



CULTURE / VISUAL ART

Cologne city tours: Art against forgotten wars, unravelling subtle violence

A German event series tackles migration, war and the arms industry



Courtesy: Michael Nowotny



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COLOGNE, Germany — Hand-drawn maps rotate on the naked frame of an umbrella, projecting their messages onto a large sheet of tracing paper covering the storefront behind. “This river is dry, there is no water here,” reads one, followed by, “Do not pass here, military.” We see the long, straight, angular borders of various North African countries, [imposed in the early 20th century](#), drawn with a ruler and a steady hand.

Set up in an underground arts space at Cologne’s central Ebertplatz station, this installation is the starting point of [Border Ferry Service](#), a performative urban walk taking

place as part of the fifth edition of the Academy of the Arts of the World's diverse event series, [Pluriversale](#) (September 2 – December 16).

As a newcomer to the city, I had clumsily found my way to the shadow-theater-map installation using a more sophisticated, digital map, one readily accessible for those with a smartphone and internet connection. Clearly, the journeys undertaken by migrants and refugees to get to Cologne, which are chronicled, retold and juxtaposed throughout the Border Ferry Service performance, are fraught with much more difficulty.

Throughout their performative tour, artist duo Birgit auf der Lauer and Caspar Pauli retell stories of Somali, Turkish, and Syrian refugees, Turkish smugglers, and a German smuggler who worked to get people from East to West Germany. “We’re trying to explore the question of how people get here, through what means?” auf der Lauer tells me. “Through smugglers, through family networks, through their own physical power.”

It’s fitting that the tour starts at Ebertplatz, a hollowed out, concrete hexagonal plaza reminiscent of the bomb crater it once was. From 1940 to 1945 the city was bombed more than 260 times, had the majority of its population evacuated to nearby towns, and an estimated 80-90 percent of its buildings and infrastructure destroyed.

The parallels are powerful — they almost draw themselves. “We’re working with juxtaposition and overlaying,” says auf der Lauer. “The stories we tell from other regions in the world come together with the urban landscape, but don’t necessarily have anything to do with it.”

Of the German smuggler, auf der Lauer says, “We met one of his customers who said ‘Yes he charged money, but he saved my life’. Human smuggling is one of the pillars of our society, because it enables people to come here when there’s no other way.”

Smugglers, due largely to news media, are seen by many well-meaning Europeans as greedy opportunists out to profit from others’ misfortunes, but for those undertaking the journey across the Mediterranean, they are often seen as a last lifeline. Art enables a nuanced, ambivalent position on such a profession. “We’re not trying to interpret reality,” says auf der Lauer. “We’re just trying to set up constellations,” adds Pauli.

But the facts remain: more than 3,700 people are known to have drowned attempting to make this perilous journey in 2015 (according to the UNHCR’s count), and in 2016, at least 2,500 by May. Many of those who do make it across head to Germany, capitalizing on its open door asylum policy. Cologne, with its population of 1 million and long history as a point of passage for travellers, has received thousands of refugees over the past three years.

“The figure of the smuggler is the figure of the door opener,” says auf der Lauer. “Without

this very simple activity of opening the door Germany wouldn't look the way it does today.”

A few days later, I followed a tour guide up a meandering path to the top of Herkulesberg, a hill that offers some of Cologne's best views but also happens to be built atop a 70-meter-high pile of WWII rubble. I wondered how many homes and pasts and memories we stood atop.

The location made perfect sense as part of a series of six city walks titled Urban War Stories, also part of Pluriversale. Urban War Stories examines how Cologne is marked by war through walks focusing on architecture, an elderly woman's memories, the daily route of a refugee currently living in Cologne, and the German arms industry.

It was from this hilltop on an uncharacteristically sunny day that our guide, Anna Schott, instructed our group of around 20 on the proximity of weapons production facilities.

AirRobot, a drone production facility in Arensberg, was 136 km away from where we stood. There were others even closer — 106 km, 50 km, 30 km away. The products they made seemed to become less insidious as our gaze moved closer to the city center. Eleven kilometers away was Deutz AG, a company that produces vehicle motors, some of them for battle tanks. And 3 km away was Aquasun, a company producing glass films providing protection from heat, glare and splintering.

It was amazing to see how war has imprinted itself everywhere, even in the most seemingly benign of industries. And that was exactly what Schott was out to illustrate. After meeting someone by coincidence in Bogota who claimed he designed weapons for one of Germany's oldest manufacturers, Fritz Werner, Schott became interested in what remains of the German arms industry. As it turns out, quite a lot.

More than 98,000 people work in the weapons industry in Germany, with 218,000 more working in what are considered secondary industries — parts manufacturing and delivery. Germany supplies 1.66 billion euro worth of weapons to Qatar annually, followed by the UK, Korea, Israel, the US, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.

“There's this loose feeling that me and our generation in Germany is absolutely not connected with war, even our grandparents are too young,” said Mareike Theile, creator of the performance along with Dominik Müller. “But in the world at the moment war is very present every day. So we were trying to connect it to Cologne again by following the traces.”

During the tour we also met with a law professor who outlined the legalities of arms exportation, and a university activist campaigning for German universities to sign self-declarations that they will not be involved in weapons research. By his estimate, 52

German universities are currently doing research on behalf of the US Pentagon or the German government.

War and violence have left traces everywhere in Cologne — on the architecture of the new-looking building next door, on the economic opportunities available, on the expression of the foreign-looking shop attendant whose story you don't bother to find out. But standing in a park with a group of concerned participants, the violent realities which force masses to come here, and the violent conflicts taking place “over there,” stoked by weapons produced somewhere close to here, still seemed very far away.

This year's Pluriversale attempts to tackle the global refugee crisis, beyond linear narratives of migration, arrival and integration, through artistic events. This theme is of course particularly pertinent in Germany, which accepted more than 1 million migrants and asylum seekers in 2015. And perhaps even more so in Cologne, where the infamous New Year's Eve attacks against hundreds of women prompted rumors that asylum seekers were among the attackers, leading to anti-immigration demonstrations and a nationwide debate on Germany's asylum policy.

What rises to the surface through events such as Border Ferry Service and Urban War Stories, as the Pluriversale booklet outlines, are “new forms of exclusion and coercion, some overt, others more insidious and subtle,” and the myriad ways we coexist with violence in our well-groomed urban spaces. Describing the migration experience as “still often as generative as it is traumatic,” it acknowledges that tackling these issues in an artistic program requires an incredibly delicate balance to avoid promoting exoticism and false notions of assimilation.

Inside Cologne's cathedral — the largest Gothic church in Northern Europe and Germany's most visited landmark — sits a peculiar installation that is not part of Pluriversale. A seven-meter-long white boat, which carried over 100 refugees from Libya to Italy, has been placed there by Cologne's archbishop. Text projected onto the ground spells out “Christ sits in the refugee boat” in five languages.

The archbishop used it as an altar to deliver a sermon in May during the feast of Corpus Christi, in which he appealed to the general public's empathy and likened any person who allows people to drown in the Mediterranean to someone who “drowns God, every day, thousands of times.” But narratives are never so clear. The smuggler is also the door opener, this motor ends up in a war tank, this public square was once a bomb crater.

If Pluriversale's events weren't able to bring home to Cologne inhabitants the complex realities of life as a refugee (and it would be unrealistic to expect them to), they were at least able to prompt people to dispense with useless binaries, to take ownership of the trail of subtle violence each of us leaves behind, and to look more attentively at what and who

surround us.



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