

Uppsala Rhetorical Studies **U R S**

S R U *Studia Rhetorica Upsaliensia*

ENGAGING  vulnerability

**CAN A PERSON BE
ILLEGAL?**

Refugees, Migrants
and Citizenship in Europe

Schellekens & Peleman
Inflatable Refugee

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Schellekens & Peleman — Inflatable Refugee —

Today's society is guided by fear.

This process started decades ago, in the 70's, when the post-war euphoria was brutally interrupted by the oil crisis. In the 80's and the 90's the big ideologies started to crumble, which opened the path for fear to enter into all kinds of domains in our lives.

We are afraid of the financial crisis, of the other, of losing our jobs, of not raising our kids properly, afraid of terror and climate change.

When we let our lives be guided by fear, we no longer live life to the fullest. As we daily operate under high levels of stress, caused by the continuous defence/attack mode, our mental world is reduced to sustaining the self.

This status does not allow us to live with a kaleidoscopic view, but rather keeps our attention focused on the danger.

This narrows down our observations, our thoughts and eventually our lives.

In his book 'Culture Of Fear', British-Hungarian sociologist Frank Furedi states that in the Western world people have lost the ability to cope with uncertainties. In the past uncertainty was linked to a positive potential. Nowadays we want to exclude risk from our society and have come to talk of insecurity in only negative terms.

What could be the antidote for our fears? How can we deal with uncertainty? How could we deconstruct our self-created borders without falling into chaos?

Art functions as a sensitive, visionary mirror of society, reflecting all levels of time and space in which a society exists. It dissects all things known, poses questions and presents alternative realities. It confronts us with beauty and ugliness. Art does not necessarily comfort us; it tears.

Art needs time. It demands us to pause and to look and dig deeper than we are used to. It is in this time frame that art unravels itself and shows its reality.

We believe art has the capacity to take up the role of a powerful, visionary voice in society. We believe art can and should be part of daily life, because it thrives at the very centre of it.

In order for it to be so, art should be at the centre of the debate. Art making is the process of distillation, observation and reflection, returned and presented as an alternative reality.

We believe that sharing this alternative is best done in a space accessible for all. We believe that instead of solely inviting the audience into the world of the artist, the artist should also step into the daily lives of the audience. Into the common spaces where life goes on, much as we do in schools, hospitals, etc.

This is what we call the 'art-for-all' principle, which we apply in our art practice.

As an artist collective, we are trying to achieve a 'blending into society' with an artistic imaginary that touches sensible and topical themes in society.

The blend of surrealism, humour, poetry and compassion takes away the audience's fear from the works presented. But when you peel away those layers, you will soon find the works scouring against you. This is the moment when the works have caught the real attention of the audience. As we mostly operate in public space, this means we catch the attention of a lot of people simultaneously and make them reflect on what they see on the spot, mostly in our presence.

'Inflatable Refugee' [2015], Schellekens & Peleman

Coinciding with the current migration crisis from East to West, we created 'The Inflatable Refugee'. A large inflatable adult male figure that represents a seated refugee.

The 'Inflatable Refugee' gazes blankly into the distance. Has he arrived at a safe haven, or will he be refused and sent back to whence he came? His sheer size allows him to look over and beyond us and keep watch on the horizon, not limited by borders or documents. It makes him an inescapable, undeniable presence.

We proportionally enlarged the 'Inflatable Refugee' to match the reactions his arrival in the Western world evoked. His size represents how we perceive him. Do we see him as a human or as a problem? Is his presence an opportunity or a threat, devoid of human characteristics? Questions of uncertainty galore.

We have chosen to create this inflatable figure from the same material as the boats, used by human traffickers to cross the Mediterranean Sea. It's too fragile to withstand the waves of the sea, making the passengers on these boats extremely vulnerable.

We created 'Inflatable Refugee' so that he would be able to travel on water. Seated on a pontoon he floats and passes the skylines of big world cities and the lives of the people that inhabit them. 'Inflatable Refugee' brings a message. His presence is undeniable. By introducing the surreal figure of Inflatable Refugee in a city, citizens become aware that something is different, something is brought into

their urban life that they did not see before. Inflatable Refugee will be the citizens' fellow citizen for a certain amount of time.

‘Inflatable Refugee’ is, in a way, an iconic representation of how we as a society perceive the other. Its appearance, a very large, inflated, seated male figure seems at first sight harmless. Yet again, what is presented through this looming presence is the very reason we have become afraid of ‘the other’.

The large figure has the unique capability of collectively pausing daily urban life. This pausing is an important first step to start reflection.

‘Moving Stories’ [2015], Schellekens & Peleman

We set up the ‘Moving Stories’ project because we detected a (growing) gap between newcomers and natives in many places in the world.

The goal is to establish mutual respect, understanding and empathy between newcomers and natives.

To reach this goal we have set up a correspondence project to create a neutral zone for a nuanced debate.

With the ‘Moving Stories’ project we invite newcomers (recent refugees/migrants) to write a letter to an anonymous fellow (native) citizen. We do not give directions concerning the content of these letters.

The white pages serve as a neutral zone in which the person who is writing the letter can slowly form his/her thoughts and pass on the message he/she finds important to share.

Together with the writers, we post the letters in mailboxes of random addresses.

With the letter comes a stamped post card, which the receiver of the letter can use to return an answer to the author of the letter.

‘Moving Stories’ was first launched in Antwerp, Belgium in

February 2016 and later the same year in Uppsala, Sweden and Copenhagen, Denmark. In all three cities we worked together with a group of recent refugees and completed the correspondence project. All participating individuals perceived the project as positive. They felt the correspondence project gave a positive voice to their situation and enabled them to directly step into the world of their fellow citizens, a world they often described as being difficult to penetrate.

The respondents of the letters reacted positively and empathically to the letters and the stories they received in their mailboxes. Some of them reached out to the authors, invited them to their houses or offered the letter writers (professional) networks.

‘Moving Stories’ is a small, but effective interference in urban societies. The idea is to weave an invisible web between people unknown to one another, to have them communicate directly and to function as a support in filling the gaps of urban anonymity.

It is an artistic intervention in which artists have the opportunity to modify a current reality and leave their footprint on human relations.