter of fact, and indeed one that potentially holds enormous benefits, even if, like everything in life, it does not run and will not run smoothly.

Inhumanity is inhumanity and must be recognised as such: no, it is not normal or politically acceptable to look on as thousands of people drown in the Mediterranean or to prevent the boats that rescue them from docking, or to drag their owners and captains through the courts. It is a grave injustice, it is not even humane, it is deeply inhumane and cruel and cynical and we all, we European citizens in whose name this is supposedly happening, are jointly responsible: we are guilty if we look on and do nothing. Or indeed if we look away.

In order to end this inhumane practice, we need a recalibration of the barometers for right and wrong and of humanitarian responsibility, since these are clearly spinning out of control. Apart from the most primitive empathy, above all we need to raise awareness of the value of basic human rights and democratic principles and the tools of democratic politics such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, and the ability to discuss and to compromise – because democracy is always a compromise. For this we need to take joy and courage in political participation and changing the framework conditions responsible for social inequalities. As Barack Obama recently put it: “The biggest threat to our democracy is indifference.”¹

The pictures and installations that you can see here at < rotor > aim to confront that indifference, they take a closer look, they concentrate the monstrosities of the present day into intense artworks. They persuade us to take a stance, and to stand firm to that stance. There is too much at stake for us to remain silent.

¹ “The biggest threat to our democracy is indifference. The biggest threat to our democracy is cynicism.” Barack Obama, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois speech, 07.09.18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHAKDTlv8fA>, 56:39.