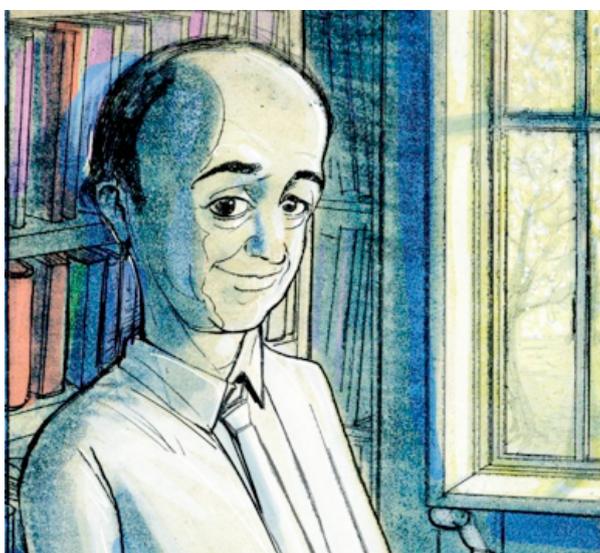


I Migrate, Therefore I Am Shelters of Babylon

Peter Tomaž Dobrila



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I Migrate, Therefore I Am

After the inquisition trial of Galileo Galilei, he supposedly muttered to himself the words "Eppur si muove". In Slovene, they are most commonly translated as literally "and yet it rotates" (referring, of course, to the Earth's spinning), although they really stand for "and yet it moves". We do not wonder about what the scientist wanted to say: today it is considered as a kind of anecdote illustrating the limited ability to accept certain facts. When an artist showcases an artwork, which always comes with some kind of statement, we are prompted to ponder while watching, listening to, and reflecting art, about the kind of message it delivers. Unlike science, which uses various methods and procedures to deliver, as a rule, an unambiguous result, leaving little room for speculations, works of art possess the ability to inspire us through multiple unequivocal paths, through which we can seek and explore, accept them, and walk along their lines. And yet we cannot be certain about the direction of this course, even though there really only is a single path, alongside which we are able to move – our path, our very own path. With our minds, our bodies, and our hearts. What would happen to us if our blood were not constantly moving, and what happens, when the heart stops and the brain ceases to think?

I've spent one month as part of a creative writing residency program in Macedonia. The city of Bitola, only a short pace away from the Greek border, known mostly for the economic and migrant crisis. It is, however, in fact a human crisis, a crisis of you and me, a crisis of everyone functioning in this world as a geopolitical entity, whereby all of us seem to be forgetting – under an avalanche of propaganda – that the world is first and foremost a naturally given fact. Made up of people. Just the way we are. We miss nothing more than the feeling of being part of nature. Connected in substance and in essence, active and creative, contemplating and loving. Yes, things can be the other way around as well, when they are manipulated by pack mentality following a single pyramid-scheme-inspired logic. But there are many different logics, at least as many, as there are of us, speaking from a purely humanist perspective. In a broader sense, there are at least as many as there are living creatures, in their profound interconnectedness with the natural world, which encompasses, besides living beings, the planets as well. One of them is our home. And one of them is us.

An exhibition of so many artists from different parts of the world, which I have been organizing since April this year, is a double anniversary. The first celebrates twenty years of the Multimedia center Kibla, and the second is a kind of an artistic prolegomenon to yet another large-scale international project, like others that the Association for Culture and Education KIBLA has been coordinating since 2008 as the single most successful non-governmental cultural institution in Slovenia and in general on top of the ladder among organizations involved in programs of the European Union, Culture and Creative Europe.

The European policy of shutting down borders is contradictory; on one hand, it appears anachronistic, while on the other, it acts as an ominous prediction of a tribal future, as it supports migrations in the sense of programs, which became, after years of embellishing the artists' mobility, one of the priorities of Creative Europe. Projects like Kibla's Risk Change - which was chosen among fourteen top large-scale project proposals as the only project from the so-called Middle and Eastern Europe, i.e., from those who entered the European Union in 2004 - therefore find themselves in a rather puzzling situation of dealing artistically with the topics of migrations and the closing of borders. Like a software vs. hardware opposition. The countries are the hardware, created by politics according to their own measures, and the people are placed in the role of programs, which the countries use to achieve their own goals.

What a contrast. When Europe was opening borders, Yugoslavia was closing them, and today we are forced to wait for hours at borders that didn't use to exist. Why can't these few newly created countries, former republics, agree at least on a unified cultural space, which still exists? According to the slightly modified Wittgenstein's statement, "the borders of my world are the borders of my language", this cultural space extends over the entire physical environment of the once common country, and in my own opinion, it goes even beyond that. It is an understatement to call it a cultural catastrophe, that young people today no longer know the same languages that were once the fabric of our coexistence. When in 2008 we were presenting the concept for the European Capital of Culture 2012, emphasizing that it was our goal – as the first city from a Slavic country to have been awarded this title – to establish the position of Slavic culture next to the constitutive Romance and Germanic cultures, members of the expert commission nearly fell off their chairs.

We keep hearing that England and Ireland have been swarmed by Poles, as many as two million. I wonder, are they not Europeans? Poland is a part of the European Union as well. And I might add that Slovenia, too, has been invaded by the British, Germans, Austrians, Italians. And many others. But mostly we have all been flooded by warmongering. Small-mindedness and philistinism as synonyms for limitation.

I cannot see why, with UK's recent decision, no one is demanding the resignation of the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, who should be announcing his withdrawal. As the president of Europe's government he is responsible for this kind of referendum result in one of the member states. British politicians are making statements about how they have been waiting for changes in the European Union for years, but in time they learned they weren't going to happen. Just a reminder, it was already Juncker's appointment to this position that had upset the public and politics, as he is one of the generators of the tax-haven-Luxembourg in the middle of Europe, not to even mention his other manoeuvres, which are borderline legal, or deep across the limit of being acceptable, let alone worthy of being followed. With such a president, Europe is doomed to failure. If we want to rearrange Europe, we need to start with the heads. The "old Europe" of rotten politicians should be turned into a "new Europe" of new possibilities and opportunities, for which one of the conditions is a shift in political decision-making: all European institutions should have elections, including the European Commission and its president. This can start right away, immediately after Juncker's dismissal. By doing so, the European Union will at least give a slight indication of (possibly) being a democratic entity.

Man would not exist without migrations. Nor would animals, nor plants. Nor would the Earth or any other planet. The prehistoric man, according to existing theories, originated from Africa, roamed across Asia and through Siberia, found his way to Europe. Later the Silk Road and Spice Route were formed, world expeditions and "discoveries", which often escalated into conflicts between the indigenous population and the newcomers, and, in the not so distant past, became manifested in the form of colonies. Today, we come closer again to this kind of understanding of the world. Only the colonies are more virtual, as are the wars. Until we experience them firsthand. Migrants are obviously discomfiting, even dangerous in the eyes of some, because the associated emotions – which are always highly individual and intimate – are becoming unwanted, even forbidden. Personality is increasingly being swallowed by the multitude of screams, triggered by others, in order to protect their own delusions and cover up the limitations of their world.

The concept, which I initially dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the death of the greatest Slovenian avantgarde poet, Srečko Kosovel, and his poems *Europe is Dying* and *Ecstasy of Death*, I later abandoned. I am still trying to make a reference to the avantgarde, but rather than the historical, I prefer a contemporary approach; I believe that the exhibited art triggers this kind of questions as well. But I opted for life: migrations are a reflection of life, a celebration of life, they are life itself.

I was driving to Ljubljana to pick up from the airport Jovan Joca Jovanović, the most forbidden Yugoslavian director, who received numerous out of the most highly esteemed and flattering awards in recognition of his work, and Oleg Kulik, a world-famous Russian artist, born in the Ukraine, who flew in from Moscow. The next morning, I met with legendary Jusuf Hadžifejzović and his fellow hometown artist from Sarajevo, Adela Jušić; in the evening I got a call from the exceptional Macedonian sculptor Žarko Bašeski, notifying me that he had already arrived in Maribor; tomorrow the famous AES+F will be arriving to Slovenia after more than ten years, while the others – from Croatia, Japan, Australia, Canada, Poland – are already present at the venues. For the first time, we are opening an exhibition of this scale on three locations, at the MMC KIBLA, artKIT, and KIBLA PORTAL, which will be topped with a performance by Marko Brecej, entitled *Žicanje z žarom (Grill Wiring)*.

Art is life, its inherent essence, a testimony to this are the artworks reflecting different fates, personal and collective, family and social, civil, political, and religious as they pull down the media curtain to face us with distant and nearby horizons; with human figures in subtle interpersonal connections, thoughtful, worried, but also playful perspectives, outlining their paths and relations. Personal stories, hyperboles and metaphors, documentation of the world, virtual reflections and realistic set-ups, reminiscences of the past, receptions of the present, and predictions of the future – connect the poetics of individual artworks into a consistent dramaturgy, expressed by a variety of audio and visual media.

And yet, even on the other side, behind the media curtain, things are similar, life always finds a way. And to say that way is an artistic way is probably the kindest form of invitation, it may inspire you to come up with new ideas, or encourage you to take action. Welcome, then, to a journey with art. The only thing you need is yourself.

Shelters of Babylon

Being is life. Any kind of being (habitation) is meant here: interiors, buildings, blocks, houses, tents, earth houses, igloos; provisional, temporary, or permanently set up spaces, trailers, campers, modules, laboratories, space stations, shrines and palaces; or outdoors, in the open space, under the open sky, in water or in the air.

Being is also existence, a continuation, which introduces certain meanings and dimensions into the bare living: on one side, it expands the very natural notion, and on the other, it reduces it to an individual level and personalizes it. In any and every way, either in the sense of existence within a particular group, society, or system, or in the sense of fighting for existence, which always implies conflict, or perhaps rejecting aggression through defense. All these things can be observed in the light of numerous current problems, from wars, imperialism and colonialism, to economic conflicts, which, as a rule, have social consequences, because they wish to use domination to subjugate masses of people, reduce their rights as much as possible, and ultimately level them down to the position of consumers.

Torn down countries, devastated environments, victims, scattered families, exiles, refugees, and migrants are a consequence of the acts of the great ones, then calling the situation "a refugee crisis", although it is in fact the war that has been kindled by the same people for several decades, that is the reason for the refugees' misfortune. Newton à la carte.

The art exhibition *Shelters of Babylon* tackles questions related to the notions of being and existence. In this spirit, it is high time to revive some of the questions already addressed historically by existentialism, which advocated not only the individual's freedom and the equality of all people and different social strata, but also the autonomy and the right of every man or woman to express themselves freely. And even if the times are now different, the context is becoming identical: survival.

A variety of artistic procedures have been used to present artists' original visions of being and existence in distinct and diverse forms, and reveal them through various media. Life on the planet, Spaceship Earth, which travels through space-time along settled trajectories, the rotation of the Earth around its own axis and the Sun, the revolution of the Solar System inside the galaxy and of the entire Milky Way in the wider system – these are journeys, which can be illustrated by a human being/artist on a personal, physical, mental, metaphysical, fictional, fabricated, or symbolic level.

Babylon as a historical fact brimming with mythology, the symbol of an ancient civilization, this romantic notion of harmony between people, races, religions, languages, cultures, has been perceived so far through artistic processes and works mainly as an idealistic idea, rooted in numerous literary works and visual depictions. The once independent city-state with its two defining rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, the Ishtar Gate, the Hanging Gardens, and the most famous tower in lost history, was always in the firing line of capital and politics by different means, its grip not ceasing even today in Iraq, a country torn asunder by foreign forces, resulting in millions of exiles and refugees.

It seems that the world today is more global than it was in the past, although it is indeed the fate of Babylon that convinces us of the opposite, which has, for that matter, been clear for ages. Humans have always sought, as have all living beings on earth, the best chances for survival. It usually began with a formation of some kind of group, which created a center of their existence, out of which through years, decades and centuries, a civilization was formed.

It is the latter, the fact of being called a *civilization*, which is the opposite of the notion/word/fact of *militarization*; civilization is in constant discrepancy with militarization, and therefore in danger of collapsing from the state of being made, constructed, living – to destruction, devastation, and death.

Hence, *Shelters of Babylon* concentrates on the here and now. The ways in which we imagine this are presented through various forms, media, and materials in the exhibition encompassing a palette of works ranging from the most intimate, to the more widely engaging, socially committed ones. In each case, the personal and the social aspect are the crucial postulates of a person's (or being's) integration in the environment, in natural landscapes or in rural areas; in deserts, mountains, and woods; in urban settlements, which have become the most densely populated areas on earth; but also in some of the most inhospitable places for man to live – glaciers, rivers, and seas; whereby man's harmony with nature is increasingly becoming a syntagm of alienation, because it means that the human being is no longer considered as one of nature's integral parts, but rather as something alien to this nature; we are intruders who need to adopt to our only habitat – the Earth, although during the course of our evolution, the evolution of our own civilization(s), we have altered this habitat so much, that it no longer acts as our ally, but more and more as our enemy.

The exhibition *Shelters of Babylon* focuses on personal artistic experiences, derived from distinctive spaces of thought and creation, and the natural environments and cultures in which the artists work. The underlying issues concerned include being (living, existence), survival, migration, as well as other processes in the modern world, which is not only defined by earthly experiences, but also looks towards alternative forms of living in space, on other planets, in neighboring galaxies, even in faraway constellations. Although for now the only human-friendly environment is our planet, artistic perception ventures further, to outline various forms of potential human dwellings, bodies, clothing, settlements, buildings, relationships, etc., which, presented through different media, constitute the central theme of the exhibition. As the title suggests, the art show captures a historical view, a present perspective, and a futuristic vision, and uses artistic codification to communicate these ideas in a number of different ways.

Related to the concept of basic human rights, "shelters" can be associated especially to the notion of safety. Shelters are places where we can hide, where we go to have a sense of safety. It is about the feeling of being somewhere, where it is neither safe nor unsafe. When a sense of insecurity is linked to fear, however, it creates a powerful collective push: today, we are discussing at a global level about which is more important, human rights, or safety. We are coming up with ever new ways and methods of controlling people, who consequently just want to retreat to their shelters. To their peace. To safe ground.

But even there, safety is nothing more than a mirage, as our intimacy is watched over by the sophisticated eye of capitalism, diagnosing our inwardness, our private sphere, our will and desires, our thoughts. There is a mirror waiting beyond this seeming safety, placed there by the exhibition *Shelters of Babylon*, to reflect and be reflected by society and politics.