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Performing Like an Asylum Seeker: Paradoxes of Hyper-Authenticity

Catalan designer Antonio Miro was the source of much controversy when he employed refugees and illegal immigrants from West Africa as models for his Barcelona fashion show. The set for the show featured a replica of *cayacos*— an open boat used to transport illegal immigrants from Africa to the Spanish shore—as eight refugees, mostly from Senegal, walked down the runway sporting designer clothes from Miro’s latest collection. While some believed that this event called attention to immigration and asylum issues in Spain, others found the show in bad taste and exploitive.

German director Christoph Schlingensiefel confined asylum seekers in containers that were installed in a central square in Vienna, enabling the public to view their daily routines for a week via an Internet TV channel. Mimicking the format of the television reality show, *Big Brother*, *Foreigners Out* (2000), a public project commissioned by Wiener Festwochen, asked the viewing public to cast their votes in a mock process where, after all others had been eliminated, one asylum seeker would “win” the coveted prize: an Austrian spouse and the legal right to remain in Austria. The project turned into a spectacle and engaged the public in a passionate political debate.

These two examples, neither located in community works that rely on unmediated presence and on sharing of the experience, nor within more mainstream theatre and drama that feature fictionalised and often romanticised embodiments of exilic figures, belong to a middle sphere of exilic performances. Both the fashion show and the

public performance use actual asylum seekers and illegal immigrants as a means of making political statements. They play out the ambiguity between the performativity of the staged and the theatricality of the authentic. In different ways and to varying degrees, they exemplify the phenomenon that I will call here the *hyper-authentic*—where the authenticity of the subject is partly constructed through the gaze of the beholder. Although the projects in question use real refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants as performers in events that are indeed about exilic issues, the artistic frameworks are not always chosen or controlled by the performing subjects. In these works, exilic voices and bodies are often subordinated, to a greater or lesser degree, to the artistic and/or entrepreneurial concepts of the established Western director and designer respectively. Nevertheless, I would argue that the relationship between performance ethics and efficacy remains ambiguous making these case studies difficult to dismiss as merely gratuitous.

The Hyper-Authentic

The term hyper-authentic is inspired by Jean Baudrillard's famous concept of the hyperreal. For Baudrillard, the hyperreal described a world of simulations that no longer had original referents and thus questioned the whole idea of authenticity. To a large degree, the hyper-authentic embodies expectations of the beholder and the tendency of the performing subject to meet those expectations. Like the hyperreal, the hyper-authentic is also produced through representation. While Baudrillard's notion suggests that everything is placed on the same plane, making the relationship between the signifier and the signified obsolete, the hyper-authentic still carries the tensions between presence and representation, theatricality and performativity, immediacy and mediation. The use of the hyphen, indicating the tensions and somewhat paradoxical

dualities inherent in the phenomenon of the hyper-authentic, suggests that the hyper-authentic has not yet fully rid itself of its semiotic roots.

Although the examples I will consider here place asylum seekers and immigrants in situations where they are asked to perform themselves—in acts that often reveal the very paradoxes of authenticity—all is not turned into a Baudrillardian simulacrum. The relationship between the signifier— residence permit, work permit, visa, passport and other legal documents—and the signified—the exile as performing subject/object—is still very relevant. The meaning generated through this relationship between sign and referent has very real existential and material consequences, often becoming the deciding factor between permission to remain in the country and deportation.

The hyper-authentic, however, both in the performance of asylum and in its everyday reality, is still in a way a mediated presence. Within the legal system, as in performance art, the exile is required to select, condense, and pitch his/her experience so that it comes across as convincing and valid. It is not only a matter of *being* an asylum seeker, a refugee or an immigrant, but also of *performing* accordingly in order not to be rendered bogus.¹ For Derrida, this is one of the central paradoxes of hospitality:

¹ In Britain 80% of refugees, fail to meet the government's criteria for granting asylum. , An article published in The Observer, for example, highlights the inability of the immigration system to recognize the experience of women asylum seekers:

About a third of all asylum seekers are female, yet campaigners argue that the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees does not take into account women's experiences. [...] Meanwhile, the fact that a woman in their initial interview might say she's been persecuted because she's the wife or sister of an activist, or because she was involved in low-level political activity such as hiding someone or cooking for political meetings, is sometimes not taken seriously. ("It is as if I'm Dead Already" The Observer, Sunday July 22, 2007)

[...] the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence. (Derrida, 2000, p. 15)

Hyper-authenticity is a translation strategy of embodying the foreigner through the language of the host. The hyper-authentic takes place between the beholder's expectations and assumptions of what a "real" asylum seeker *is* and the exile's need to meet these expectations and legitimise his/her status—to prove his/her own *authenticity*. By calling attention to the position of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, the performances that this paper will examine both perpetuate and subvert the phenomenon of the hyper-authentic.

Model Refugees

Antonio Miro, who engaged eight illegal immigrants to showcase his 2008 collection at the Barcelona fashion week, is one of the most celebrated fashion designers in Spain. He has received a number of international awards, and, among other projects, he designed the entire wardrobe for the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992. His designs are famous for being simple, elegant and smart, but he also does not shy away from an occasional provocation. In one of his previous shows, for instance, he used prisoners as models. The fishing boat, wooden boxes, and illegal immigrants, featured in his latest controversial fashion event, were a clear allusion to the wave of refugees arriving from poverty-stricken sub-Saharan Africa to the Spanish shores in search of employment and a better life.

According to Human Rights Watch, this year 25 000 illegal immigrants arrived on the Canary Islands alone, while 3000 are estimated to have drowned during

the dangerous ten-day crossing in makeshift boats that often carry up to one hundred people.² Two years ago, the Spanish government decided to grant asylum to some 700.000 illegal immigrants and since then 1 million new illegal immigrants have entered Spain. Human Rights Watch further reports poor conditions in overcrowded detention centres where large numbers of unaccompanied children, who also arrived in the open boats, are particularly at risk. The image of *cayucos* transporting exhausted and desperate people to Spanish shores populated with sunbathing tourists is iconic not only of the Spanish immigration issues that have spiralled out of control, but also of wider contradictions. For instance, a large number of people who embark on the perilous journey towards Europe are Senegalese fisherman unable to compete with massive European trawlers. The Spanish government's decision to grant asylum to a very large number of immigrants was not just an act of generosity, but also a way of supplying cheap labour as the country was going through a construction boom. Although the situation has often been described as a humanitarian crisis because of the huge number of deaths incurred during the sea voyage and because the Spanish government needed assistance in coping with the influx of illegal immigrants, Europe has been very restrictive in granting visas to Africans. For many, boarding a plane for Europe instead of paying for a perilous journey in a makeshift wooden boat is simply not an option. It is only recently that the EU has considered opening employment centres in African countries to provide opportunities for legal immigration, but it has at the same time set up a rapid reaction force of border patrol to stop immigration.

According to Miro, the concept of his Barcelona fashion show and the usage of illegal immigrants as models that he found through an aid agency, was a way of

² See Human Rights Watch website
<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/07/26/spain16449.htm>

confronting the issues of immigration and the plight of asylum seekers. How do real illegal immigrants on the runway at Barcelona Fashion Week embody those issues? And how is the authenticity of asylum seekers/models reconciled with the theatricality of a fashion show?

In the fashion show context, the wooden boat and boxes, the invitations designed in the form of a visa application, and the bodies of illegal immigrants all became aesthetic objects. The predominant colours of Miro's collection were beige and ivory and the boat and wooden carts were painted to match. The visual contrast between the black-skinned models and the light colours of Miro's new clothing line attracted spectator attention while at the same time heightened the sense of objectification of the immigrant as an exotic Other.

The hyper-authentic was established through a promise that the bodies moving down the runway were indeed not models, but illegal immigrants; that they hid, underneath Miro's slick designs, the scars and proof of their dramatic "true" stories. Since the spectators did not know any individual details about the models, aside from the fact that they were "boat people", they could freely ascribe whatever meaning and identity they found most convincing, or most *real*. In other words, the reality that the fashion show referred to became so beautified and generic that it could only embody the hyper-authentic—a world within which the immigrant/models became curiosities.

Nevertheless, the connection between signs and referents was easily made, and the show incited a great deal of controversy. Representatives of Senegalese immigrant communities were offended and deemed the show frivolous. The pro-immigrant group, SOS Racismo, agreed with the designer that "not only NGOs denounce the situation the immigrants are going through when they come by boat to Spain." (BBC on-line, 2007) When it was reported that the immigrants were paid a

“token” sum to appear in the show, the designer was quoted as saying: “I can’t give them work but I can give them small hope of earning money and perhaps something else will arise for them.” (Guardian on-line, 2007). No comments from the immigrants were cited, but reading the images from the show it is evident that they were not “performing” the legal and existential circumstances of their immigration. Rather, the immigrants took the gig seriously and did what they had been asked to do—they were runway models for the evening.

Given the fact that the immigrants borrowed the body language of the runway model for Miro’s collection show, public outrage was directed less to the fashion show than to the background story used for publicising the event. This is at the same time the most subversive and the most problematic aspect of the show. Paradoxically, the conventions of a runway performance have, to some extent, subverted the hyper-authenticity of the illegal immigrants. Within the fashion show framework, the asylum seekers fulfilled the primary function of the event—they simply modelled. Nevertheless, in the ethical debates surrounding the show, nobody has yet mentioned that the immigrants performed their modelling task professionally but were only paid a token sum, which perhaps might be the most ethically problematic issue of the case. The somewhat theoretical focus on authenticity ethics thus diverted attention from the more practical consideration of employment equity for immigrants.³

Asylum Seekers as Übermarinettes

German theatre director, Christoph Schlingensiefel further problematises and perpetuates the problem of the hyper-authentic in his public art project “Foreigners

³ Although I have contacted the designer to find out more details about the conditions of their engagement in the show and what happened to them afterwards, I have never received a reply.

Out!” (*Ausländer Raus!*). Schlingensief is well known as an agent-provocateur whose controversial films, performances, television work and public art often push ambiguous subject matters to extremes, blur boundaries between artifice and reality, and probe socio-political contradictions. His toying with the notion of authenticity by using mentally disabled people in his short film, *Freakstars* (2003), engaging repentant neo-Nazi’s in his Zurich production of *Hamlet* (2001), and asylum seekers in *Foreigners Out!* (2000) has sparked political and ethical debates in the German media. His work oscillates between being an effective new form of politically engaged art and a spectacle of simulated reality that no matter how fierce the response, reproduces what it set out to scrutinize.

Schlingensief’s public project, “*Foreigners Out!*,” focussed on the rights of asylum seekers. It was staged in Vienna and documented by filmmaker Paul Poet. Although the issues that this project deals with have wider significance, the impetus for the project, as well as its development, related to a series of electoral successes of Austria’s far-right Freedom Party and its leader, Joerg Haider, whose strong anti-immigration views defined his campaign of 1999 and 2000. One of the posters for his electoral campaign featured the overtly xenophobic term *überfremdung*, last employed by the Nazis, to describe a country overrun with foreigners. This development towards the far right, prompted the EU to put Austria under diplomatic sanctions as a way of voicing its outrage not only over the Freedom Party’s anti-immigration approach, but also over what this party represents with its checkered past involving strong Nazi ties. Schlingensief set up his project with a sense of political urgency as a means of exploring the ambiguities of the Austrian populace who, on the one hand, unmasked their xenophobic sentiments and cast their ballots

overwhelmingly in favour of Haider, while on the other, staged a wave of political protests against the Freedom Party and its anti-immigration campaign.

For one week, Schlingensiefel kept his asylum seekers confined in a container that resembled a detention centre and at the same time alluded to a concentration camp. Unlike the actual detention centre, located on the outskirts of Vienna, Schlingensiefel's container stood in the heart of the city in Herbert-von-Karajan square, in front of the *Staadsooper* making a stark contrast to the opera building's architectural grandeur. On top of the container a huge banner proclaimed AUSLÄNDER RAUS! Cameras installed in the container enabled the public to constantly observe the asylum seekers and eventually to vote some of them out of the country in the style of the reality show, Big Brother. The last one to remain was promised a monetary prize and marriage to an Austrian citizen to get immigration papers. Biographies of the protagonists, describing them in exaggerated cultural and racial stereotypes, were posted on the director's web sites. Schlingensiefel acted as a kind of MC of the event giving provocative, sometimes contradictory speeches and engaging in debates with the public that in the course of the event grew increasingly heated, even physical in some instances.

The hyper-authentic that the presence of the actual asylum seekers invoked within Schlingensiefel's constructed, artificial framework, created a situation of a complex interplay between real and simulated that not only challenged the political views of Austrians, but also at times tested the intelligence of the viewing/participating public. Paul Poet's documentary of the event catches some of the hilarity of the debates such as the moment when an outraged elderly woman, whose opinions seemed to corroborate those of the Freedom Party, yells at Schlingensiefel to get out of Austria and calls him "You artist!" in a tone of voice that

made the word “artist” sound derogatory. As her anger grew, her argument got increasingly more confused until finally she seemed unable to distinguish where *art*, *artistry* and *artificiality* ended and where reality began. “You artist!” came out sounding like a swear word, perhaps not only because the lady had a different political position, which the event was ridiculing, but because she no longer knew precisely what her political view was.

Arguably, the most thought-provoking instance of confused realities and perceptions took place when pro-immigrant activists took the provocation at face value and stormed the performance site. Climbing onto the container, they attempted to remove the Nazi slogan and to “free” the asylum seekers. During the seven days of Schlingensiefel’s show, passionate and aggressive reactions ensued mostly from adherents of the right-wing. On a couple of occasions, security guards, employed to ensure the safety of the asylum seekers, had to intervene to protect the director. The asylum seekers remained relatively safe, up to the moment when the pacifist group came to “save” them. It was only when the activists climbed on the container and tried to take it apart that the asylum seekers were in real danger and had to be evacuated. This episode is in a way a literal and most ironic illustration of Derrida’s paradox of hospitality that points to the close epistemological proximity between terms *hospitality* and *hostility* both derived from the word foreigner (*hostis*) “welcomed as guest or as enemy” (Derrida, 2000, p. 45). Schlingensiefel’s provocation was not only a critique of a xenophobia that at times verged towards Nazism, it also exposed the naiveté of the political opposition, whose acts of misplaced hospitality proved to be almost as dangerous.

The project has turned into an open debate and to some extent into a morality play for the Austrian public. Schlingensiefel blurred the lines between the factual and

the fabricated, confusing previously firmly-held political positions, exposing truisms as ambiguities, and making the familiar strange and uncanny. Although his work can, in a certain light, be seen to reflect Brechtian visions of a politically engaged theatre of *Verfremdung*, it is through a very different set of devices and production ethics. In *Foreigners Out*, the concept of *Verfremdung* depends on the initially introduced axiom of authenticity. In other words, the asylum seekers need to be genuine, since the strategy of confusing facts and fabrication is key to Schlingensiefel's *Verfremdungseffekt* as a means of destabilising the firmly-held positions and preconceptions of the public. If the people in the container are real asylum seekers, what else is real? Are some elements of their biographies real? Where are they taken after they are voted out of the country? Is their deportation real? What about the winner? Does he really get the money? The hyper-authenticity was stretched to its limits and turned into its own parody—it became an estrangement device.

To disguise their identities, most of the people held in the container wore wigs, hats and sunglasses, which further turned the whole idea of identity and authenticity into a masquerade. In one scene on the roof of the container, they were taking part in an obviously staged language class, trying to learn the language of their host country by mechanically repeating German words. In another scene, a tall, black man with a blond wig, danced to a German cabaret song that contained blatantly racist lyrics. Asked to perform their authenticity, the asylum seekers became to some extent, actors in a drag show. This parody of authenticity echoes Judith Butler's concept of "subversive body acts" where drag performances are seen as a means of exposing the construction of gender. In this case, however, the subversions of asylum identities were limited, since the people in the container were not in control of the performance. Rather it was Schlingensiefel who was the mediator between the pseudo detention

centre and the outside world, “directing” the asylum seekers’ “subversive body acts” most of the time. Schlingensief used asylum seekers as Übermarionettes. More specifically, he used the exilic body as an artistic device, a metonymic embodiment strategy in a morality play staged for the outside world. At one point during the event, the Austrian Nobel laureate, Elfride Jelinek, addressed the crowd assembled in front of the container announcing that she and the asylum seekers had put together a puppet show about asylum. This metatheatrical episode made the parallel between puppets and asylum seekers obvious.

Schlingensief nevertheless seemed fully aware of the ethical issues that his project brought to the surface. At one point during the interview, he stares into Poet’s camera and declares that after all was said and done, this was not a project that offered much to the asylum seekers involved—in the end, no one was going to be awarded a green card. In a way, the objectification of the asylum seekers in this project could be viewed as a deliberate representation of a representation—a mirroring of the way their personal and legal identities are embodied, represented, and instrumentalised in society. In that light, it could be argued that Schlingensief repeated and exaggerated the pattern of instrumentalisation of asylum seekers as a means of social critique—a form of counter-instrumentalisation. However, one of the key ethical dilemmas of the project lies in the scene where the black man in a wig dances cheerfully to the beat of a racist German song. The question still remains: did the man speak German and could he understand the lyrics? An answer to that question would determine whether his dance was a “subversive body act” and a deliberate parodic performance of hyper-authenticity, or a manipulation on the part of the director that did not do much more than objectify and exploit its subject. The documentary of the project, as well as other available materials, focused on the

director and on the reactions of the public. Poet's film includes Schlingensief talking at length about the project as well as brief interviews with critics, theorists, politicians, activists, collaborators, members of the public, and fellow artists. Interestingly, not one of the asylum seekers was asked to comment on the project and his/her involvement in it.

Representation and Ambivalence

Both Miro and Shlingensief put asylum seekers on display, making, as Barabra Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out in her writing on live displays, "the status of a performer problematic, for people become signs of themselves" (1991, 415). In the projects of Miro and Schlingensief the immigrants move within an imposed mise-en-scene, while someone else, someone with "better" qualifications and "proper" language skills speaks in their name and on their behalf. Through such a representation much has been left unspoken in the relationship between artists and their subjects. Julia Kristeva finds a suppressed conflict underneath the silence of the exile:

When the foreigner—the speech-denying strategist—does not utter his conflict, he in return takes root n his own world of a rejected person whom no one is supposed to hear. The rooted one who is deaf to the conflict and the wanderer walled in by his conflict thus stand firmly, facing each other. It is a seemingly peaceful coexistence that hides the abyss. (Krsteva, 1991, p. 17)

Within the given framework, asylum seekers have no room for resistance, for even the subversions of hyper-authenticity are part of the mise-en scene. Miro and Schlingensief use asylum seekers as devices to voice their own political concerns, while the main subjects of the debate are kept more or less silent. The two artists position themselves as representatives of the issue in question, while the actual presence of an asylum seeker serves to better illustrate the point. The idea of

subversion is understood as a *mise-en-scène* performed by exiles, but directed and controlled by the artists.

Nevertheless, it might be useful to look at these two projects from a slightly different angle. Internet search results for Miro not only link us to where we might buy the designer's latest collection but also to the BBC's site where the article on the controversial fashion show is featured followed by links on African refugees and Spanish immigration issues. While Schlingensief's project indisputably relies on the objectification of asylum seekers, by locking them in containers and covering the city centre in xenophobic slogans, the project not only alludes to reality television, but also ominously echoes Austria's Nazi past, warning against its current right-wing trends. With all its ethical shortcomings, it is still a daring piece of politically engaged public art. The ambiguities of using, perpetuating and eventually subverting the phenomenon of the hyper-authentic in these two projects suggest some potentially useful strategies that could be further explored in staging asylum and immigration outside the mainstream. Two aspects might be particularly relevant—moving beyond the narratives of victimisation and using spectacle to place issues of immigration in the centre of public debate.

Miro's fashion show involves allusions to the hardships of illegal immigrants, but it also moves beyond the signs of suffering, by placing them in an unexpected context— at the centre of the glamour industry and high society. Even if some of the aspects of Miro's concept could not help but be rendered superficial, the act itself is still one of transgression. It employs the “new arrivals” from Africa in a gig outside the usual palette of underpaid physical jobs reserved for immigrants. The show trespasses class hierarchy and there, where it subverts expectations, a potential space for debate opens.

One of the many paradoxes of Schlingensief's project includes ways in which it moves beyond the voyeuristic consumption of asylum narratives, where hardship and suffering happen to the *Other* in remote places of the world or in remote spheres of societies underworld. In such a constellation the figures of victimisers are usually equally distant and sufficiently different from the viewing public, so that the "pleasure" in watching unfortunate lives of *Others* is not disturbed. Schlingensief takes the process of watching to the point of absurdity by using techniques of a reality television show. The public is entertained, but also confused, and finally agitated. Parody and drag emerge here as the key strategies of staging asylum. However, neither Miro's nor Schlingensief's strategies of subverting narratives of hardship are truly empowering for the asylum seekers and illegal immigrants that perform in their projects for a number of reasons analysed earlier in this paper. The core of the ethical problems with the two projects is that Miro and Schlingensief use subversive strategies as a means of representation, not allowing the performers to negotiate, fashion, and appropriate those strategies in ways they find most suited to their bodies, voices, and histories—allowing the projects to aid exilic self-expression.

Nevertheless, both projects raise awareness of immigration issues and make use of controversy in order to spark public debate. Schlingensief, by placing the container with asylum seekers in the heart of Austria's capital, positioned immigration issues as a crucial political question and a test of Austrian democracy. He used the city as stage along the lines described by Krzysztof Wodicko, a Polish-born émigré artist known for his politically charged public projections:

The city operates as a monumental stage and a script in the theatre of our way of life, perpetuating our preconceived and outdated notions of identity and community, preserving the way we relate to each other, the way we perceive others and ourselves. [...] Media art, performance art, performative design: they must interfere with these everyday aesthetics if

they wish to contribute ethically to a democratic process. (Wodiczko, 2000, p. 88)

At the end of Schlingensiefel's project, a number of theatre artists and other figures took to the stage in front of the container to share their views of this project. One of the speakers pointed out that it was curious that all the protests and debates took place in front of a pseudo detention centre, while there was an actual detention centre just a few kilometres away, on the outskirts of Vienna, where no one had ever ventured either to free asylum seekers or to demand their deportation. A similar paradox could be identified in relation to Miro's project. The report on the controversial fashion show not only sparked debate in Spain, but also travelled internationally including headlines in the Guardian and reports on the BBC. Hundreds of illegal immigrants working below minimum wage, at construction jobs for instance, rarely prompt public debate about exploitation issues, but when eight of them appear in a fashion show the issue of exploitation of illegal immigrants makes headlines world-wide. What is it that makes the performance of asylum more powerful than the reality of it? Guy Debord's seminal work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, opens with a quotation from Feurbach, that might provide an answer: "But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to essence...illusion *only* is sacred, truth *profane*." (Debord, 1992, p. 11)

Further to this line of thought, perhaps the genuine needs to become hyper-authentic—the sign of itself—in order to call attention to itself and eventually carve out a space for intervention. This last point should not only be taken as a reiteration of the critique embodied in Debord's notion of the spectacular society, but also as a potential interventionist strategy of counter-appropriation that might deserve further exploration through practices of staging asylum and immigration issues.

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