

SUSPENDED IN THE POST-HUMANIST LAPSE: CONTAINED MOBILITY





When entering the harbor, the voyager leaves the exceptional condition of the boundless sea – this traversable space of maritime immensity – to come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the trans-local state of not being of this place – nor of any other really – but of existing in a condition of permanent not-belonging, of juridical non-existence. He comes to signify the itinerant body, bound to string along a chain of territories, never reaching a final destination. Probing the protocols of access time and again, he moves through non-civil places, waits for status in off-social spaces, only to remain suspended in the post-humanist lapse. What used to be a state of temporary exemption – survival in the time-space of legal deferral – has turned into the prime mode of migratory subsistence. Connected but segregated, it forms the world system of contained mobility.
Prologue, Contained Mobility



Contained Mobility enters the digital world generated by the prevailing control of mobility and the unstable, trans-local forms of life that emerge between and around it. The video conveys this paradoxical, but fully interconnected, contemporary condition by splitting itself onto two synchronized screens. One screen displays digital navigation and container traffic information systems while the other registers the interior of a container inhabited by asylum seeker, Anatol. In conversation, Imre Szeman observes that, among my videos, *Contained Mobility* offers possibly the most direct, forceful and engaged examinations of the ways in which subjects are today enmeshed in a web of legal, geographic, political and economic systems which shape and determine *belonging* – one of the fundamental aspects of being human. The experience of globalization connects the question of what it means to be human with the technologies by which the human is divided, organized, distributed, arranged, prohibited, emplaced and displaced.¹

The story of the refugee, Anatol K. Zimmermann, narrates reality in the state-of-exception. A Belorussian, born in a labor detention camp in the Gulag, he has lived in limbo for an indefinite time, suspended in a post-national lapse. As a young adult, back in White Russia, he was discriminated against socially for being ethnic German, and persecuted by the authoritarian state for being a dissident. His is the experience of “low-intensity citizenship,” a citizenship not fully benefiting from human or citizen-rights. It is not surprising that such second-class citizens, who have historically been granted lesser rights, tend to be those most affected by neoliberalism’s trend for diminishing citizens’ rights. They are the ones we are most likely to encounter in an ever-growing juridical and spatial reality in Europe and worldwide. The crisis of human rights is inextricably linked to the crisis of the nation-state, which is based on the notion of its citizens and thus incapable of bearing meaningful relation to those who live outside it. Anatol’s existence takes place in a state-of-exception beyond the simple binary of re-nationalisation and repatriation.

For many migrants, it has become virtually impossible to enter the European space in a sanctioned way. The stringent measures devised for Schengen are being further reinforced in a post 9/11 period,² and only the very resourceful and inventive stand a chance of overcoming the imposed barriers. Even though many migrants would rather choose other venues, they recognize that asylum is the only option left

for entry. In theory, the European countries guaranteed the human right for asylum when signing the Geneva Convention, which constitutes one of the basic conventions of a humanist culture. De facto, however, nation states implement legal and practical measures that make it virtually impossible to access this right. One way of achieving this is by keeping migrants in extraterritorial transit zones, where national constitutions do not apply and cannot therefore be violated. Prolonged states of legal suspension are increasingly experienced by people who are not entitled to settle down anywhere. What used to be a state of exception has slowly consolidated into the primary mode of migratory subsistence. The provisional state – the reception camp, the asylum procedure – have turned into a permanent post-human and post-humanist condition. *Contained Mobility* attempts to grasp this transformative moment, to understand the qualities that characterize the emerging subject and to bring his condition to the fore.

Since the mid 1990s, Anatol has been working in Poland and attempting to enter the European Union, first by swimming over the freezing river Neisse to Germany, later by crossing mountains and swamps in Ungaria, Slovenia and elsewhere. In the video, he appears as a highly educated, smartly-dressed human being who cunningly uses technology to find loopholes in the system of Schengenland. While webcam images show Anatol in a shipping container, the factual narrative of his odyssey of illegal border crossings, his capture, internment and escape scrolls up the screen. He comes to signify the itinerant body, never reaching a final destination. Trans-local existence appears here as an extra-judicial movement from place to place.

The gaze into the inside of the container, perceived through a surveillance camera, evokes a collapse of the borders between public and private life. But, when this camera lens captures a refugee, an irregular migrant, an exile, the border is effacing that between human being and citizen, the line between life and law. And it is the possible point of departure for the conception of a new post-national subject, a subject outside of political representation, where “everything new is born illegal” as the last line in the video reads.

While cultural identity has long been perceived as a fundamentally static concept, predicated on the nation state, this video pursues a model of pure mobility. *Contained Mobility* juxtaposes the two spatial realities of the global container transport system and human migration contained as pure movement. A global regulatory network is emerging that aims to control the flow of commerce and people on a global scale, focusing on the major nodes and logistical centers of harbors and airport. Increasingly sophisticated technologies intended to manage and control global flows are countered by equally inventive tactics of evasion by people questioning the prerogative of access to a political community. Oppressive spatial practices of control do not mean that resistance is

1 Ursula Biemann and Imre Szeman, “Forced Transit: A Dialogue on Black Sea Files and Contained Mobility” in *Political Typographies* (Barcelona: Fundacio Tapies/Actar, 2007), 35-45.

2 The reference here is to the 1985 Schengen Agreement, which introduced a European-wide common policy on the temporary entrance of persons to signatory nations. The countries in ‘Schengenland’ include all members of the European Union (with the exception of Ireland and the UK) plus Switzerland, Norway and Iceland.



1995/96_Finds seasonal work in agriculture and construction in Poland.



forever confined to the authorized spaces of domination. They might “take place” elsewhere.

Contained Mobility gives some insight into the technological operations that constitute the network of control and the co-dependent possibility of autonomous migration. The synchronized videos depict the ongoing struggle between disciplinary mobility and the desire for self-determination, keeping in mind, however, that migratory resistance does not necessarily define itself in opposition to a specific power but imprints itself through all sorts of deviant tactics of survival and empowerment. In this scheme, the shipping container is used as a symbol for these contradictory terms as it denotes a quality of confinement and enclosure, while simultaneously implying a systematized world-wide mobility.

None of the images of *Contained Mobility* document reality. Every image is an artificial construct: a simulated seascape, a visual rendering of digital data, a webcam set up for a staged scene. The video is a conceptual statement about a particular state of being in this world. As the voice of the prologue reads: “To come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the trans-local state of not being of this place – nor of any other really – but of existing in a condition of permanent non-belonging, of juridical non-existence.” The condition of the refugee is expressed only in the negative.

Documentary representation today often serves the interests of the state – to identify, to recognize, to know, to control. Accordingly, photography, positioned within ever-new and expanding surveillance systems, operates as judicial and forensic evidence. Control, however, is not absolute since every system has its blind spots. These become manifest when Anatol disappears from the screen as a result of the angle at which the picture is taken. Thus, blind spots become a metaphor for the system’s loopholes, which Anatol uses with great ease. At another moment, Anatol takes up a Yoga position and, after a while, his figure dissolves in the air. The most obvious interpretation would be that he resorts to meditation in order to escape the confinement and precariousness of his situation. Perceiving things in a different, unreal way gives expression to a feeling of the stressful relationship and problematic sense of the self in relation to places. But there is also a deeper dimension to this image that I recognize in T.J. Demos’s question “How can one represent artistically a life severed from political representation?” In answer, he articulates – with reference to Yto Barrada’s photographs *A Life Full of Holes* – that the scene visualizes the becoming of the refugee as a process that pulls away presence into another world, creating a hole in the visual field that expresses the phenomenon of dislocation as a rupture from the grasp of the state.³ The rupture from political status troubles representation.

While none of the video images are indexical, referring to an immediate lived reality, the text is strictly documentary. Based on several hours of interview with Anatol in his forever-temporary location in Liverpool, I extracted his complicated itinerant biography with the greatest possible accuracy. This is, in fact, the simple procedure required for every asylum application filed. Yet Anatol assured me that, after being processed by a dozen European countries or more, I was the first person to produce a complete record. Usually meant for the obscure circuits of asylum management (which mostly mean asylum denial), this information, which authorities no longer feel obliged to produce, is now made public through an artistic practice that produces the missing record required for access to the human right of asylum. This made me wonder whether the unexpected utility of my act of representation had an impact on its status as an artwork, signifying a contemporary human condition, or whether *Contained Mobility* had inadvertently turned into a document reporting on one case to be resolved.

As dedicated as I am to symbolic production, I am nevertheless sensitive to the ethical question of when to put down the camera and assist the protagonist – in other words, whether direct intervention in social and political injustice is sometimes more justified than the aesthetic representation of it. In one instance, I did leave the mode of representation and engaged in a real-life encounter with Anatol: I offered to buy him a Polish passport. This was before Poland entered the EU, but it was only a matter of time and he would have been able to replace the forged passport with an EU one. As he was raised near the Polish border and spoke the language, this seemed to me the most suitable way for him to obtain the much-desired license to free circulation. Anatol declined. Salvation would have meant the death of his problem, which by now was obviously not only a burden but also the condition with which he has come to identify: to march in the cracks between nations as the post-migratory subject into which he has mutated.

Installation of *Contained Mobility* see page 108-109.

3 T.J. Demos, “A Life Full of Holes,” *Grey Room*, 24, Summer 2006, 72-87.

