

An artistic and social project with immigrants.



Letters/Performance

As a visual artist I have been working in and outside Europe for more than ten years. In this way I often come into contact with the problems and needs of refugees, this during various art projects, such as in Athens, where I often work. For some time I have been active in Belgium as a volunteer to help immigrants understand and speak the Dutch language better. This is important in their integration. The time they have experienced as refugees is often the subject of conversation during these language sessions. It are often shocking and tragic stories, sometimes also the example of courage, resilience and determination. The will to finally find peace, away from violence and life-threatening situations.





As an artist, passionate about handwritings, artistic letters and libraries (Libraries of Walks since 2002), I started collecting stories. I asked the newcomers, the migrants to write me a letter, a handwritten letter in their own language. The story was not about their agony on their way to Europe, but I asked them to try to tell a positive story that was (or had been) a support for them. A special fact or a joyful memory despite their turbulent experiences. The suffering is often so rooted in their existence that I did not want to confront them again with these painful experiences from their personal past. But a humane gesture from person to person, to have a conversation through these letters as a sign of friendship and trust. This in a new cultural context. A sort of personal 'welcome'. For me trying to understand some of their past and situations. It is an intercultural meeting, also a learning process, a project that brings me new insights in relation to our human behavior and resilience. A talk on an equal base.





'Letter XI & IV' 2018.

The handwritten letters are cut out in a 'hand shape' supplemented with documents that relate to the story of the writer, (or the places where he comes from or about his culture). Also to the places, or the refugee camp or center where the writer stayed during his travel.

The process that leads to this collection of letters is also interesting. The conversation, (or the series of conversations), the trust that people from different cultures, background, give each other, is a great experience. The fact that people get closer to each other through this artistic and social project means a lot to me. I am grateful to all participants because without them this project cannot exist. It is very nice to see a collection of letters, written in different languages, in different styles, with a different approach and world view. Writing a letter in your own language and handwriting is unique because it is part of the author's identity. Often it is a moving event, time and time again. And this is the essence of this project. To be touched by others.

The handwritten letters are from refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Eritrea, Albania, Russia, Philippines, Nigeria, China, Canada, Chechnya, Ukraine, Algeria, Belgium. As a Flemish artist I am aware of my own family migration history since the 17th century: Spain, France, the Netherlands..



'Letter XI' 2018. [Several sleeves on the wall].

So the letters are written by several people who came here to Europe as refugees since the 1990s. Their handwritten letters are written by them personally in their own original language and contain an anecdote, a story from their childhood or family or the account of their flight to Europe. The hope of a safe life with better living conditions. The contents of the letter remain with the artist and the writer. What remains is the image of a handwriting letter, a silent witness of suffering or joy. Handwritten layered letters in a hand shape.



First presentation: Platform Projects Athens Greece May 2018.





'Reading the letters I Am'

Stefaan van Biesen starts from social actions, daily habits or gestures, tactile skills. Social rituals that he isolates and wants to give an artistic meaning. Often it are props or attributes, aesthetic tools, which have arisen after an artistic process and research and which are a communicative extension of our thinking. These nomadic props are instruments that invite us to a sensory action and perception. Sometimes they lead to silent experiences or a sort of strange psychological/mental role play with an astonishing aspect: the disruptive effect of everyday actions that have been taken out of their context, in the silent hope that this leads to a broader insight or to be more aware of dealing with our environment and in the relationship with others. The audience that is involved in performances and projects is invited to become the artwork itself. The attribute is only a reason for this exercise, where concepts such as nature versus culture, silence, empathy, 'beauty', comfort, the individual in the group, are aspects of experiencing. Stefaan van Biesen hands out an object, a question to others. The participants let the artwork lead its own and different life in the urban fabric, in proposed spaces or in the landscape. He is only the 'provider', not a conductor. To walk a philosophical path to be constructed on your own. The artwork takes place within the event where Stefaan van Biesen transforms into a spectator and attentive observer. An action that is recorded by texts, drawings, video and photography.



All sleeves have tailors needles that have been pinned.
About Stefaan van Biesen [° 1953]

Since 1990 Stefaan Van Biesen has made walks which he documents and displays in drawings, installations, photography, models, texts, videos and photographs. He regards the act of walking as a kind of subjective thought process in the urban fabric and in the landscape. Thereby the destination is of secondary importance. What counts is the being on the way: something that gives rise to its streams of thoughts and mainly drawings that have already been seen in the Goethe-Institut in Greece, the National Museum Brasilia in Brazil, and the Fundação José Saramago in Lisbon. Portugal.

He spends an important part of his artistic creativity on exchanges and collaborations with other artists, scientists and experts from various disciplines. His work is in direct dialogue with his environment. One of his current international projects is the 'Spaziergangwissenschaft', in which walking, starting from urban and social observation, is an artistic instrument.

Stefaan van Biesen investigates the mainly urban, human space with his many, broadly documented walks. He makes walks a sensory experience, which through his documentation has a scientific and aesthetic character. The 'Spaziergangwissenschaft' was introduced in the 1990s at the University of Kassel, Germany, by the sociologist and urbanologist Lucius Burckhardt. Walking is elevated to an observing stimulus in relation to space.

Stefaan van Biesen plays an important role in this 'science of walking': he examines it in an aesthetic way, documented by visual art (installations, performances, multimedia, drawings ...). His work has a strong affinity with the work of another famous 'walker'; Fernando Pessoa. Van Biesen's thinking is in line with the nomadic aspect of the Renaissance artists who traveled all over Europe. Dürer is a striking example of this. These journeys were art projects, in which currents of thoughts, drawings and other artifacts arose out of encounters with other people and cultures. These trips were, as it were, laboratories of thought. Van Biesen shows this lab. Notes, artifacts and drawings upholster his journey. As an artist he worked in Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, UK, Poland, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, Brazil and China.

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