

**MIGRATION
AND
BORDERS
Visible
and Invisible
Walls**

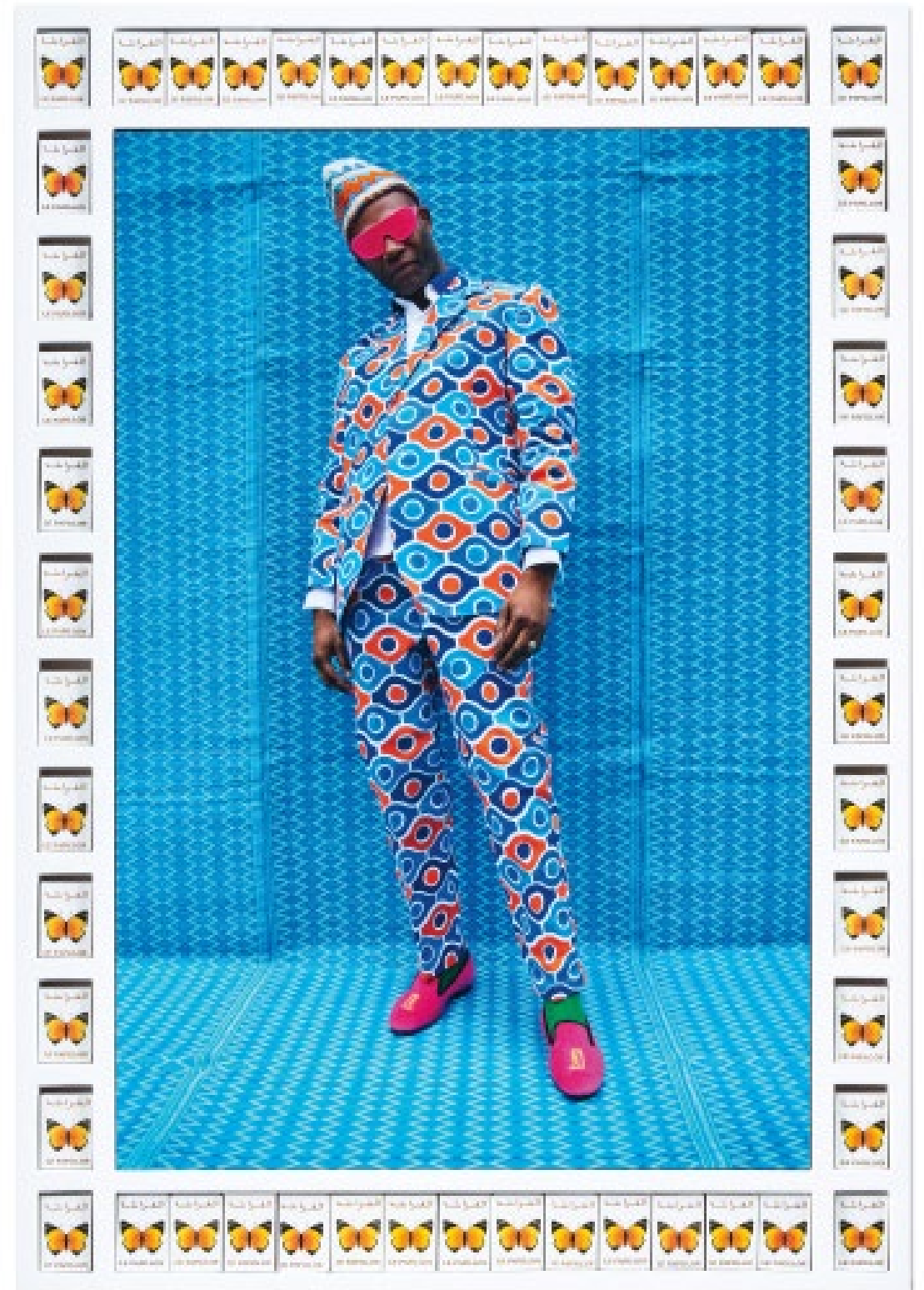
Hassan Hajjaj*Mr. J. C.-Hayford*

2012

Metallic lambda print on Dibond,
Papillon matchboxes in white frame
35 × 24 3/4 inchesTang Teaching Museum collection,
purchased with generous funding
from Nancy Herman Frehling '65 and
Leslie Cyphen Diamond '96, 2017.9

“When you say, ‘rock star,’ in my eyes and my friends’ [eyes], it’s normally a leather jacket, long hair, a guitar, and dark glasses. That’s kind of a brand. I wanted to take this brand and turn it into my brand, my rock stars: it’s my friends, it’s people who have a similar journey from different parts...I’ve chosen these friends, which I call the underdogs, in that they’re not mainstream. But they have this passion and they’re born with something and they follow it. Even when they fall, they get up and keep fighting. When I started this project, I was very lucky because of my background...I’ve been very lucky to have these kinds of people around me. When you hear the title *My Rock Stars*, you expect musicians. And so I try to have the Henna girl, male belly dancer, the snake charmer, the bad boy done well. The underdogs are more attractive to me.”

—Hassan Hajjaj



Books, Borders, and Democracy

Tanya Selvaratnam

¹ Azar Nafisi, *The Republic of Imagination: A Life in Books* (New York: Viking Press, 2014), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 294.

When those in positions of political power seek to divide us with physical borders and walls, our imaginations are the most effective tools we have to keep cultural borders open.

From the time I could read, I haven't felt complete without a book in my hand or my bag or by my bed. Even in the car as my parents drove, I would read in the back seat until the natural light dimmed and I couldn't squint my eyes any smaller to discern the words on the page. When I was reading, I was someone else, somewhere else. I could escape my surroundings in Long Beach, California, and the unhappiness in my family home. I made friends with the characters in the books, getting to know their worlds and communities.

In my New York apartment, I have books on my shelves that date back to elementary school. Seeing them triggers memories of the times during which I read them. The older I get, the more my bookshelves overflow.

Soon after 2019 began, Marie Kondo, the Japanese home-organization expert, was all the rage. After watching her television show, people took piles and piles of clothes, records, and books to donation centers and secondhand stores. I decided it was time to clean up my own shelves. I said "thank you" to the books I knew I wouldn't peruse again and put them in bags to give away. But when I came across *The Republic of Imagination* by Azar Nafisi, I started reading it again.

Nafisi wrote, "Long before I made America my home, I inhabited its fiction, its poetry, its music and films."¹ She wrote about her admiration for James Baldwin: "Baldwin genuinely believed that literature had a vital role to play as a sort of social glue. He felt there was, as he put it, 'a thread... which unites every one of us' and saw a deep-rooted and necessary affinity between our everyday lives, anxieties, joys and sorrows and the act of writing."²

Baldwin was my father's favorite writer, and he eventually became mine, too. A copy of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* had been on my father's office bookshelf. As my father lay dying from lung cancer in his hospital bed, I read to him from *The Fire Next Time*. When I was starting the Federation, a coalition of artists, organizations, and allies committed to the concept that art is essential to democracy, I turned to Baldwin's words again and again, and in particular, to this quote: "The

3 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," in *Creative America* (New York: Ridge Press, 1962), 1.

4 Nafisi, *The Republic of Imagination*, 294.

5 Ibid., 16.

precise role of the artist [is] to make the world a more human dwelling place."³

But can art save democracy? The question is a provocation in its implication that there's a democracy to be saved: the United States has never truly been one. The question then becomes: How can art be used to build the democracy we are striving toward?

Nafisi wrote, "In a democracy, the arts tend not to threaten the state." She also asserted, "Writers are truth tellers, and that can sometimes put them in conflict with the state."⁴ In her 2003 bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she recounted how every Thursday for two years, she gathered seven female students in her living room to read forbidden Western classics. Reading was rebellion; reading was an act of defiance against totalitarianism. In both democracies and totalitarian regimes, there's an element of people having to succumb to a system of governance. Nafisi has stated that "fiction is an antidote" to conformity, "a reminder about the power of individual choice."⁵

We know we are sliding toward authoritarianism when artists become perceived as enemies of the state, when cultural exchange becomes a threat. We know that this is happening in the United States in 2020. The measures taken to build physical walls and ban entry from specific countries have been explained in terms of national security. But in truth, they have been much more about suppressing freedom and eroding our shared humanity; they have been intended to instill fear. When children are separated from their families at the border, they are imprinted with trauma that will track them for the rest of their lives.

Making borders more rigid is an attempt to block the free exchange of ideas. Take, for example, the saga of bringing *The Jungle*, a play set in a refugee camp in Calais, France, from London to St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York. Many of the cast members had lived in the refugee camp, and three were from countries on the ban list. It took intense legal maneuvering as well as letters from luminaries such as Sting and the mayors of New York and London to persuade the US government to let the actors cross the border. Matthew Covey, the lawyer who worked on the case, said to the *New York Times*, "The issue of refugees is on everyone's mind right now, so a

6 Michael Paulson, "How 3 Actors Overcame Trump's Travel Ban to Take the New York Stage," *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/02/theater/the-jungle-st-anns-warehouse.html>.

7 Paulson, "How 3 Actors."

powerful artistic piece coming out of that context is very compelling, and when this first came in, we said, 'We have to do this, and we have to make it work.'"⁶

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, in her plea to the State Department about the case, said, "Welcoming refugees is what the Statue of Liberty stands for and what our nation stands for, and this play is so important because it gives refugees a chance to bring their powerful experiences to the United States."⁷

Near the building that houses St. Ann's, droves of tourists take photos against the backdrop of the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges: bridges not walls. They also take photos of the Statue of Liberty in the distance. This gift from France has at its base the Emma Lazarus poem that resonates ever more strongly with these simple words:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free

In a recent moment of despondency about everything, I reached out to my friend Farai Chideya, the multimedia writer and thinker. I told her that what was getting me down was the feeling that the bad guys are winning, that it's ultimately hopeless, and that we spend too much energy trying to make things better. As long as the constructs of money and real estate dominate our government, we're doomed. We've built the systems that enslave us. With typical brilliance and quick-wittedness, Chideya responded, "Yes, bad guys win, but truth tellers also win."

A friend of Chideya's, Betty Reid Soskin, has lived through many times of tumult in the United States. When I met her in 2018, she was ninety-seven years old (and the oldest National Park Ranger, assigned to Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California). We might think racism, misogyny, and xenophobia are out of control in the twenty-first century, but she's seen them way more out of control. She told me that periods of chaos arise when democracy is redefined, and that we all have access to the reset buttons.

The United States has always been in a tug of war between those who believe in democracy, justice, and equality for all and those who believe in it only for

themselves and their friends. Artists and cultural institutions can chip away at the harmful tactics of our government and governments everywhere to fragment us. This involves supporting programming for people from vulnerable communities and taking extra steps to provide platforms for artists from vulnerable communities. We can use art to offer a more representative and inclusive vision of our world, to inspire people to change the world, to provide levity and joy.

As storytellers, artists in all genres have the power to change the picture, to change the narrative, to change the public discourse. When consciousness is transformed and opened up, it is more likely to lead to better choices, whether in the voting booth or the schoolroom, the workplace or the community. When we realize the strong man is a straw man, we can strive to build the world we envision for ourselves.

There are various simple actions that everyone can take to protect and improve democracy:

- Register people to vote. Voter suppression and voter manipulation are some of the most serious threats to our democracy.
- Stand up for and with vulnerable peoples. Wide swaths of communities are vulnerable under the government. Volunteer for or contribute to an organization that works on these issues.
- Support a free press. Your favorite truth-telling publications are dependent on subscriptions to stay afloat.

It's worth noting that Azar Nafisi herself comes from a banned country: Iran. For the epigraph in *The Republic of Imagination*, she chose the Langston Hughes poem "Let America Be America Again." Although he wrote, "America was never America to me," he closes with hope:

And yet I swear this oath—
America will be! ▲

APRIL 20, 2017

Hassan Hajjaj

artist

Richard Mosse

artist

Tanya Selvaratnam

producer

Isolde Brielmaier Our conversation revolves around a current and urgent global discussion regarding international movements of people, both voluntary and forced. This type of movement goes beyond political boundaries, calling into question issues of identity; human, legal, and political rights; displacement; the definition of home and what home means to a broad range of people; and citizenship, among other things. Individuals and communities have been put into motion and into exile. They have been moved into spaces of uncertainty, into the so-called shadows, and into what essentially have become states of suspended life or existence.

This includes undocumented citizens in the United States and Europe, the crisis in Syria, and conditions throughout the Horn of Africa. Historically, we can think about Bosnia, Herzegovina, Rwanda, those who survived Katrina and fled Louisiana, those who fled the terror of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, or Jewish communities forced to flee their homes in Europe. The list goes on and on. A lot of this calls into question identity, and how people have chosen to represent and identify themselves, and how that isn't always in line with official structures of power.

Hassan, as an individual and as an artist, you've traversed multiple spaces. Can you talk about being a transnational, someone who's gone from Morocco to Paris to London and back?

Hassan Hajjaj I was moved to England via my mum and my dad. Along the way, I found myself a misfit in both countries. Growing up in London, I became a Londoner, but I didn't see myself as British because I'd always be reminded that I was not British. Going back to Morocco, I was the person who lived abroad.

I try to express my journey and my experiences in my work. For example, I have a series called *My Rock Stars* that shows people that I met along the way in London, in Paris, people that had been moved. They call a place home for a moment, but sometimes they don't end up being there all their lives. I have friends who've come from Brazil, got married in London, have documents in London, and the next minute they're living in Paris. This is part of the world that we're living in. There are people who choose to move, and there are people who choose not to be moved but get moved.

The series includes people I've known or I've grown up with in London, mostly artists or designers. It came to me that when you look at medina images, you see beyond just the pictures; you see the documentation of a city at a time. I thought, okay, it is my turn to continue this form of studio shoots and to go beyond pretty pictures, to document my friends at a certain point of time. It's a journey of myself along with that person.

IB Can you talk about the fabrics, the materials, the poses, the adornment in the images?

HH It's about having nothing and making something out of nothing, or making something from very cheap materials. For example, in *Mr. J. C.-Hayford*, in the Tang's collection, the fabric in the suit was made from a sun parasol. Using something like this is about trying to be more grand, trying to have a dream life. It's really a journey in my life and the lives of the

people around me, and I want these lives to be documented. So when you see Joe Casely-Hayford’s photograph, that’s when he was in London.

If you see Cobra Mansa, he was in London, then he went back to Brazil.

I just met someone from Mali who lives in Canada—this is the way the world is, it’s not anything new anymore. But when people choose not to move or somebody’s been pressed to move, then it becomes a big problem.

- IB Tanya, you’ve worked in the creative realm for several decades now in addition to being active with social justice and human rights efforts. You’ve touched in the past on the idea that borders have many layers to them, and you have questioned—I don’t even know if there’s an answer—how we keep our cultural borders open.**

Tanya Selvaratnam

When I was thinking about the theme of visible and invisible walls, I thought about how sometimes the walls are between us and the people who are right in front of us. We’ve seen that so much in our country over the last few months, how this lack of understanding and this lack of empathy have led to horrible decisions being made and how important it is to be able to use or to pierce the walls that those in positions of power would seek to erect between us.

I produced the film *Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman*, the artist Mickalene Thomas’s first film about her mother. Making that film was part of her process of getting to know her mother, from whom she had been estranged, and who had sacrificed so much to give Mickalene the ability to express herself as an artist. This is a way that art has been used to bridge that wall between a mother and a daughter. And I think about how grateful I am to exist in this country today because of the sacrifices of people like my father, who came as an immigrant from Sri Lanka, where he was a minority discriminated against. He came here to seek better opportunities only to find that once he got to the United States, many white people saw him as Black and some Black people saw him as white. I think of how hard he had to fight to exist in this country.

What I’ve done pretty much my whole adult life is do as much as I can in the limited amount of time I have on this earth to contribute in some small way to making it a better place. For me, a year and a half ago when our current president announced his candidacy, I was terrified that he was going to win. I came from a country that had already experienced the deleterious effect of a narcissistic, jingoistic ruler like Donald Trump; we had the South Asian Donald Trump. And I saw the damage that could be done, so I dedicated myself to producing as much digital content as I could to get out the vote.

As the great Toni Morrison says, “This is precisely the time when artists go to work.” Artists are going to be so important moving forward, maybe more important than ever, in shaping public consciousness, because movements come from the ground; they’re not going to come from above. The change of consciousness is not going to come from a politician giving a speech.

This is where all the artists really have to get to work and contribute to building empathy and understanding. Although it’s a trying time and

there’s going to be unmitigated damage done to so many vulnerable people, it’s also an exciting time because people are so awake in a way that they haven’t been in a long time. So while I feel sad for all the damage that is being done, I’m also very optimistic because of how much we can do to pivot public consciousness and hopefully impact policy in a positive way.

- IB Many artists feel a strong sense of responsibility not only to their craft but also to building a groundswell in terms of movements. Richard, where is your point of entry into all of this? Can you share a bit about your work and what you think about the artist’s role?**

Richard Mosse

I spent the last three years making artwork about the refugee crisis that’s been unfolding in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. I made this work along various points on two of the busiest and most perilous routes in the European Union. That’s taken me from the Persian Gulf to the border of Syria and Turkey, across the Aegean Islands, up the Balkan Corridor to Germany. And the second route, which I’ve intercepted at various points, is from Sub-Saharan Africa, lands such as Mali and Niger, through the Sahara Desert toward Libya on the route north to Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. I couldn’t go to Libya because I’m working with a camera that’s classed as weapons grade, so it’s sanctioned. I intercepted this route again off the coast of Libya as people traveled on Italian rescue boats.

- IB You’re following multiple migrations here?**

RM Yes. Those are the routes, but there are whole different types of people on the routes from so many different countries, fleeing so many different harsh realities. Along the southern route, people are coming from the Horn of Africa, especially Eritrea and Somalia, all the way across to West Africa, countries such as Senegal and Mali, or fleeing Boko Haram and other Islamist groups in places like Nigeria. There’s a lot of climate change in the Sahel that’s forcing people off their lands. There are also people coming from Sub-Saharan Africa fleeing persecution and conflict, which often has a correlation with climate change. And those on the route from the east are fleeing war in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. But I’ve also met people from Iran, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, fleeing persecution and economic hardship.

The project includes a film and photographs. The film, titled *Incoming*, is a fifty-two-minute video installation with three screens and 7.1 surround sound. It describes actual journeys. In the photographic prints, *Heat Maps*, produced with the same camera technology, I’m documenting camp architecture from a high elevation. So one is about the journey and the other is about the migrant staging sites.

The whole project was produced and made with an extreme-long-range border-enforcement and military-targeting camera. It’s thermographic, so it can see day or night, and it can image the human body from about eighteen miles. That doesn’t mean we always use it from such a distance, but it has that feature. It’s very powerful technology, and it’s very much a military tool, not available for consumer use. Since it’s weapons grade, it’s very hard to travel with legally, and without the correct export documentation, you could be locked away for weapons smuggling.

IB Why that specific camera?

RM To investigate the medium. It's very much about a European subjectivity—to remind but also to confront the viewer, particularly a European or American audience, that these are the technologies for which our governments—surveillance states—are paying vast sums of money to control our borders against what they describe as “insurgents” but who are usually stateless, dispossessed, and very vulnerable people.

So my project attempts to confront the viewer with that reality, to reveal this, as well as to work against it, to allow the viewer to think through this form of representation, and hopefully allow them to see the refugee's struggle anew, to refresh the subject and provoke the viewer to see in a way that hopefully holds a mirror up to them.

The project is very much about perception. It is also about privacy—the camera depersonalizes and anonymizes the individual—which is both an appropriate yet symptomatic approach to figuring these individuals, due to, for example, the Dublin Convention. (Refugees often wish to conceal their identity from the camera's gaze.) So there are tensions within the work that we are deliberately bringing into collision in order to make the viewer feel these problems and their own complicity.

There are also ways to interpret the work more simply in terms of body heat. If you're a refugee, on a daily basis, you're facing the risk of hypothermia, mortality from the elements, because you are living in tents and risking your life on the cold sea waves. Boats frequently sink and refugees die of hypothermia, something we witnessed many times and which we show in the film itself. To image the refugee's body as heat is a way to allude to that bodily risk, particularly hypothermia.

IB One of the things that you're talking about is an alternate mode of creating visibility—not only for the subjects, the people who make up the content of the images, but also a heightened visibility or awareness on the part of the viewer. Hassan, what do you think of the idea of visibility and presence and relationships to people but also in regard to governments and systems of power?

HH Thinking of what's happening right now in Europe, I was having a conversation with my friend Miriam, and we figured out that a while back you could be sitting at home watching the news and you could see thirty-eight Iraqis get blown up. And all of a sudden one day you wake up, for example in Germany, and all the Syrians are sleeping in the train station. I was imagining how the German people were probably watching the news yesterday and going to work and now it's on their doorstep. So it's not just their problem, it becomes our problem. And this is happening everywhere.

There's this disconnect between the government and the real people. Governments are splitting countries in two. It's happening in Europe; it's happening over here. It's creating this thing that is kind of good—there's a self-expression from both sides, everybody has the right to say something—but it also creates tension. There can be something positive, but sadly enough, this kind of chaos happens with it.

If you're not really aware of the refugee movements, what Richard said could scare you. The whole of Africa is running into Europe. It's a big problem, and it's a problem for everybody. It's not just “them” or “us.” Even my kid, who's thirteen, understands about politics and is aware of what's going on. I was a kid when I heard about the Vietnam War. I had a radio, and the war was far away; it was like another world, but now I think that's changing.

IB There's an immediacy to crises now with the advent of technology.

HH This younger generation is living in the moment; they've got the world in their hand even if they don't travel. I don't know about their awareness when it comes to history, because sometimes people only think of the problem that's happening now. But actually you have to sometimes refer back to how it started and not blame just the people who are with it now.

IB My father says that history is your best weapon. Some of these crises are deeply rooted historically. To talk about what's going on in Europe now and not be fully aware of and engaged with the history of colonialism on the part of the French, on the part of the British, on the part of the Dutch, the Germans, it goes on and on... There's a big disconnect there.

TS There's also this false construct of what it means to be an original person. There's a delusion that people give themselves about who is an original citizen or inhabitant of a particular place. Those in power have a perplexing need to dehumanize someone—they just change who that someone is at certain points in time. Right now the Mexican and the Muslim—they're the most visible enemies in the United States who have been constructed by those in power. If we go back to earlier in the century, it was the Japanese; if we go back to the nineteenth century, it was the Irish, who came to this country in waves during the Irish Potato Famine. I'm always aware of how much there is this need to dehumanize somebody so that somebody else can consolidate their power and control people.

IB And define themselves in a way—the way in which we define Americanness, the way in which we define citizenship. Determining who is able to rightly claim those things is often done in opposition to something, along those false binaries.

TS Power and money are these systems we've set up to enslave ourselves, and those who've mastered the tools of these systems can maintain their power only by creating people who are separate and selfish and scared, which is why it's so important to have artists doing the work to force people *not* to be separate and selfish and scared, to realize that there are a lot of commonalities between us. We know for a fact that most Americans actually feel very similarly about a majority of issues, whether it be climate change or immigration or criminal justice reform. Yet we've been manipulated to think that we are separate.

IB And that's a wonderful opportunity for artists to step in and change that image—this idea of humanizing, of making more visible individuals or communities that are disenfranchised or pushed to the margins.

- TS** But it's also important to recognize the limitations of art and technology. I was at a talk where a Google executive was saying that somehow technology was going to save the world because there were more people with iPhones and cameras taking images and witnessing things. It was going to make the world a better place because people could film a police officer straddling a young Black girl at a swimming party, because you could see the Syrian refugees, because you could see the warfare. But we're creating disaster porn. Are we changing policy? While we're using art and technology, we must also understand that it's important to take political control, because until we take political control, the issues we care about won't be actionable.
- IB** **How do we do that? Where is that bridge between art, technology, the visual realm, culture, and actually impacting policy? That is, effecting change in a way where it can actually be implemented?**
- RM** One criticism of the contemporary art world is that it's constantly preaching to the choir. I think art does have this power to move people, including the people who don't necessarily read *Artforum*. We communicate, that's what we do, and our role now is to move people. I have problems when people want art to be didactic or become propaganda. I think art needs to stay in a rather neutral and ambivalent space to be effective, to make people feel, because I feel that human experience and social responsibility is not about likes and followers and angry comments on Facebook—it's far more complex, and the viewer is very often complicit in certain ways. I guess we should ask ourselves what art's task is. Is it to hold a mirror up to society, to confront us with an image of ourselves that is not necessarily comfortable? Or is it to affirm the beliefs and positions to which we already subscribe? Or is it to prescribe, to tell people what to think and how to respond?
- HH** It's true. Artists can say something and can change something, but at the end of the day, it has to come from the person. We can only do so much. It's nice when you can communicate with people who don't look at art. I'm doing my best and trying to see if I can touch one person, which is better than none.
- IB** **That's creating a sense of responsibility also for your viewer in terms of thinking about reception.**
- HH** Exactly. In some of my early work, I'd take pictures of women with camouflage djellabas, which are Moroccan gowns, with Louis Vuitton bags. And I realized that if I put this image in front of the public, there would be two kinds of thoughts. And because I was testing the viewer, I wanted to see what the viewer thinks. It was interesting because some people said, "Oh, look, terrorists, Muslims." Then some say, "This is very cool." Because camouflage was in fashion in Europe then, and they saw the fashion side. Sometimes you have to play around with the viewer's mind—they have to question themselves—you don't have to give it all to them. You want to push them not to be lazy.
- IB** **Richard, you straddle two realms as a filmmaker and a photographer. In your work, do you go in with specific goals as you're beginning a project?**
- RM** No, I go in asking questions, and I usually come out the other end asking more questions. I don't go out with a fixed idea that I have to prove "this"; it's not prescriptive in that way. Good art is about asking questions rather than answering them. Also, my work is in a space between documentary reportage photography and contemporary art.
- IB** **For me, at the crux of what each of you do is storytelling. And there's no one clear path to doing that. All of you are working in multiple mediums to achieve that and going in with a set of questions as opposed to this idea of "this is what I want to achieve."**
- HH** For me, sometimes you can start with an idea, and then once you start scratching the surface, it goes somewhere else, and then you find yourself thinking on this new level. I have to let myself go and try to see where else it goes. In a sense, it is a way of searching for yourself within the work. I think any artist will probably ask, "What's the next thing to do?" But when you're on a roll, you find many different layers within a layer, and then you're learning as you go along.
- TS** For me, as a producer facilitating the work of many artists and directors, every project is so different based on the subject matter. There are some projects where we know the story that we want to tell; there are others where the story has to present itself. For instance, one of the most recent films I worked on, *Chavela*, was about the Mexican outlaw/ranchera Chavela Vargas; she was a muse to Pedro Almodóvar. I also produce a lot of social justice PSAs.
- I have no interest in politics myself. I don't believe in the two-party political system; I think that the dark-money machine has totally corrupted our government. But because I was terrified of what would happen to this country if it got its version of what I experienced in Sri Lanka, I did as much as I could. On November 9, 2016, I thought I'd be sailing into the sunset and going back to my happy artist life. And instead, like so many people, I sailed into the fire. So one thing that's definitely changed for me is that while I'm doing films like *Chavela* and projects like Mickalene Thomas's film, I will continue to do more social justice work because I won't be able to sleep if I don't.
- IB** **Is there a way to think about migration, movement, mobility more positively and not necessarily as a plight, even though we are contending with a lot of that, specifically in Europe but also in the United States? That can involve storytelling—a lot of relevant stories are not heard, they're not told, and therefore what's going on right now in terms of the scapegoating, the xenophobia, the dehumanizing is more prevalent.**
- TS** There's been so much dissecting and analysis of the failure of storytelling as what got us into this place over the past year. So many of the problems that we're dealing with and the siloing of people that's happening right now, not just in the United States but all over the world—which enables

people to live with their own isolating perceptions of themselves and the people around them—are because of the way that our popular culture has evolved. There was a time when I was growing up when there were just a couple of television channels that you could watch, there were just a couple of publications that you could read, a couple of radio stations that you could listen to. But now, it really is user’s choice, not dealer’s choice. That allows people to cherry-pick what they’re exposed to. And there’s no arbitration or editorializing that goes on.

- RM** They don’t even choose; the algorithm chooses for you.
- TS** That’s the corruption. We are all great storytellers, but we’re constantly telling stories to people who already know them. How do we pierce through those walls and have the stories reach the people we want? A lot of it is going to boil down to support and money, and it’s something that, sadly, evil people figured out many years ago—how to bust the algorithms, how to penetrate and get their stories out there. It’s not that our current president is an effective communicator, but he was able to weave the most distorted stories.
- IB** **We’re seeing this around the globe—messages predicated on very specific narratives, many of which have at their core xenophobia, anti-immigrant ideas, and complete historical amnesia.**
- TS** This is where the artists and the people on the ground will really have to seize control. They have to rise up because there’s just too much money that’s fighting against us. The Murdochs didn’t fire Bill O’Reilly from Fox News because they thought it was the morally right thing to do; they made that decision because people freaked out and rose up, and the ratings dropped, and then advertisers pulled their support because people were rising up. Moving forward, it’s going to be very important not just to continue to tell stories but to figure out how to have those stories penetrate to the places where we need them. Again, it’s not that we actually feel different about most of the issues, it’s that we don’t realize how similar we feel.
- HH** For me, I’m talking about my personal inner situation. Lots of my friends have been touched by what’s going on. These are friends I would never have expected to be touched: they can’t enter the United States, or in England, Brexit’s hit. So sometimes it’s difficult to think of the positive side because we’re going through moments like this. Even coming to the United States for this event, I was told I can’t bring my laptop and my camera because Trump changed the rules. Sorry to say, I almost canceled the trip, but obviously, I wanted to be here. I always felt this land is a free land; I have friends here, I feel at home.

At this moment, the earth needs to settle. We’re going through lots of political changes. I’m a person of the world: I was born in Morocco; I’m Moroccan, and I’m a Londoner, too. But when you have these situations around you, you do question yourself.

Audience As a storyteller, as an artist, how do you tell the story of people who are extremely vulnerable without objectifying them? There’s a fine line between telling the story of the subject and telling the story instead of the subject.

IB **When we talk about individuals, communities who were historically and are currently vulnerable, oftentimes they have been defined by someone else, and they have not had a voice nor been visible. In my own curatorial practice and teaching, it’s about creating a platform to allow people to have a voice, to speak for themselves.**

RM A lot of my work is about visibility. So many people in eastern Congo are dispossessed; it is a place that I would argue is in a state of near anarchy. Of course those people have their own voice; I’m not trying to put a voice in their mouths, but the work is trying to challenge some of the conventions of photojournalism and reportage photography, and to try to find an alternate way of communicating that particular story, hopefully one that’s more effective.

In my newer projects—*Incoming* and *Heat Maps*—that objectification is embedded in the work on some level, as is the problem that the work is trying to deal with and trying to reveal. The camera becomes the author, and a camera like that portrays people in a way as a heat trace. I like to read that in terms of an idea by Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher. He had a concept of “bare life,” and he saw the refugee as the crisis point for liberal democracy. We’re seeing that all over the world in Europe and in the United States now, where this perfect storm of refugees, who are coming from different parts of the world for various reasons, is being used by opportunistic politicians to change the system. What Agamben called the “state of exception” is when emergency laws prevail because of emergencies—that’s when the law stops working. It’s not just the refugee who has no human rights; it’s also the citizen who loses rights. So the refugee creates the crisis by which the system of human rights is suspended for all of us.

The camera strips the individual of identity, anonymizes the individual, and portrays people as biological traces rather than as people with colorful clothes and identity, even though of course they are. It felt like an appropriate way to portray the refugee, which is this stateless person. And also the people around him, the volunteers, emergency workers, Frontex officers, search and rescue people, and other aspects of the military humanitarian complex that has formed around this crisis. All of these people—whether citizen or stateless—are living, breathing human organisms; we share the biological fact that we are pools of heat created by cellular combustion. So I hope this work will evoke this sense of shared humanity, which seems to be a very difficult idea in these febrile times.

TS It’s often up to debate whether a work of art is exploitative or whether it is giving voice. It is the utmost responsibility of the artist to fuel that responsibility to their subject. In my own work, when I am showing a difficult situation, it’s important to connect it to some type of action that might lead to the eradication of that problem or solving that problem or offering greater awareness of that problem.

I find the debate over who has agency to depict people’s stories really strange. There are organizations that have been beating the drum of the need to witness for decades because when you have situations without witness, the atrocities are exponentially higher.

You can't really say that only those who are the identity of the people they're filming are allowed to film. That means that I, as a Sri Lankan woman, can only film Sri Lankan women? For me, the ultimate goal has to be highlighting the efforts of others, giving voice to others, and focusing on positivity and inclusion and uplifting people as much as possible. That's where documentarians really can get to work in filling that role so that there is witness. And when they tie it to action, it's even more powerful and potent.

Audience If you completely give agency to the subject whose story you're trying to tell, how is your work artistic, not documentary? And if you make it artistic and you are putting your own input in it, then how much say does this subject have?

IB **Think of Malick Sidibé. His images are filled with agency. Sidibé saw himself as an artist, an author. People came to him and commissioned images. But what you see is the result of a back and forth, a conversation, a negotiation. Someone would come into the studio with an idea of how they want to be seen, of how they want to be presented. Through a conversation with Sidibé come these images that stand in stark contrast to previous images of Malians from the 1940s and 1950s.**

The process is a little bit fluid, but you should come to it with a heightened awareness of the fact that you are an author and the subject is literally providing the content of your work. What are their intentions, what are yours? How can they come together to then create?

TS Albert Maysles, the documentary filmmaker, was a big inspiration to me. He's written some beautiful things about the role of the documentarian and about his process and how he worked. As a documentarian, he placed his fate and faith in reality—that was his guide. And he preferred to be a fly on the wall rather than the person who was trying to put his imprint on it. He let the story find itself, and that's very important. But I've also seen successful documentary films where there was a strong imprint of the filmmaker and a lot of editing that went into it.

HH What you said earlier about Malick Sidibé is a good answer in some ways because he was actually a studio photographer for the town. He wasn't looking at himself as an artist in the beginning. He created a studio setup in Bamako where people came to have their pictures taken and sometimes dress up. But somebody later on saw his photos as art, and then he became an artist.

Audience I'm a professor of anthropology here at Skidmore, and I do a lot of work on Mexican cultures and Mexican migration. In this past year, I've studied refugee and migrant issues in France, Vienna, and Berlin. I found from meeting people from many different countries in Europe that the visual aspect of the migration experience is important to refugees. There's so much that can't be visualized, so in some ways, art is a way to imagine certain forms of suffering and experience. In Europe, I was struck by how much the dominant visual culture is one that creates this image that European or French or German culture is somehow very different from the

one the migrants come from. It emphasizes difference and disconnectedness. Yet one aspect of the visual culture that's oftentimes not represented is the humanitarian aid workers, the French and Germans who see themselves as connected to migrants and refugees.

I'm thinking about how much the identity of the migrant is represented, but what I see happening in Europe is that French people are thinking about what it means to be French right now, and Germans are thinking about their identities as well. Those identities also need to be represented visually. In the United States, there are a lot of visual images that separate white Americans from brown Mexicans. What about the images of collaborative cross-cultural relationships that are generational in this country around migration? Art in some ways has the potential to help us imagine and visualize things that are hard to visualize otherwise. How do we visualize not so much cultural differences but cultural connections in a moment where difference and division are almost naturalized or normalized?

TS The nativist thinking that's happening all over the world is terrifying. It's especially terrifying because it doesn't actually represent the way the majority of people think. But the minority is seizing the mic and taking the platform and their views are taking hold. One of the reasons they're taking hold is this crisis of storytelling and having storytelling penetrate through walls. People don't really understand where they come from; they don't actually understand who they are. That's going to be a real task for artists moving forward: how do we inform people about the commonalities between us, that we are truly human first?

RM In Europe, it's a product of migration displacement. During World War II, there were tens of millions of people moving around all the time, and that crystallized as Europe. So this nativist idea is just not true. And it's sad.

IB **You mentioned the term *generational*. I do think that there is quite a bit of difference when you talk in terms of generations. I'll speak about my mother's family, who are Austrian. There's a very clear sense of being Austrian on the part of my grandparents' generation that differs from my cousins' generation and from the younger generation. We can say the same thing here in the States. And that's where culture really plays a role—when we talk about what it means to be American or the issue of race. That intermingling, intersecting of cultures actually does exist.**

TS I have to remind myself every day of the words of Flo Kennedy, the civil rights radical activist lawyer, who said, "Don't agonize, organize." It's so easy right now to be pessimistic, and it takes real courage to be radically optimistic. But it's so important because I do believe that the long game is ours to win, and when I say "ours," I mean the majority of people who believe in progress and justice and equality. I see what's happening right now, in my optimistic view, as the last gasps of the patriarchy—it's going down screaming. But I do find hope with the younger generations.

It was really hard to watch so many of my friends' kids right after the election. They were distraught and depressed and crying, not knowing if their parents who are immigrants were going to get sent home, not

knowing if their friends were still their friends because they looked different from them. We need to reach out to these generations and reach out between different groups of people, because there's hope if we come together and communicate with one another. And I take hope just thinking about all those who weren't awake who are awake now and civically and politically engaged. People that I never thought would have been asking are asking, "What can I do?"

They had a sense of urgency, calling up their senators, showing up at the town halls. There were tens of thousands of women who signed up for leadership training programs after the election. We might not feel it tomorrow, or weeks from now, or months from now, but years from now we will.

- Audience** When you were talking about representation and who can represent whom, I thought of the controversy over Dana Schutz at the Whitney Biennial. Can you speak to that?
- IB** **Dana Schutz, a white, female artist, painted an image of Emmett Till in an open casket, which was included in this year's Biennial. The curators are both Asian American, young, early thirties. The artist Hannah Black wrote an open letter that set off a huge firestorm—about who has the right to represent whom, who has the right to represent violence, to represent Black death. It brought up issues around censorship, around cultural authority, around appropriation, around monetizing Black bodies and death.**
- TS** That was a case of something being handled terribly by everyone on all sides of that conversation. I was having dinner with a friend who is a person of color, and she had just seen the piece and said to me that she'd actually been moved. I was going to the Whitney two days later with another friend who is also a person of color. We walked around and around and couldn't find the painting. I was getting frustrated because I felt like this controversy was a shiny object that was distracting us from the actual problems and the bigger conversations that needed to be had, but I wanted to see this work. And we asked a guard where it was, and she kind of winked. She said, "There was a leak, and so it's been moved to storage for its safety." And we all started laughing, including the guard. And I asked, "When was it moved?" She said, "Last night." I thought, okay, wow, the censors won.
- IB** **Well, it's back up now.**
- TS** So there was the outrage over it being up, and there was outrage over it being taken away. In the same way that we have to have the courage to put our work out there as artists, we also have to have the compassion to observe the work of others. And we have to be better at having conversations around that work.
- A lot of the more open-minded and enlightened people who should have been talking about this didn't want to get their hands dirty; they didn't want to publicly get involved because it had become too hot. But what I feel is important is that when these controversies happen,

they shouldn't be things that allow us to slide backward. They must be things that help us push forward with a greater understanding of the problems that might have happened, and how we can work better so that they don't happen in the future. What I worried about with that controversy is that because of the way it transpired, it was used to stifle expression. It is important for artists to be curious and to take risks. I would hate to see any artist be stifled from taking a risk because of what happened around that controversy.

- Audience** I'm a senior here at Skidmore College. I'm a visual storyteller, and my medium is interactive web design. I just finished a project on linguistic prejudice among the Puerto Rican community in the United States and in Puerto Rico. I look back on it, and I wonder how I would feel about doing a project that wasn't so personal to me. As storytellers, how do you take a step back from a project that could hurt you and that is personal to you, but that a community out there needs?
- HH** There's one piece of film I've done. I'd been taking pictures of this friend of mine for seventeen or eighteen years, on and off. I decided to step aside as a photographer and film her. When I see the film now, it touches me because it's very personal not just for me but for the subject because it was about her. Some things happened within the film that were unexpected, and that made it more interesting and more questionable as a piece of film.
- It's about a woman who works in a square in Marrakesh. She's third generation, does henna, and wears a veil. In her group of friends, one of the guys wears a hijab and has makeup on, so it's a real contrast. I had this feeling of, What's going to happen? Will some people say something? Does it have a negative effect? But actually it opened up whole new questions for the work. When I decided to put the film out, I was a bit worried about how people perceived it. But I've had lots of positive feedback, and I was really glad these moments happened.
- From my point of view, you just have to know that not everybody's going to like your work. As long as you're happy with it, you have to put your work out there for yourself. If you can touch a few people that have the same feeling as you, you're doing the right thing.
- Audience** My parents migrated to the United States in the 1990s. Two weeks ago, I was trying to have a conversation with my father about race. His experience with the United States is very different from mine. He wasn't aware of how he was racialized, so he didn't have anything to contribute to that conversation. How do you make the invisible visible when some people don't even know they're invisible?
- HH** In my journey, I'm making myself visible toward my parents, because my parents came from a village. They can't read or write. I was the first one to read and write, so when they needed to go to the dentist, I went with them. For me, I look at myself as the next generation to make myself visible but also to make sure that my parents are visible, too, because they put me in this world.

TS Whether it's dealing with a parent or dealing with an artist and subject, it's important to be able to step back from the assumptions that might prejudice you in viewing somebody in a particular way. Always be gentle and compassionate with somebody else. Don't feel like you have to force somebody to change their opinion because it doesn't coalesce with your opinion. The world is big enough for all those opinions. I have to deal with that with my own family as well.

As an example, I have Sri Lankan relatives, persecuted minorities in their own country, who voted for Donald Trump. Why? Their church told them to (which is actually illegal), because their church is anti-abortion. The most important thing you can do is open up the conversation—but don't expect that you will all agree. Don't expect that you will see eye-to-eye. Beautiful things can emerge from those gaps.

IB **My experience in my family is similar, although I am a post-civil rights 1970s baby. One way I have worked through some of that was to meet my father where he was and hear about his story. Speaking with my grandparents before they passed has also helped me to understand where he comes from. And then I began to see some of the commonalities, some of the places where we overlap. We're like two peas in a pod, and especially along lines of race and gender and class, we think so much alike. But I had to understand what his story was, and understand that although it's very, very different from mine, it's equally valid. And it's a part of mine as well. Throughout our father-daughter relationship, it was a lot of him telling me, "Isolde, you have two ears and one mouth." Keeping that one mouth shut and listening as he began to share his story, I realized, wow, there's so much overlap here.**

Audience I want to share with you my perspective. Half of my family—all my siblings—emigrated from Syria, where I was born and raised, to Europe on boats. Some of them took the Libyan route and some of them took the Greek/Turkish route. Now they're all political refugees in Sweden. When I see work like Richard's work, I become happy because I see people caring. I see people raising awareness about the story of my fellow countrymen and the story of my family members. But sometimes I wonder how much of this is people telling a story and people caring, and how much of this is people looking at us refugees as material or raw content that could potentially evolve into a cool, artistic product? Some of my sisters and brothers who were on those boats back then were photographed. Do you have any thoughts on agency and who is doing what to whom?

RM Artists tell, they communicate. I'm European and the refugees coming to Europe are going to change my country as well, so I do have a stake in it. It's all very complicated, and you're absolutely right: it's all in there, and it's all a problem, and it's not easy. I guess we have to ask ourselves whether art is simply another form of entertainment, cool products for the art fairs, or whether it wields a different, greater power in our society.

TS I think about all the conflicts around the world that don't have witnesses, that we don't hear about, and that are truly invisible. And how tragic

those situations are. It's a catch-22: Are we going to solve the war in Syria? No. Is the documenting of the atrocities and the suffering bringing more awareness? Is it convincing people to give to causes like the white Helmets? I think about so many conflicts, including in my own country. The lack of documentation of certain genocides means that the history bank is not there for future generations to learn from. So I feel that it is incredibly important to witness. ▲