

400 – the image behind | They sought peace and found death

According to data from refugee organisations such as UNHCR and IOM, 400 refugees had already died on the Mediterranean route in 2016 until 16 February 2016. European governments, on their part, submit figures to limit the number of refugees – Horst Seehofer (Germany): 200,000, Asylum Summit Austria: 37,500, former Prime Minister Manuel Valls (France): 30,000. In September 2015, Angela Merkel claimed “We can do it”. Yet, barely six months later, it seems as if we, or the governments, respectively, are merely achieving to name numbers and upper limits in order to provide the citizens living within the Schengen borders with an undefined sense of security.

Such statistical sedatives are used to blur the suffering of ‘foreigners’. What is often forgotten or obscured in a very cynical way, however: those statistics are about actual individuals who share an adverse fate.

It is questionable whether an introduction of caps would even be covered by international law altogether. After all, each of the 28 EU Member States have signed the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (‘1951 Refugee Convention’) and its 1967 Protocol. Against the backdrop of these facts, the question arises whether the slogan of the welcome or recognition culture titled ‘**Refugees Welcome**’ should not rather be renamed to ‘**Justice Welcome**’.

An attempt at visualisation

Statistical figures are devoid of any emotion. As long as the number remains an abstract combination of figures, it divests itself of any purport. Conversely, the moment the number is translated into an image, it regains its original thrust. 400 white pictograms in the shape of those who had died were affixed to the shop window of a premise in Vienna’s second district to visualise those statistics in the most conventional and comprehensible way.

The depiction and positioning of the pictogram refers to Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian-Kurdish refugee child, who had died on a tug boat at the age of 3 in a (commonplace) accident and was later found dead on a beach near Bodrum

in Turkey. While, up until then, images of an influx of living people into our countries had been mounted as threatening parallel image worlds via various media in populist manner, this image was one of the first to spin news reporting in the opposite direction, albeit only for a briefly.

Although this had just happened on 2 September 2015, the menacing numbers game, illustrated with pictures of the living, gained upper hand again shortly thereafter. Exactly half a year later, the conceptual artist Ai Weiwei expresses himself with a photographic quotation by recreating the original photo with his own body lying on the beach in Greece, the country to whose beaches Aylan Kurdi had been washed ashore.

There are ongoing media debates whether the galvanising image of a dead child can be shown, only to then use images of the living shortly thereafter and thus (re-)creating threatening, anti-refugee scenarios.

It hence only seems logical to keep the images of all casualties present in public perception in a representative form – at least, until this dying has finally come to an end. In 50 years, it will have become too late to erect a memorial for this European tragedy that, already today, is omnipresent and of which we are fully aware.

In addition to the visualisation with pictograms, a performative event took place on 26 June 2016. The incomprehensible figures were to be made tangible through the presence of real persons in a public street. Almost 200 participants followed the invitation, and were lined up in 32 rows with 6 people each in a choreographed setting. This 'living installation' was documented both with photographs and film – a film about being or not being or having been. A film about every single attempt at a failed arrival in a supposedly peaceful society.

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