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BARE LIVES

28.04.2017 – 10.06.2017

An exhibition by Mario Rizzi

Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Curator of UP,
Galerie Wedding – Raum für
zeitgenössische Kunst,
Berlin, 2017

Giving shape to Life, Society, and Oneself...

Tunis, Muhammad Ali Square, 8.1.2011:

»Ben Ali, you send the police to harass the citizens asking
for work and for the right to live a dignified life!
Ben Ali and the Ministry of Interior use police to repress the people with bullets!
Tunisian citizens are killed with bullets in their own country.
Where is it? Where is freedom? Where is justice? Where is democracy?
(...)
You are a foreigner in your own country!
And then police come... Now I want to talk to the police.
This matter is also yours... it's ours!
Your son is hungry, he has no clothes! And he has no dignity.
(...)
Work, freedom, national dignity!
(Activists cry loud)«¹

Kauther Ayari, a Tunisian activist, 31 years old at the time of these events, screams these words, literally hanging on the façade of the Trade Union's central building in front of a small group of activists, leftists and intellectuals at the central Muhammad Ali square in 2011. She addresses the then president Ben Ali, who left 6 days later. And so, the short film **Kauther** by artist Mario Rizzi begins. It is an oral history of a - now unfortunately forgotten- female activist, today a mother of four, who the artist explains, was among the first activists to give a passionate voice to Tunis rioters and who was a member of the revolutionary movement and Communist Party in Tunisia from her teenage years till she later withdrew from activist work to reflect on the overwhelming reality of betrayal and the outcome of the 2011 Arab uprisings and revolutions.

The film **Kauther** reflects on the patriarchal dominance she experienced in various areas of life. It motivates her to become militant, to change and rebuild society. In the film, she highlights the lack of recognition of women's work in building society and the revolution in the Middle East: »The Tunisian mentality always refuses that a woman has a role to play in society, while it always praises what a man does, even when it's banal, never what a woman does.«²

1 Kauther Ayari on 08.01.2011, Muhammed Ali Square, Tunis, documented in Mario Rizzi, Kauther, 29-min HD film, 2014.

2 Ibid.

Pressekontakt

Galerie Wedding
Raum für zeitgenössische Kunst
Nadia Pilchowski

Müllerstraße 146 – 147
13353 Berlin

T (030) 9018 42385
presse@galeriewedding.de
www.galeriewedding.de

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Why did the revolution in Tunisia fail to continue? The reasons behind the interruption of the revolution, as Kauther explains, are the hijacking of the revolutionary spirit by the Muslim Brotherhood and the reintroduction of old politicians prompting disagreements among activists, thus plans to change the corrupt government in the latter years soon disintegrated. Consequently, the activists were not engaged in political decision-making, which became a key issue. Furthermore, the killings of two charismatic leftist opposition leaders in 2013, Chokri Belaïd, a leader of the left-secular »Democratic Patriots' Movement« party, and Mohamed Brahmi, leader of the »People's Movement« party, was a grave set back. Finally, the memories erased of those who really started the revolution – like Kauther – began the discontinuity of the transformation of society. Today, Youssef Chahed is Tunisia's seventh prime minister in less than six years (elected in August 2016). Will the protests against the political state of exception, which has seemingly become the rule in Tunisia, continue in another form? Kauther believes so.³

»They don't accept this condition of ›bare lives‹...«

As an artist and filmmaker (trained psychologist and photographer,) Mario Rizzi has worked with humans living on the edge of society, excluded by the law, and from protection by the state and the law. His work surveys oral histories and poetical life stories of people struggling to survive or who create change. He spent years working in refugee camps across Bosnia, Palestine, Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy and Greece. He has also lived in Western societies and observed how neoliberal ideas can cause oppression of the underprivileged and has lived in countries in which the juridical, executive and legislative powers are merged under dictatorships – mostly, but not exclusively, in the Middle East. »My work has long been connected with the idea of ›Bare Lives‹, with people that are subjected to forces beyond their control,«⁴ Rizzi explains. Reflecting on his own position of a white Christian male artist regularly working inside refugee camps, he says, »The privilege is already in being in there. It is a privilege to be allowed to be there, to get in there, to be in touch, in a place where people fight for their lives, for their basic means. And you are there just as a kind of visitor entering their lives asking them for stuff. This is already a request that is very great. In this sense, just being there is already a big privilege.«⁵

In his recent photo series **August 3rd**, shot in a Yazidi camp for the internally displaced in Iraqi Kurdistan, the date »3/8/2014« is graffitied on many tents. On August 3rd 2014, Daesh, the Islamic State started the systematic massacre and genocide of more than 5000 men of the Yazidi minority in Sinjar, Iraq, and the enslavement of women and children.⁶ Daesh justified the occupation, kidnapping, dehumanization, the trading and mass rape of women and girls of the Yazidi minority – who are not Muslim – on the grounds that they don't believe in Allah. At this point, as the massacre is still happening, thousands of Yazidis are placed amongst others in camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and Jordan, but also in Greece and Germany.

Silence, introspection and respect emanate from the seven Yazidi women portrayed in front of their tents. We meet them against a backdrop of a recent and extensive human-created hell. Nevertheless, they persevere and open up for the camera. »Sometimes we inflict a se-

3 Ibid.

4 Mario Rizzi in conversation with Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Jonas Tinius, Solvej Helweg Ovesen, Galerie Wedding, 15.2.2017, first transcription by Jonas Tinius, to be published in the book »BARE LIVES«, which will be launched at the finissage of the exhibition.

5 Ibid.

6 UN News Centre: UN human rights panel concludes ISIL is committing genocide against Yazidis, 16.6.2016, available via <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54247#.WM-UERLyto4> (retrieved 20.3.2017).

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cond act of violence on these women. We know their stories. (...) Many of them, who have been rescued, were a means to sustain ISIS economically. They suffered immensely, being kidnapped and traded as sex slaves. Often when we look at these women, we frame them in this inhuman condition; as sex slaves, and by doing this we seem to forget their dignity and their humanity«.⁷

In recognition of their silence pertaining to their past, it was important to photograph the women with respect for their identities and integrity, and hear their eloquent silences.

»Bare life« is a concept that may describe the lives negotiated in Rizzi's films and photographs, and refers to a body, a human being, who exists outside of politics and the law, outside protection, who can be killed by anyone without legal repercussions. »Bare life« is the life not politically defined as life, outside any nation state, for example. At the same time, the person is exempt from classical juridical punishment or protection, since the person – although he/she exists and nation states define themselves through their exclusion and exploitation of such persons - is not a citizen.⁸ »In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men. (...) The fundamental categorical duality of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/ political existence, *zoē* /*bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion«.⁹ »Bare life« is a life that is excluded, physically discounted, to define the political existences/population of citizens within a nation state or organization in power. In the case of the Yazidis, the organization in power (the Islamic State), simply denies this community of people exists, by discounting their bodies.

In the section »The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern« of his book »Homo Sacer«, Giorgio Agamben analyzes how the refugee camp is the space and instrument for politics, sovereign power, to define »bare life«, the excluded, the edge of the nation: »(...) the camp -- as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception) -- will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize«.¹⁰ This part in general focuses on all the biopolitical acts of violence that are connected with, and at this moment, sustain the sovereign nation state. Currently, one biopolitical act of violence is the keeping of bare lives, refugees and internally displaced people all over camps and borders in Europe and the Middle East.

Returning to the work of Rizzi, the exhibition includes the slide-show **Bare Lives**. These 80 photographs were shot in two different geographical spaces and human conditions: the improvised camps which were unofficially forming throughout 2016 in Idomeni, at the border between Greece and Macedonia, and the aforementioned internally-displaced camp, an official state-established one, for Yazidis in Iraqi Kurdistan. Settlers in Idomeni, from different parts of the world, from Syria to Afghanistan, found themselves living beside rail tracks in cheap tents for many months. The images depict the daily life of impermanence and improvisation, how kids play on disused trains, clothes hang to dry, tents prop up each other. All these people hoped that the border would open and they could continue their journey

7 Mario Rizzi in conversation 2017.

8 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA 1998 (after the Italian original version, Turin 1995), available via: http://www.opa-a2a.org/dissensus/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/agamben_giorgio_homo_sacer.pdf, p.78 (retrieved 10.3.2017).

9 Ibid. p. 8.

10 Ibid. p. 78.

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towards the wealthier European countries - to Germany, to Sweden. They had to accept the camp's dysfunctional infrastructure to be present in case the border reopened. But, as we know, their dreams crumbled in the face of reality and they were forced into official camps throughout Greece.

In contrast to the unofficial camps in Idomeni, the film **Al Intithar (The Waiting)** by Rizzi depicts the organization of everyday life in an official camp in Jordan, Zaatari. Here, we observe day-to-day life in family or tent units where time stands still and in the absence of a home, kitchen, family network, friends, institutions, shops, and energy. The women stay active and form a fulfilling daily routine – cooking, cleaning, doing their make-up, teaching, selling, playing and keeping contact with friends, which in turn forms a basic social infrastructure which the kids and others in the camp benefit from in many ways. Meanwhile, many men mope around with hunched, sedentary postures. The central male character appears depressed, smokes and plays with a kid deprived of joy, vision or playfulness. The camp is 80% women and children, as the men either stayed in Syria to fight, went into exile or died.

Mario Rizzi notes that the men and women in the camp deal differently with the situation of a life stripped down to nothing but itself; a human body: »I always felt that inside, at least for most of the women that I met, they keep their dignity, their capacity to react, to stand up again. They have to feed and dress the family, keep everyone together. Men sometimes lack the tools to react to these situations. They feel and show alienation and frustration, they brush things aside and try to forget. I find this happens not only in camps, but in our societies in situations of emergency and stress, where different lives and bodies are not accorded the same worth.«¹¹

An important theme of the show and the reason for bringing these images and stories to Berlin is that of how to cope with suffering and transformation of life conditions, and how people build societies from scratch. Firstly, it is key to understanding the individual life stories and struggles of the Middle Eastern uprisings as well as the human reaction to camp life. The effects of migration may lead us to positively reevaluate our perception of the local norm, in shifting the focus on efficiency and acceleration of life here and from the optimization of humans and their competences in an economically driven society, to those very basic human expressions of resilience, silence, mourning and reinvention. We have to mourn, and in that find new solutions to merging and redefining the privileges of political existence and all existing lives. **BARE LIVES** as an exhibition shows how society can and must always be formed with the energy, the personal histories and vision of the people living today, whatever they may have experienced.

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11 Mario Rizzi in conversation 2017.

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