

Christian Vagt

Softex

Softex is a military and police run camp in an industrial region of Thessaloniki. Refugees live under appalling conditions in tents in the former warehouse of a toilet paper factory and the wasteland behind it.

In 2015, the passage from the Middle East via the Balkans was the most important route for fleeing to western and northern Europe. In 2016, some European countries closed their borders. The refugees were interned in camps. The attempt to distribute people across Europe failed due to the refusal of many states to shelter them. By declaring non-European countries as *safe countries of origin*, some states are attempting to keep the refugees out of Europe entirely. The refugees that succeed in entering Europe are detained under the Dublin Regulation in the so-called *safe third countries* along the EU's external borders.

"Greece could end up becoming a giant holding pen for refugees, performing the same controversial role for Europe that Nauru and Manus Island perform for Australia in the Pacific. If the situation does not improve, then what we have instead is an Australian-style system, where Greece becomes Nauru," the *Guardian* writes in an article about Softex.

In *Children of Men* (2006), a film by Alfonso Cuarón, Great Britain has closed its borders for good. Fear is being used to justify a police state. Migrants are tracked down, rounded up and displayed in cages. They are deported to camps like the notorious *Bexhill* on the coast or executed on the spot.

Psychoanalytic theorist and cultural critic Slavoy Žižek: "I would say that it's a realist film, but in what sense? Hegel in his aesthetics says that a good portrayal looks more like the person who is portrayed than the person itself. A good portrayal is more you than you are yourself. And I think this is what the film does with our reality. The changes that the film introduces do not point toward alternate reality, they simply make reality more what it already is. I think this is the true vocation of science fiction. Science fiction realism introduces a change that makes us see better. The nightmare that we are expecting is here."

The images were made in three days in June and July 2016. I photographed from a moving car, in part to let chance flow into the creation of the image. Accident creates images that intellect could never make.

I did not want to recount the fates of individuals, nor fake proximity, nor enable the spectator through pity to reassure himself of his humanity and therefore to find relief. This kind of pity replaces the gesture of causing change.

Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do - but who is that 'we'? - and nothing 'they' can do either - and who are 'they' - then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic. And it's not necessarily better to be moved. Sentimentality, notoriously, is entirely compatible with a taste for brutality and worse."

So I am exhibiting photographs of the fence, obscuring yet transparent, and the acts behind it that it is meant to conceal but that it spans a screen for: tents, people standing in line, a rubbish bin, a heap of sand, a man kneeling, a mother and child, the military and the police and the postures of power.

Once again Žižek on *Children of Men*: “The true focus of the film is there in the background and it’s crucial to leave it as a background. It’s the paradox of what I would call an amorphosis, if you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don’t see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background.”

“The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by the images,” writes Susan Sontag, “suggests a link between the faraway sufferers and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence.”

The artist

Christian Vagt is a photographer based in Berlin. In the nineties, he documented the everyday life of squatters in East Berlin and worked as a club photographer in Berlin’s punk and queer club SO36. In 2009, his photographs of gay punks and skinheads in the gallery of the Tallinn Art Hall in Estonia attracted attention. “His photos aren’t staged, in fact they are snapshots often resembling film clips. This effect is deepened by the seriality of his photos.” (Ants Juske, Eesti Päevaleht). *The Sprawl*, a photo series of Kim Gordon, then singer and bassist of the band Sonic Youth, was exhibited in 2010. In addition he shoots reportages in New York, Siberia, Central Asia and Bosnia. In 2016, his photographs of SO36 appeared in the book *SO36 – 1978 until Today* accompanied by an exhibition at Knoth and Krüger Gallery. The images of the exhibition *Softex* at Somos Art House were photographed on a trip along the Balkan route in the summer of 2016, until then the most important passage for refugees on the way to Western Europe.

Christian Vagt

Softex

Photographs of a Camp

02-12 Nov 2016

Tu-Sa 2-7 p.m.

01 Nov 2016, 6 p.m., Opening

03 Nov 2016, 6 p.m., Artist Talk with photographer Christian Vagt

11 Nov 2016, 7 p.m., How we help: Open and moderated discussion

12 Nov 2016, 6 p.m., Closing

SomoS Art House

Kottbusser Damm 95

10967 Berlin