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// Sabine Nielsen

STUCK BETWEEN DESTINATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON PEJK MALINOVSKI'S VIRTUAL REALITY PROJECT *THIS ROOM*

"Time is like a train that has stopped in a station. The seconds, the minutes, the hours, they are very slow. It's not a prison, my room is not a prison, but in a way it's a prison, that just takes away my life, my age, my youth, I cannot go back, I cannot go forward". These words are uttered by a young man describing his experiences of living in a camp in Denmark as a rejected asylum seeker, and they appear in a recently produced virtual reality installation entitled *This Room* (2018). The installation explores and exposes the harsh, stressful and often traumatizing living conditions of refugees, and as a critical and political gesture, it thus seeks to extend visibility and audibility to those existing in globalization's shadows, consigned as they are to life in camps.

In my article, I will approach the topic of this special issue, i.e. critical responses to the 'refugee crisis' in art, through a case study of this specific installation project. In 2015–2018 I conducted a practice based curatorial research project entitled *Transit: Art, Mobility and Migration in the Age of Globalization*. The project took its thematic point of departure in the 'refugee crisis' and it consisted of an exhibition at *KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces*, Køge/Denmark, a series of commissioned art projects realized in contested transit zones, an educational program, and a series of talks and debates organized in collaboration with the Danish newspaper *Information*. In this article, I will focus specifically on the formerly mentioned virtual-reality project produced by the poet and sound artist Pejk Malinovski. I will choose to centre attention on this particular project because it has been created by means of a participatory methodological approach, because it experiments aesthetically with the blurring of boundaries between documentary and fiction, and because it seeks to facilitate conflictual encounters at a series of different sites:

Fig. 1: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at Copenhagen Central Station. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Ole Bo Jensen

Aspects all of which will appear important for my discussion of the project's production of effects and affects. Malinovski's project entitled *This Room*, which was recently selected for the renowned *International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam*,[1] is about refugees who arrived in Denmark in 2015 and their subsequent fates in refugee camps. I will start by presenting and reflecting on Malinovski's project focusing specifically on the critical potential of its blurring of the boundaries between the documentary and the fictional. Subsequently, I will analyse some of the effects it has produced, not least in its capacity as a site-specific version at Copenhagen Central Station, mediated by refugees and volunteers from refugee organizations. Drawing on conflict theory and radical democracy theory, I will argue that artistic forms of critique necessitate the creation of agonistic contact zones in which negotiations can take place and counter-hegemonic publics be created.[2] Furthermore, I will end by arguing that taking a critical approach involves being partisan, i.e. taking a position which is dissensual, convincing and politically positioned.

STATIONS AS SOCIALLY NEGOTIATED TRANSIT SITES Working on the *Transit* project, I commissioned a series of art projects, including the aforementioned by Malinovski, that were to focus attention on the different kinds of travellers whose paths intersect every day in public transit nodes. The overarching curatorial ambition of the project was on the one hand to explore key themes in contemporary art pertaining to mobility, migration, and globalization, and on the other hand to incorporate present-day public transit nodes as specific sites of such explorations.[3] *Transit* took place at – and in the case of some of the performance projects; between – KØS, Sydhavn Station Exhibition Space, Copenhagen Central Station, and the stations on the E line between Copenhagen and Køge. Copenhagen Central Station and the E line were chosen because they are characterised by a high degree of social complexity. This is partly due to the fact that stations literally connect multiple local, national and international zones. As public spaces, stations such as these thus make it possible to show how contemporary urban society is both locally embedded and defined by far-reaching networks[4]. Also, they enable an investigation of public transit sites as concentrated sites of social negotiation.

Copenhagen Central Station is a cardinal example of a transit site as a zone of social contact and conflict. It is a place where tourists and commuters cross paths on a daily basis, and where migrants and refugees also pass through. In the summer of 2015,

1) The project has also been selected for *Tempo Documentary Festival* in Sweden.

2) For the concept of 'publics and counterpublics' see Warner (1958).

3) For further reflections on this particular aspect of the project see Dahl Nielsen (2019a) and Dahl Nielsen (2019b).

4) This point is further underlined by the fact that the E line passes through an area west of Copenhagen that has been characterised by extensive migration since the 1970s.

for example, when I started working on the *Transit* project, large groups of refugees started to arrive at the station, where volunteers gathered spontaneously to bid them welcome and offer various kinds of assistance. Shortly after, however, both the refugees and volunteers were evicted from the station, since the authorities claimed that they were hindering the free movement of other passengers. The volunteers then requested the use of a room at the station, so they could help arriving refugees without causing any disturbances. After lengthy negotiations, this request was granted, but only on condition that use of the room would end in the spring of 2016. After this deadline, volunteers continued to try to help the refugees that kept arriving, albeit in smaller numbers, at Copenhagen Central Station. Now they went through the station on an ad hoc basis, looking for people in transit who needed help. Summing up, the events at Copenhagen Central Station show that transit sites are public spaces where persons in transit – in different ways, to different extents, and with radically different consequences – come into contact.

LIMBO-LIKE STAYS IN SMALL ROOMS *This Room* is an exemplary art project within the context of the *Transit* exhibition: it highlights the fact that mobility flows are often characterized by conflicts, negotiations, and the playing out of asymmetrical power relations. In the summer of 2015, Europe experienced a large influx of refugees and migrants, including people from war-torn Syria. Images of these people on their way through Europe dominated the media. With *This Room*, Malinovski raises the question as to where they all went. That is, the refugees who walked up the highways, who came on trains and trucks and boats, and who camped out at the Copenhagen Central Train Station. Many of them were shipped off to camps all over Denmark: former prisons, tuberculosis hospitals, schools, tent camps, i.e. temporary structures fitted to house refugees. Often, however, these camps are situated in remote, rural areas, out of the public eye. With his project, Malinovski explores the refugee's trajectories, their often conflict-filled experiences of public transit nodes along the way, as well as their current, limbo-like stays in small rooms within the camps. Rooms such as these appear as transitional sites, which the artist himself describes as "suitcases stuck between destinations."[5)]

Working on the project, Malinovski chose to employ a durational,[6)] explorative and research-based methodological approach.[7)] During the initial phase of the project, he visited a series of camps and established relationships with refugees staying there.

5) The quote is from the artist's project description: "Often camps are situated in remote, rural areas, out of the public eye. I grew up close to one of these camps in the 80's. […] One of my strongest memories from this camp were the small rooms, where 8-10 people would sleep on bunk beds, all their belongings stuffed in big suitcases. The room itself was a kind of suitcase, stuck between destinations." See *Transit* exhibition folder (2018: 6).

6) For the concept of durational approaches to Public Art see O'Neill and Doherty (2011).

7) For further information on Malinovski's artistic methods and reflections on his collective production process see Malinovski (2019).

Fig. 2: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at Copenhagen Central Station. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Ole Bo Jensen

Subsequently, he entered into conversations with a group of six people of varying ages, genders, translocal backgrounds etc. The resulting audio recordings laid the foundation for the polyphonic virtual-reality installation shown at KØS, a site-specific version of the project presented at Copenhagen Central Station as well as a public talk about the project held at *Information*. Using various aesthetic means and activating a multiplicity of sites and publics, Malinovski thus sought to explore how today's contested transit nodes can be perceived as locations that are networked, yet always also negotiated locally though materialized and socially embodied practices.

Regarding the working process, it is of course important to note that *This Room* was initiated, conceptualized and produced by Malinovski, i.e. by a white, male artist, who obviously inhabits a privileged position in more than one way and who by means of the art project – apart from the effects generated for the participating refugees and the viewing audiences – also profits from the project himself.[8)] Malinovski is aware of this potentially problematic aspect of the project and discusses it self-critically in the article "This Room – Some notes on the process" (2019). In this article, he

8) For example, Malinovski has received wide press coverage in connection with launching of the project, he has been invited to speak about the project in connection with an event at *Dagbladet Information* and he has been invited to show the project at an International film festival.

refers to himself as "a white, Danish man with tons of privileges" (Malinovski 2019: 104) and he states that he "didn't want to just helicopter in and record their [the refugees'] stories and then take off again" (ibid: 104). However, the artist's attempts to conduct media training workshops so as to enable the refugees to "take control of their own story" and establish "some kind of equal exchange in the project" (ibid: 104), failed. First of all because the contacted Red Cross camp operation managers chose never to respond to Malinovski's emails and second of all because a volunteer coordinator, with whom Malinovski finally manged to enter into conversation, was reluctant to allow for the workshops to be carried out because she feared that the refugees' utterances and voiced opinions might be misunderstood or misrepresented (ibid: 104).

It goes without saying that the participation of the refugees in a way that would have allowed for them to not only take part in *This Room* as conversation partners, but also as actively deciding producers, would have strengthened the project. Allowing for such a genuinely collective and collaborative production process could have contributed to the contesting of the existing asymmetrical power structure. However, I will argue that the project nevertheless manages to question such power structures and to reveal the urgent need for them to be politically debated. Not least, because the project – both by means of text publications, media interviews, debating events and the staging of encounters between refugees, activists, volunteers and travellers at Copenhagen Central Station – has managed to put focus on and to problematize the unequal means of participation that characterize on the one hand a critically acclaimed white, male artist such as Malinovski and on the other hand the excluded and marginalised refugees living in the camps.

VISUALIZING VIRTUAL EUROPEAN APARTHEID

This Room appears as a virtual-reality installation where two participants at a time can sit on a bench in a narrow room, wearing a virtual-reality headset. The dimensions of the installed room and the therein placed seating correspond to the ones in the rooms in the camps, thus allowing participants to be confronted with a concrete and corporeally felt experience of the limited space in question. Using the highly immediate sensory visual universe of virtual reality technology, participants are then led into a fictional space and given an immersive, physical sense of the psychological stress, fear and uncertainty that dominate the transit experiences of many refugees. Importantly, however, the experiences of the participating audiences are of course voluntarily inflicted, virtually

simulated and of a very short duration as opposed to the ones of the recounting refugees. The virtually simulated room is based on refugees' memories of the real-life transit zones and rooms they have occupied while waiting to hear the verdict on their asylum application. *This Room* can thus be described as a virtually simulated, memory-based mapping of the rooms that refugees have passed through and stayed in for shorter or longer periods of time since they left Copenhagen Central Station and practically disappeared from the media spotlight.[9)]

As a critical reaction towards the regime of social and political separation that constitutes what Étienne Balibar has identified as a *virtual European apartheid*, the undemocratic and exclusionary policies of the EU in regard to its noncitizen residents (Balibar 2004: 36-50), *This Room* seeks to focus attention on the situation of refugees currently living in Danish camps. According to Balibar, the intentionally provocative expression of *virtual European apartheid* refers to the emergence of what he terms the "reduplication of external borders in the form of 'internal borders'" nurtured by notions of national and racial identity, as well as to the "stigmatization and repression of populations whose presence within Europe societies is nonetheless increasingly massive and legitimate" (Balibar 2004: x). These matters of concern clearly resonate with Malinovski's project given that it also attempts to critically expose the exclusionary mechanisms of current asylum policies and to highlight the emergence of a situation in which refugees living in Danish camps appear detached from the rest of society and stripped of political agency.

It is important to note, however, that Malinovski's artistic attempt at contesting so-called *virtual European apartheid* is not realized by employing conventional documentary practices. Thus, in *This Room* the use of virtual reality can be said to blur the boundaries between the documentary and the fictional. The soundtrack is assembled from audio recordings conducted by the artist during his recurrent visits to a specific camp called *Avnstrup*, thus lending the project a certain testimonial character. Similarly, the shifting visualizations of specific details in the portrayed room are all based on the before-mentioned recordings with the refugees on site. In this way, both the levels of image and voice in *This Room* seem to obey to the laws of coincidence, providing the observer at first sight with the impression that there is a clear connection between the work's simulated space and the recounted reminiscences of the narrators.

9) Some of the recounting refugees, who all appear anonymously in the art work, recount having stayed there for periods of up to seven years.

Taking a closer look and listening carefully, however, it becomes apparent that the relationship between the two is somewhat more complicated. For instance, the act of remembrance is revealed as an unstable and porous process. As Malinovski states in an article about the artistic process (Malinovski 2019: 104), both the recounted stories and the depicted spatial scenarios in *This Room* are based on conversations with a group of refugees. Also, they take form from roughly sketched maps of the rooms through which they have passed and which the artist has subsequently asked them to draw. These maps, however, were not produced so as to provide an exact and complete overview of the rooms in question. Rather, they were intended to function as triggers stimulating the personal memory processes of the participating refugees. The approach thus allowed them to focus selectively on specific situations, locations, physical experiences, emotional reactions as well as imagined and dreamed sequences that they considered to be of special importance to them. The artist's choice for this methodological approach attributes the project with a subjective as well as selective *modus operandi*. Moreover, one might argue that the memory-based project contributes to a certain destabilization of conventional documentary practices. A case in point is a sequence in which one of the narrators, pausing momentarily and then continuing his recount in a slightly hesitant voice, explicates that his memory of his room in the camp – where he stayed for several years, but where he no longer resides – may be fraught with potential holes: "If this was my room, I'm trying to remember... there was a bunk bed here".[10)]

Upon closer inspection, it also becomes evident that the work's visualizations do not yield to objective and authoritative exposés based on traditional regimes of documentary truth telling. Thus, *This Room*'s imagery does not seek to convey transparency, nor does it attempt to create an immersive and seemingly realistic environment so as to facilitate a frictionless transferal of the observer to the refugee camp in question. If desired, such an effect could in fact have easily been obtained by means of the employed virtual reality technology.[11)] Instead, however, Malinovski choses to visualize the recounted memories in the installation by initially presenting the room by means of a processual drawing of white lines on a black background. Thus, the installation emphatically emphasizes the provisional, tentative and sketch-like character of the pictorial memories, before gradually turning them into simulations characterized by more detailed, colour saturated and three-dimensional reality effects.

10) Quote from the beginning of *This Room* 00:00:28,700 – 00:00:34,600.

11) This is evident, for example, when observing how influential media houses have recently become increasingly interested in employing virtual reality technologies as a means to create so-called *immersive journalism*. See Marcelle Hopkins, "Pioneering Virtual Reality and New Video Technologies in Journalism", *The New York Times*, 19 October 2017.

Summing up, *This Room* can be said to confront the condition of those confined to life in the camps by destabilizing documentary conventions. It remains invested with an undetermined excess precisely by the rejection of representation's realism, a resistance that the use of virtual animation also exemplifies, intimating a visual field beyond the supposedly transparent documentary. Paraphrasing T.J. Demos *This Room* can thus be said to "offer representations of conflict as much as a conflict of representations" (Demos 2013: 171). In other words, it gives expression to the refugees' tragic experiences of the camps as sites as contact and conflict zones, while simultaneously emphasizing the fact that representation is ultimately unable to capture such experiences in their fullness and directness. The resulting documentary-fictions of the refugees' traumatizing experiences of being stuck between destinations in a refugee camp interweave the factual and the imaginary registers of the image in order to create a critical political effect. But how is it possible to artistically represent life that is severed from political representation such as in the here discussed case of the current situation of refugees in Europe? And how, one may ask subsequently, can the creative configuration of *This Room*'s connection to politics be said to constitute an oppositional force directed against the undemocratic and exclusionary policies of the EU in regard to its noncitizen residents? These are questions that I will address in the following.

COUNTERING VICTIMIZATION IN SPACES OF CONFLICT

Malinovski's virtual reality installation contributes to the invention of new paradigms of truth based upon the admission of subjective constructions and the development of both the image's and the sound's affective economy. Traditional documentary conventions are thus de- and reconstructed in various ways, for example by introducing subjectively reflexive narrative approaches, by over-layering multiple voices so as to create a polyphonic soundscape describing life in the camp from different – and at times conflicting – perspectives, by inserting poetic pauses and moments of stillness as a means to evoke a sense of opacity, and by using virtual reality technologies to simulate a complex room composed of various superimposed locations, that are disjunct rather than coinciding in time, thereby activating the trope of the palimpsest.

As a paradigmatic example of *This Room*'s fruitful cross-fertilizations of fact and fiction one might mention the last scene in the work in which two of the recounting refugees – in a multi-

voiced, rhythmically edited sequence and saxophone accompanied sequence – reflect on how being close to and listening to the sound of the sea at times made their stay in the camp slightly more bearable by creating hope of possible new beginnings. On the visual level, the here described sequence is supplemented by images of a diminutive and spatially secluded room in the camp whose walls suddenly seem to dissolve so as to reveal an open view of the sea. Far from testifying to the dubious nature of visually based truths, I will argue that a scene such as this makes evident that a profound understanding of reality, particularly a traumatic one, necessitates an engagement with the fictional and conflictual aspects of images. Such effects can, of course, be obtained by means of various media. Virtual reality, however, not in the least when employed experimentally as in the case of *This Room*, appears ideally suited as a medium to address the complex layers of such sites of conflict as the camps, sites torn between the demands for refugees' rights and the increasingly exclusionary political pressures to control and prevent the movements of non-citizen residents.

Seeking to address such conflictual issues, and not in the least when working on artistic projects that take an explicitly critical and political stance, I am of the opinion that it becomes pertinent to avoid reaffirming the excluded as victimized objects of representation. Otherwise, such projects paradoxically tend to reiterate the relations of inequality they are otherwise trying to contest. In the case of Malinovski's *This Room* the above-mentioned challenge has obviously led to the renegotiation of documentary strategies of representation in order to avoid such objectification. Malinovski's project counteracts frequently reproduced views of refugees living in camps. It avoids both the ethnographic gaze and the compassionate depiction of victims that is often associated with conventional documentary practices, for example by side-stepping the possibility of visually portraying the refugees recounting their experiences of living in camps. Instead, it makes an active contribution to the formulation of alternative narratives and representation techniques that deliberately set out to avoid such objectifications. For example, by providing a platform for articulating often overlooked and overheard stories, as in the cases of refugees explaining how they create solidary alliances in order to ensure each other's safety, telling about their plans for studying Danish and starting an education or recounting how they actively – although with great difficulties, and at all odds – seek to create a sense of homeliness for small children in the camp.[12)] In cases such as these, the installation can be said to contribute to

12) Here it should be noted that although the project evidently seeks to avoid objectifying the refugees as victims it nevertheless tends to reinforce gender-stereotypical representations in some of the above-mentioned cases, for example when letting a male refugee talk about his future educational ambitions and a female refugee recount of her straining attempt to nurture and take care of her child in the camp.

the invention of empowering types of storytelling that analyse and challenge the potential reduction of the portrayed to disenfranchised existences.

Similarly, the refugees involved in the work are partners in conversation rather than merely interview subjects. Despite the obvious precariousness of their situation they clearly possess agency. This was further emphasized when some of the refugees took on the role of mediators and active discussion partners with viewers and bypassing travellers in connection with the presentation of the project at Copenhagen Central Station. Agency is an important aspect of the work, to which I will return later in this article. Taking this into account, Malinovski's work can be seen as exemplary in exposing the Danish refugee policies' lack of solidarity and insistence on maintaining unequal power relations. It does so, not by reaffirming views of refugees as victims, but on the contrary by creating a platform for the articulation of alternative narratives, positions to speak from, and visions for the future.

A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC SPACES

As mentioned previously, *This Room* was presented at several sites, namely at *KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces*, in connection with a debate at the Danish Newspaper *Information* and at Copenhagen Central Station. Seeking to activate the project in this way in a series of different – and, as in the case of the Copenhagen Central Station, highly contested - public spaces clearly links to an ambition of contributing to the creation of democratically engaging contact and conflict zones.[13] In order to further reflect on the encounters staged in connection with the presentation of *This Room* at Copenhagen Central Station, where the by far broadest spectrum of social, cultural and economic positions came into contact, both with the guides on site and with each other, I introduce Chantal Mouffe's concept of so-called *agonistic spaces* (Mouffe 2013: 91–94). This concept enables me to analyse the conflictual aspect of the project's presentation within this contested and power-charged space within a radical democratic context. On the one hand it helps me to draw the attention towards the critical and political potential of staging situations of dissensus with regard to the current refugee crisis, and on the other it enables me to reflect on the importance of the specific premises on which such situations are played out.

According to Mouffe's reflections on what she terms radical and pluralistic democracy, public spaces are permeated by exclusionary power relations (Mouffe 2005a and Mouffe 2007). Mouffe points out that a fully functional public space has to be able to

13) The term *contact zone* was originally coined by the post-colonial theorists Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford in the 1990s and has since then resulted in an increased focus on how museums institutions can be said to function as contested social spaces. Pratt and Clifford describe contact zones as spaces, in which diverse social and cultural positions come into contact and have to be negotiated, thus challenging notions of a singular, coherent and harmoniously coexisting general public, see Clifford (1997) and Pratt (1991).

accept antagonisms, since it is created through the constant negotiation of different – often antagonistic – points of view. From a social perspective, antagonism can be defined as the limit of a given sociality's capacity to constitute itself as a coherent whole. In summary, by use of the concept of antagonism, Mouffe seeks to criticize the idea of public space as a sphere of consensus and harmonious coexistence.

As Mouffe states, it is necessary to view and practice public space as a pluralistic space where divergent subject positions are not seen as enemies but as so-called *adversaries* whose legitimate existence should be acknowledged, but whose views can rightfully be disputed. By introducing the concept of the adversaries – understood as responsive opponents – Mouffe is able to clarify the concept of antagonism in a productive way. On the one hand she uses the concept of antagonism in the original sense of the word, referring to the conflict between two irreconcilable enemies who share no symbolic space. But she also introduces the term *agonism*, by which she refers to the conflict between responsive adversaries who are positive towards each other because they share a symbolic space, but who still fight against each other because they want to understand, interpret and administer this space in different ways. On the basis of this distinction between antagonism and agonism, Mouffe concludes that an *agonistic* public space has to take the form of a constant struggle to transform antagonism to agonism (Mouffe 2009: 102-103). Consequently, she sees antagonism and conflict as indispensible. How to deal with conflict, and how to deal with this antagonism are, according to Mouffe, the key issues in contemporary public spaces that we need to constantly address (ibid: 139).

ART IN CONFLICT ZONES: NAVIGATING THE BORDERS BETWEEN ANTAGONISM AND AGONISM Returning to *This Room*'s thematization and actualization of the so-called 'refugee crisis', the question which arises in this specific context is of course, whether conflict situations arose during the project's staging at Copenhagen Central Station, and if so, how they were played out. Placing the installation at Copenhagen Central Station, i.e. at a contested site where previous conflicts and negotiations regarding the 'refugee crisis' had taken place, antagonistic encounters were obviously anticipated. This was one of the reasons why it was collectively decided that the mediators would always be present, two at a time, so as to ensure potential backup and support in the case of confrontational situations. As noted before, contact zones are power-charged

spaces, where actors interact on radically different terms, and since the refugees taking on the role of mediators inhabit a precarious situation, precautions were taken so as to secure their position accordingly. Another point of consideration was the ensuring of a certain heterogeneity on the part of the mediators present at the station with regard to gender, transnational backgrounds and situated points of perspective as either refugees currently living in camps, museum workers or volunteers from refugee organisations. This was given priority in order to encourage as many different bypassing travellers as possible to engage in conversations on site: A strategy which seemed to work according to the plan given that a very broad spectrum of people chose to approach the installation and enter into dialogue with the mediators.

Fig. 3: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

Luckily, no antagonistic encounters ended up taking place between irreconcilable enemies seeking to eradicate one another. Indeed, most of the conversations took place between sympathetically inclined and politically aligned mediators and passing travellers. Several participants explained that they had refugee backgrounds themselves and had lived in similar camps. Local employees from the National Railway Company recounted that they had often been in contact with refugees at the station back in 2015 and they reflected on how the installation had triggered their memories of these encounters and heightened their awareness of the refugees' current situation in the camps. Commuters from Sweden were keen to discuss differences between Danish and Swedish reactions to the 'refugee crisis'. Also, groups of teenagers were curious to learn about the practical aspects of living in the camp of *Avnstrup*. Regarding this last group, however, mediators subsequently reported being struck by their almost total lack of knowledge about Danish asylum policies and the current conditions of refugees living in camps: A case in point which clearly poses a problem from a democratic point of view and which – on a more personal level – distressed the mediators on site, not least the ones with refugee backgrounds themselves.

More affective encounters also took place at the station. For example, a young woman, who had recently experienced a break-up, tear-brokenly explained that the work had made her realize how her former boyfriend's traumatizing experiences of living in a camp had in many – often unarticulated and unacknowledged – ways impacted their relationship. Other participants

were also emotionally affected by the work and started asking questions about the possibilities of becoming involved as volunteers in the on-site represented refugee organisations. They were thus informed about the practical possibilities of joining DFUNK and CAMP, just as they were made aware of an upcoming demonstration in support of the children staying at the highly contested refugee camp of Sjælsmark.[14)]

There were, however, also discussions of a more conflictual and confrontational character that were played out at the station. For example, a male viewer with refugee background criticized the installation project for being too negative in its depiction of life in the camps. He stated that *This Room* failed to portray some of the more positive aspects of living in the camps, which he himself had experienced upon his arrival to Denmark, and he argued that the project would most probably end up promoting the idea of refugees as being ungrateful, thus contributing to intensifications and radicalizations of anti-immigrant sentiments in the Danish society. Also, as another case in point, a participant voting for *Dansk Folkeparti* – a national conservative party fighting for enforced border control, stop of immigration and implementations of restrictive asylum policies – entered into a heated debate with one of the mediators after having seen the work. In this case, the participant felt provoked by the project's topic and argued for a total future stop to immigration, although he reasoned – after having watched the virtual reality work – that it might be necessary to somehow improve the conditions for the refugees currently living in the camps.

In accordance with Mouffe's use of the term *agonism*, the participants in the here mentioned cases – as in several others – did not reject the project categorically, but instead chose to experience the work and to successively engage in a debate with one of the mediators on site. They listened to each other's arguments, thus acknowledging the opponent's legitimate existence and right to be heard, but they nevertheless chose to contest each other's positions ideas because they understood, interpreted and acted upon the current situation of the refugees in radically different ways. As these examples indicate, *This Room* also generated debates and staged situations of dissent where divergent – and clearly opposed – subject positions were articulated and negotiated.

THE NECESSITY OF BEING PARTISAN Drawing on radical democracy theory, I have hitherto argued that artistic, curatorial and activist forms of critique necessitate the creation of agonistic

14) For more information see Marronage (2018): "Manifestation: Support the Children in Sjælsmark": https://www.dukop.dk/events/5171?locale=da (20 May 2019)

contact zones in which negotiations can be played out and counter-hegemonic publics created. Following this line of thought, I will conclude by arguing that taking a critical approach also involves being partisan, i.e. it requires taking a political position. Artistic, curatorial and activist forms of critique can thus only seek to challenge the existing hegemony and produce lasting effects if they partake in what Mouffe terms "a progressive 'collective will' engaged in a 'war of position'" (Mouffe 2013: 127).

Both Pejk Malinovski as artist, the mediators at Copenhagen Central Station and I as curator took a position in relation to *This Room*, allowing for the staging of participatory and politically engaging contact and conflict zones. For example, in my curatorial reflections, that I have expanded on in talks and conference presentations, in internal working papers and in published articles, I have taken a clear political stance with regard to the 'refugee crisis'. I have argued for more equal means of participation in today's highly hierarchical mobility regime and contested the non-solidary and exclusionary policies of the EU in regard to its non-citizen residents. Malinovski, on his part, has produced a work that exposes and challenges the potential reduction that life in the camps entails, and on various discursive platforms he has furthermore stated that he views *This Room* as a critical response to that which he terms "the state sanctioned violence" currently being enforced in Danish refugee camps.[15] Last, but not least, the mediators at Copenhagen Central station have not only chosen to talk about Malinovski's virtual reality installation and the curatorial context of the *Transit* exhibition, but also to discuss their own experiences, convictions and agendas as either refugees living in camps or as politically positioned volunteers from refugees' organizations. Consequently, *This Room* enabled all those involved to take a position, which – paraphrasing the educator and curator Nora Sternfeld – was "not exclusionary, but also not at all neutral, but rather dissentual and convincing" (Sternfeld 2011).

Which effects exactly the project will generate on a longer-term basis is, of course, impossible to determine at this moment of writing. What is evident, however, is that *This Room* has mounted a political challenge by making audible those persons typically excluded from globalisation's imaginary. Besides, it has stirred debates on various platforms about the current state of affairs in Danish refugee camps. In short, it has demonstrated that forcing refugees to remain stuck between destinations, unable to go either back or forward, is not a natural condition,

15) Malinovski used this term both in an interview broadcast on national radio, namely *Kulturen på P1* on 11 September 2018, and during a debate organized in connection with the Transit exhibition at Information on 5 March 2019.

but rather a political effect of globalisation. In other words, the condition is negotiable and therefore potentially open towards the envisioning and creation of more solidary scenarios in the future.

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Fig. 1: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at Copenhagen Central Station. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Ole Bo Jensen
Fig. 2: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at Copenhagen Central Station. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Ole Bo Jensen
Fig. 3: Installation shot of Pejk Malinovski's *This Room* at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces. © Pejk Malinovski. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

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Sabine Dahl Nielsen is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen where she is currently working on a project entitled *Togetherness in Difference: Reimagining identities, communities and histories through art*. Dahl Nielsen's Ph.D. project *Art in Urban Public Spaces: Conflicts and Negotiations as Critical Spatial Practices* was conducted at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen in 2015, and during her Ph.D. she was a member of the Curatorial Knowledge research network at Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2018 Dahl Nielsen curated a research exhibition at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces entitled *Transit: Art, Mobility and Migration in the Age of Globalization*. Furthermore, she has contributed with topic related articles to a wide range of Danish and International journals, anthologies, and exhibition catalogues.

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