

## **Bearing witness to violence at borders: intermingling artistic and ethnographic encounters**

Anitta Kynsilehto

The starting point of this essay was a visit to the Finnish contemporary artist Riiko Sakkinen's exhibition *Closing borders* (Mänttä 2017-2018). The exhibition portrayed various border locations both at the external borders of the territory of the European Union as well as within this territory, building on the artist's visits to these sites over the year 2016. Many of these places are the same ones where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork on migrant journeys and solidarity practices since 2010. This essay brings together the analysis of these artistic works (collages, drawings, installations) and the book produced as accompanying material to the exhibition, and ethnographic material (field notes, interviews with people on the move and local solidarity activists) collected at some of the same sites. The essay examines border politics, practices of knowledge formation via responsible witnessing, and multiple forms of enacting resistance to violence at borders. With this backdrop, I ask what the exhibition rendered visible in terms of ongoing struggles at these sites and what remained hidden, arguing that while it is important to document the forms of violence, it would also be necessary to recognize ongoing forms of resistance and the continuities of these struggles in order to reach beyond the mediated spectacle.

Keywords: Border violence, witnessing, ethnography

### **Introduction**

Borders are violent and unpredictable: beyond territorial lines marked by concrete fences and barriers, material border infrastructure, they spread to practically anywhere (Fassin 2011; Mountz 2015). In so doing, those touched by these borders are left confused, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand their functioning. This became evident to the wider public in Europe especially during the latter half of 2015, with the mass mediatization of people wandering across the European continent. This mass mobility coming into close proximity called for artists, academics, civil society organisations, and lay individuals to engage with the topic and to bear witness to the unfolding events and ongoing forms of violence. Among the other professionals documenting these events, Ai Weiwei travelled to the Aegean coast, collected orange life-saving jackets and posed as the little Alan Kurdi who became the symbol

of the plight of refugees and the violence of the borders in early September 2015. Ai Weiwei toured different refugee camps in the following years, using his voice and fame for activist purposes, not always without criticism for his interventions and the way in which he capitalized on other's losses (e.g. Kampmark 2018). Banksy chose another symbol for a refugee by painting Steve Jobs, the creator of the company Apple and the son of Syrian migrants, with a plastic bag on his shoulder and an old-school computer in his hand, on a wall in Calais, another symbolic site of long-term border struggles. These sites and struggles also incited the Finnish contemporary artist Riiko Sakkinen to reorient his exhibition in the Art Museum Gösta in Mänttä, Finland, planned for 2017 by refocusing it on borders and bordering. He embarked on two journeys along migrant paths with curator Pauli Sivonen that resulted in the exhibition *Closing borders* (2017-2018) and an accompanying book of the same name that largely consists of the curator's depiction of the process. It therefore provided a way of making sense of what is going on at the EU borders; an artistic interpretation shaped by witnessing the multiple forms of violence enacted by the European quest for sealing its borders.

The narrative that unfolds in the book *Closing Borders* that accompanies the exhibition begins with the massive mediatisation of mobilities across the Mediterranean and further on across the European continent in 2015. Sakkinen and Sivonen travel, on two successive trips, first from Spain to Morocco and back, and then from Greece across the Balkans to Paris, Calais and London. Interestingly, they began the journeys from borders now seemingly forgotten since the peak years of the early 2000s. The main focus of international attention has shifted back and forth between the Straits of Gibraltar, the Canary Islands, the island of Lampedusa and the Aegean Sea. These shifts indicate rather the political and media interest and importance allocated to each; attempted crossings and successful arrivals have continued despite the attention being moved away to another site. Seeming emptiness, whether in the forest of Gurugú in Northern Morocco or the village of Idomeni in Greece nearby the border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), does not mean the mobile circuits are gone for good. Rather, it signifies the rerouting of itineraries based on the necessity of avoiding capture.

The second trip follows the path taken by many during the mediatised mass march across diverse borders in Europe during the second half of 2015, the one that fits better into the imageries of unregulated mobilities across Europe at the time: the Greek Aegean Islands and the so called Balkan route. The highest peak of attention spanning summer 2015 until late

spring of 2016 had faded by the time they embarked on their first journey in August 2016. In the meantime, also many of the highly mediatised sites of those months, such as the village of Idomeni, had changed their signification from an actual site of distress to the nostalgia of this distress: to witnessing the traces and memories left behind once the cameras are gone.

In this essay, I reflect the exhibition via my own multi-sited ethnographic journey across many of the same border sites in France, Greece, Morocco and Spain. In so doing, I enquire after the politics of representation that is enacted in the combination of the exhibition and the accompanying book. This denotes considering that, when a particular perspective is shown, there are other perspectives that are being omitted, hidden from view, and the temporalities of these forms of visibility. Ultimately, this consideration leads to further questions that pertain to the ethics of witnessing violent state practise, including the positionality of the witness: moral and political witnessing as discussed by Frank Möller, thinking with Avishai Margalit (2004), about remembering and witnessing in the praxis of citizen journalism as opposed to photojournalism undergirded by demands of objectivity and impartiality (Möller 2017). Much of theoretical work on witnessing has focused on those who have lived through and survived extreme forms of violence (Wieviorka 2004) whilst in artistic and ethnographic engagement, the artist and the ethnographer often, though not solely, focus on understanding violence experienced by others. In this essay, I discuss these aspects of witnessing via artistic engagement arguing that ethnographic reflexivity and the recognition of humility (Cabot 2016) as regards to the indispensably 'partial truths' (Clifford 1986) produced by ethnographic engagement could be helpful.

### **Situating the exhibition**

Mänttä is a small town in Central Finland that has branded itself as the capital of contemporary art in the country, with a summer festival and two Serlachius art museums, Gösta and Gustaf, open all year round. It seeks to attract diverse audiences including families and tourists alongside art enthusiasts. Mänttä also hosts a reception centre for asylum seekers, as a part of the decentralized reception system in the country, which makes this small town far away from territorial borders a peculiar border site in its own right.

In his work, contemporary artist Riiko Sakkinen combines various techniques such as drawing, collage and installation, which were all present in *Closing borders*. Sakkinen has built his

career around critique of what he calls Turbo-capitalism, which he counters by an anarchistic approach called Turborealism (endnote 1) while, in somewhat contradictory ways, simultaneously cooperating with commercial art galleries in Finland. This renders his position in Finland somewhat similar to Ai Weiwei's in the global scene: he combines social critique with rentable commercial strategy. This is an ambiguous position prone to critique by fellow artists and social theorists, and bears a resemblance to critics of academically timely topics that come with somewhat easier access to research funding. Sakkinen had agreed to exhibit in the Serlachius museum focusing on contemporary art in 2017, but the focus of this exhibition changed with the developments over the winter 2015-2016, as explained in the accompanying book. The exhibition drew a map of borders and the many migration hubs constituted around them around and within Europe. Moreover, while exposing concrete borders, it performed a critique to broader bordering practices in that it acknowledged the fluidity of the border beyond its physical place delineating sovereign territories, and entwined the continuities of a colonial mind-set to these bordering practices.

When one entered the exhibition *Closing borders*, the first item on view was a wall full of shoes, many of which were Converse sneakers, with flashing party lights squirming around. The sneakers themselves were laced with blue LED-laces that added to the shiny image. These sneakers were not just standard shoes, however. They had been modified with thick screws, similar to the ones that serve to enable climbing the layers of fences at the borders that separate the North African state of Morocco from the territory of the European Union (EU), around the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. One of the sneakers in the wall was also used as the cover image for the book, symbolizing the struggles on-going at various borders.

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The fences surrounding Ceuta and Melilla have not been built exclusively in order to keep the Moroccan nationals out, although a large majority of Moroccan nationals find it extremely difficult to gain access to the EU territory via legal channels. The inhabitants of the Northern border region, if they are endowed with an identity document or a passport, have access to these two Spanish cities that are located on the African continent. However, access to mainland Spain by ferry or internal flights is forbidden also for them unless they have a valid Schengen visa, as these Spanish territories are not part of the Schengen area of free movement.

The primary function of these fences is to keep out those who have even more limited access to the EU territory, namely nationals of different sub-Saharan African countries such as Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali and Nigeria. These fences have been built over the years, fortified by the most developed technologies and coupled with sets of bilateral agreements between Spain and Morocco, and the EU and Morocco, and accompanied by corresponding funding, in order to oblige Morocco to serve as the border guard to the EU territory (e.g. Collyer 2007; Andersson 2014; Casas-Cortez et al. 2015). Despite these multiple measures undertaken to halt unwanted mobilities, the fortification of the border has not impeded people from trying to cross to the other side. At times, some succeed in getting to the Spanish side. Others continue these attempts for tens of times without losing hope of a better future on the other side, despite the fact that they may be forcibly removed from the border multiple times even after having reached the Spanish side. Until the summer of 2013 those who had been arrested by the Moroccan police or border guards were transported to the border with Algeria and told to walk to the other side. Since the summer of 2013, those arrested have been loaded into buses and driven away, to be dropped off in smaller numbers right across the Moroccan territory, all the way down to the southern-most parts of the country. This practice accentuated in early August 2018, as one attempt by Morocco to show that they are de facto keeping up with their task as credible guardians of this part of the EU's Southern border.

Alongside the shoes, the lights that are habitually used for Christmas decoration or for rendering any other collective occasion more celebratory, also hint at another form of symbolism present in border-making. They are a reminder of the squirming wire that has become a prominent visualization of multiple emergencies, not only in Europe but, for example, in different North African countries. This is Concertina wire: the razor wire that decorates for example blocked streets and anti-terrorism hurdles, aiming at deterring people from crossing for the fear that the blade will cut the human flesh of the crosser. These wires have become highly visible in the public arena topping border fences that delineate the territories of different countries, seeking to redirect the steps of the people on the move to the desired paths, usually in the form of a U-turn. This razor wire, its composition and prominence also inspired artist Riiko Sakkinen's various visualizations of closing borders in the contemporary era. Indeed, it is this visualization that Pauli Sivonen, the curator of the exhibition and Sakkinen's travel-companion on the two journeys to European borders that preceded the exhibition, presented as the most central item in the exhibition. It was also used

to surround the main exhibition area, making the very experience of entering the exhibition space resemble a border passage.

### **Chasing the traces of border crises**

Unlike the impression suggested by the shocking imageries circulating during that time, struggles over the right to mobility and access to the EU territory for example around the Greek Aegean islands before the mass arrivals over the year 2015 have been well documented too (Pro Asyl 2007, 2013; Migreurop, EMHRN and FIDH 2014). An important part of these struggles is the continuing action by local and international civil society organisations that has, over the years, worked towards mobile persons' access to rights on a daily basis (Trubeta 2015), and gathered to protest against the uneven access to global mobility and the confinement of people to a detention infrastructure that, earlier, bore the name of Pagani (Alberti 2010). What changed in 2015 was that, under the new government in place after the elections of January 2015, the Greek Coast Guard refrained from pushing back the boats that sought to reach the Aegean Islands (Cabot 2016: 657). However, it did not denote that safe passage would have been guaranteed across that maritime border.

Border aesthetics are entangled with colonialism and diverse forms of subordination that Riikonen labels as the fourth or, indeed, the fifth world. These designations refer to the exploitable shadow labour force where earlier qualifications are not recognized, and where the working conditions are sub-standard. Due to the precariousness of the residence permits, if extant at all, this labour force is kept docile and silent by the looming possibility of being outed and deported at any time (De Genova 2002). While Sakkinen evokes the broader colonial past and its entanglement and continuities in the present day in the form of popular Spanish brands such as the detergent Colon – modified with –ism to directly point at colonialism, it neglects the changing character and continuities of struggle at the sites it documents. One hint at these sites undergoing change was illustrated at the border between Spain and Morocco, in the form of a dark digital print titled *Gurugu Mountain*, initially drawn on a piece of headed paper from the hotel Paradores in Melilla, with the text “Gurugú Mountain is the unnatural border between Africa and Europe” written on the mountain side. This mountainous forest, located close to the border fences around the exclave of Melilla, gives a view down across the border to that town. It became symbolic of the migrant struggle in Morocco as it was the site of informal residence and, over many years, the site where migrants were chased and arrested, and their campsites

were regularly destroyed and burned, just to reappear again. It was also a frequently visited site for different associations and organisations advocating for migrant's rights. Gurugú forest was emptied in 2015, in parallel with the first regularisation campaign (endnote 2) in Morocco, pushing many people further away to the forest of Bolingo that has served as the central site of everyday struggle since. Looking at this particular piece of art that, for me, evokes many memories of encounters and experiential narratives I have collected of those having traversed that site, I wonder how this image might speak to someone not quite as familiar with these sites. Would someone first introduced to this place understand the multiple forms of violence that crisscross the site, despite its emptiness to the eye? And more importantly again, would it convey the meaning of continuity of the struggles at these sites despite the shifting locations of particular sites of border violence?

Regardless of the actual site of the encampment, the strategy of Moroccan officials has remained the same: burning the campsites and arresting everyone, releasing those with a valid authorization of residence, and dispersing those without a document legitimising their stay to various locations across the Moroccan territory. Similar practices of destruction and harassment appear in many other hubs as well, for example around the town of Maghnia located on the Algerian side of the Moroccan border (see EMHRN 2013), less than two hundred kilometres from Melilla, but also in the hubs across the EU territory, of which the town of Calais has become emblematic since the late 1990s (Laacher 2002). Calais also became one of the final stops during Sakkinen and Sivonen's second journey.

In early autumn of 2016, international media attention was geared towards the town of Calais, by the English Channel. As it had done many times before since the late 1990s, the French government promised its UK counterpart to "do away with the problem of migration" in Calais. This time it was to be done by demolishing the jungle, which designated, that time, a more formally maintained campsite than many others by the same name that had been destroyed previously (e.g. EMHRN 2011). These same months saw an increasing number of people arriving in Paris. During that autumn, I conducted fieldwork in the Northern arrondissements in Paris. My initial intention had been to continue work I had done earlier in Calais (e.g. Väyrynen et al. 2017, chapter four) but as the struggles intensified in Paris, it became more meaningful to try to accompany those struggles in the best way I could. Moreover, as the humanitarian catastrophe was unfolding in front of my eyes, with several thousand people sleeping in the streets and constantly harassed and chased by the police, it became imperative

to engage not only for an academic interest (see also Schuster 2011). I was not alone: in the bi-weekly introductory meetings to one of the local solidarity groups, tens of people joined, appalled by the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in their everyday surroundings.

A humanitarian crisis in the form of people on the move in forced transit and thus residing on the streets of Paris is not new either (e.g. Schuster 2011), nor are the struggles by and alongside those who attempt to access a recognized status. In the midst of yet another “resolution of the Calais crisis” in 2016, a solution that was offered was the first reception camp, the Camp Hidalgo, the opening of which was delayed for many months. It was finally opened in early November 2016, after mass arrests and a massive cleaning operation of all irregular dwellings. Most solidarity advocates had been critical of its opening, as it was unlikely to serve for short-term stays in a context where more permanent forms of housing continued to be practically impossible to find. Moreover, many were critical of its presumed function that turned into actual practice: the sorting of those deserving, likely to qualify for an international protection status, and those to be deported. This resentment was captured in Sakkinen’s poster-like drawing titled “Stalingrad Style” that begins with a few lines from a sticker he found nearby the Stalingrad metro station: “Hidalgo’s camp for migrants = selection of migrants / barbed wire fence / control / isolation”. With this piece he evokes contemporary hospitality European style, coupled with enhanced efforts for removal.

Despite it being pivotal in the planning of the journeys, in the actual exhibition the acknowledgement of continuities of struggles finds less space. By this I refer to continuities of these mobilities and the bordering processes that have sought to halt them, rendering only particular sites visible at a given time, in a crisis mode that has been analysed as one of legitimisation (Collyer and King 2016) or of political decision-making (Kynsilehto 2017a) instead of a refugee crisis as such. In the meantime, this selective memorizing undermines the complex corporeal choreographies (Väyrynen et al. 2017) border struggles signify, swiping away the ways in which different locations have been subject to massive mediatization over the years.

### **Engaging positionalities and responsible witnessing**

The travel narrative of Sakkinen and Sivonen depicts a somewhat unstructured journey to sites that are considered as meaningful via different media accounts. The debate between the two



interlocutors, curator and contemporary artist, juxtapose degrees of support for free movement: radical and more conservative takes on the issue of the permeability of borders. What remains with a lesser degree of reflexivity are those privileges, such as available resources, that permit some to go and search for migrant narratives, literally hunting after migrants, and the even more privileged position to leave the site behind and maintain a critical position via distance. This is the privilege foreign researchers, artists and solidarity advocates have, while local residents, whether activists, artists, researchers or others, can hardly do so.

As that of researchers, artist's positionality includes the quest for originality, of seeking to do something someone else has not yet done. The clearest exemplification of this quest is expressed by the travel team's reluctance to do what journalists have been doing repeatedly: to search for people to transmit their first-hand voices of the refugee plight. Another feature during the journey is the enormous pile of discarded lifejackets in Molyvos forming an orange mountain in the northern part of Lesbos Island. Sakkinen thought something needed to be produced about these, as they belong to the intrinsic symbols of the plight of refugees in the deadly Mediterranean Sea. However, Ai Weiwei had already used them for his artworks and there was no artistic room for repeating similar things. Among the adults' vests there were also different children's bathing toys, with signs saying that they are not to be used for life-saving purposes. "Could anything be more touching than linking it to children?" (Sakkinen cited in Sivonen 2017: 146) They form the installation displayed on the museum wall under the name "This is not a life-saving device." These bathing toys illustrate the thin strings to which those who attempt to cross the Mediterranean attach their hopes and desires for a safer future. In a blog post, written right after his return from the second leg of the border odyssey and under the same title, "This is not a life-saving device", Sakkinen (2016) reflects on their journey traversing diverse borders across Europe:

"Visits to refugee camps of all types in several countries – closed, open, official, improvised, legal, illegal, dirty, model. Our white man privilege refugee camp tourism – driving premium rental cars and relaxing in the spas of luxury hotels." (Sakkinen 2016)

A similar reflection reappears a few times in the book, too, yet in the exhibition the position of the witness is left without further reflection. Instead, another piece of artwork which also relates to bathing, this time entwining critique of humanitarian rescue efforts. It is a collection of bright

white bath towels, embroidered in golden letters with the names of the foreign aid and solidarity organisations that had operated on Lesbos. In its mixture of white luxury and whiteness symbolizing innocence, it seemed to create a dichotomy based on assumptions of good, innocent although somewhat naïve locals and bad, if not self-interested then simply naïve humanitarians coming from outside, eager to help but unaware, even disrespectful of local people and practices. This positioning of local activists and humanitarians coming from outside the particular location in direct opposition to one another is replicated in the book, as one lesson learnt during the tour on the island.

Critiques of volunteer tourism and the gaze of what has been framed as ‘popular humanitarianism’ (e.g. Mostafanezhad 2014) are not new. However, some of this critique acknowledges varieties of political orientation and levels of self-reflexivity within these practices, meanwhile reiterating the need to retain a critical orientation not only to structural conditions but also to practices one is implicated with (e.g. King 2016). Whilst this critique has been largely present in different circuits of critical humanitarian or ‘solidarian’ practice if not in written (but see e.g. ReFlActionist Collective 2016), then in spoken forms, any awareness of this kind of critical reflection is not rendered visible. This conveys a sense of a white male gaze from afar, able to see from a God’s-eye optic what is going on and able to unravel power dynamics and hierarchies in place, meanwhile not required to pay attention to other forms of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) and the necessary partiality of perspectives (Clifford 1986). The spectator is then left in the ambiguous position of nodding, together with the artist (and his travel companion, the curator), knowingly to the catastrophic conditions at the border and those futile attempts of naïve people to come and perform search and rescue activities and organise first reception in a context that lacked basic infrastructure. The solution offered to this general catastrophe is a global passport that this privileged white male, a citizen of a Nordic country in the real world, is claiming; a passport that would be out of reach for most of the dwellers from the Global South, let alone many of those storming the fences in Northern Morocco or risking their lives by embarking unseaworthy vessels in order to reach the EU territory. Of these latter, few are those who are able to claim a passport of any kind, due to the cost and the bureaucracy involved.

Trained to see these struggles and resistant practices not only by scholarly interest (e.g. Väyrynen et al. 2017) but also, and more importantly, from a more engaged perspective as a migrants’ rights advocate, I was looking for signs of resistance and solidarity. Corporeal

resistance to border control is captured in the modified Converse sneaker that I described earlier, one that is to serve in the burdensome climb across border fences surrounding Ceuta and Melilla, for example. Failure to acknowledge the multiple counter-movements to the closing of borders in the form of activist networks and individual acts of resistance results in a simplistic narrative of the border regime, its multiple paradoxes and political subjectivities (e.g. Varada Raj 2006; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Rygiel 2011; Väyrynen et al. 2017). Transnational grassroots initiatives such as Watch the Med and its system of providing a green number, Alarm Phone, for those who are attempting to cross the Mediterranean have materialized one form of creative counter-conduct, performing 'disobedient gaze' (Pezzani and Heller 2013). This counter-conduct is enacted in a way that contributes to preventing unnecessary deaths at sea by reminding those who are officially responsible for search and rescue activities of their duties, of pointing out to them the boats found in distress. The phone number can be operated from a distance, enabling the engagement of those who, for various reasons, are unable to travel to the most exposed sites themselves. Moreover, for example in the Western Mediterranean, the Watch the Med network has sought to ally those who share a similar possibility of very limited, if extant access to regular forms of mobility themselves.

While seeking to do it differently from journalistic practices (cf. Möller 2017), the exhibition ended up doing similarly via the material enactments of borders. Whilst the broader and punctuated border critique is necessary, some advice could be taken from the ethnographic value of humility, of the constantly looming possibility of not getting it quite right, of not quite knowing (Cabot 2016). This kind of humility might, perhaps, contribute to conveying also the sense of unpredictability of borders and bordering processes, in the face of which solidarity advocates, ethnographers and people on the move share the condition of incomprehension (Kynsilehto 2017a, 2017b; Perl and Strasser 2018).

## **Conclusions**

I would like to conclude by reiterating what I said when interviewed by the museum staff after exiting the exhibition hall: this was an exhibition that everyone should see and explore carefully. It documented on-going forms of violence at borders that are far from being simply located in the outer circuits. In so doing, it added to the much needed critical iconography of the border infrastructure. By its clever play with familiar trademarks, it also guided the viewer to consider the global economies of these struggles: of the on-going colonisation that translates

not only in the development cooperation and trade policies but the politics of mobility, that is, in the very ways in which borders to the Global North are rendered increasingly impenetrable except for the privileged few from the Global South.

At the same time, however, the exhibition presented a snap-shot of the moment ‘now’, thus failing to account for the continuities of these struggles at borders that date way before the mass mediatisation of the year 2015 and onwards. Moreover, it left practically unaddressed questions related to diverse counter-conducts that are equally present, even if not always similarly observable, across these multiple sites. These counter-conducts resulting in civil disobedience, for example, are the only hope left in the present context that builds on exclusions of multiple kinds.

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### **Endnotes**

1 See his artistic statement and the Manifest of Turborealism on [www.riikosakkinen.com](http://www.riikosakkinen.com).

2 As part of its new migration policy since 2013, Morocco has implemented two regularisation campaigns (2014 and 2016) that sought to ease the access to a residence permit for those who were able to prove they had stayed in the country for several years.

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### **Contributor's note**

Anitta Kynsilehto is Senior researcher at the New Social Research –programme and Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University, Finland. She is the author of *Gender and Mobility: A Critical Introduction* (with Elina Penttinen).