

Persona (Non) Grata: Reading the Human in the 'Homeless'
Andrea Luka Zimmerman

'The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied . . . but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing.'

Person (n.): early 13c., from Old French *persone* 'human being, anyone, person' and directly from Latin *persona* 'human being, person, personage; a part in a drama, assumed character,' originally 'a mask, a false face,' such as those of wood or clay worn by the actors in later Roman theater. In legal use, 'corporate body or corporation having legal rights,' 15c. *In person* 'by bodily presence' is from 1560s.

That John Berger's insightful analysis above feels palpably true can be seen in the many ways in which a dehumanizing process has become persuasive across our society – be it in the ubiquity of private security personnel, demanding that 'homeless' (looking) people move on from park benches and other (privatised) public-appearing spaces; in the use of homeless spikes, in 'donor-friendly' barcodes to be worn around the neck, and in even more experimental measures like the deployment of off-putting atonal music on the S-Bahn in Berlin to deter extended journeys.

The individual, or person, has been taken out of the homeless, and has become one of 'the homeless'. We should know from history what dangers lurk in such a process of rendering people into pejorative problems, or even victims. As in Kafka's *Parable Before the Law*, such a 'label' erases the individual circumstances of that human being, with all the memories and pasts and thoughts that make them, for they are now defined and bound by the structures of bureaucracy ostensibly set up to protect, yet which in practice so exclude. These very systems, rendering invisible the hyper-visible, are part of what can be called 'structural violence', and are further heightened because of the ongoing processes of constant erasure faced by the said person in their journey further through the administration of their condition, and the increasingly hopeless, often impossible, attempts to seek redress for, or redirection of, their situation.

Culture claims its own narrative about homelessness. The fact of being or having been homeless becomes part of the overt definition of a person. Culture (made predominantly by people of privilege, be it of class, gender or race) more frequently interrogates people from deprived backgrounds instead of people who hold privilege.

I first came across Bekki's Doorways Project several years ago. Bekki was in the process of developing a larger-scale outdoor sound installation that would tour the country. Bekki's work touched me on such a profound level that when, as part of Fugitive Images, I co-curated a six-week exhibition on housing activism called 'Real Estates' at Peer Gallery in 2015, a work-in-progress installation version of the Doorways Project became a key part of it.

In Bekki's work, life and art are inseparable. Life comes first. Art comes from life. Artists making work about their own life experiences are many, at worst because ours is a

world made up of an excessive individual need for validation and recognition. Works about others' experiences are also numerous; when there is a great disjuncture between maker and subject, often around the parameters mentioned above, those lives portrayed can all too easily become engines for the imagination and agenda of the makers (well-intentioned or otherwise), at the expense of those depicted.

I am not suggesting here that authentic works can only be made by those who have experienced the situations represented. This very idea has so often become an excuse for a further silencing by means of aesthetic or logistical barriers. Yet the questions remain: who tells (or is allowed to tell), how is the story told, and for whom? So, on the one hand there is the individual expression of an experience, and on the other its relation to the larger socio-political context, one that allows some to thrive, while silencing, even erasing, others. This latter may not be a conscious or deliberate act but it is a by-product of our current value system, one which reduces certain bodies and expressions within the context of structural violence or a 'pervasive social inequality . . . ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm', as you will read in this book.

Some works forget to include the one who is listening, reading, touching, looking. The Doorways Project allows us to stop, consider, remain and become part of the work by taking its stories from and back into the world, where similar stories can be found on nearly every street corner, waiting to be seen, heard, acknowledged, witnessed. The Doorways Project renders experience in place and time as a wound, and at the same time moves beyond the intimate, singular 'now' of their telling into a deeper understanding of humans suffering within the mainstream narratives of a society all too readily tolerating the injustice of their condition.

Art can both illuminate and erase. This book is about Bekki's art, and the women within it and beyond who shared with us such a fundamental part of their lives. So frequently they know what they need but are told by agents of more or less well-meaning social and political structures that they actually need something else. This is no more apparent than in the visual essay comprised of a selection of letters about Lisa (pp. xx–xx), written between various mental health and housing departments over the course of a decade. Like the other women here, Lisa knew what help she required to deal with the extreme trauma she had experienced but was either ignored or told repeatedly that she was asking too much, she was needing too much – that she would need to accept their offer or none at all.

The way in which mental health is described in official narratives (as a priority concern, that everyone has access, and so on) brings to mind the observation of the late Umberto Eco that the same words used in a sentence can mean the opposite. The mental health system is failing traumatised women (as well as many others), and what part does culture play in this? What strategies legitimise this enabling of rejection of the needs of people, allowing them to be 'othered' and pathologised? Cultural production is pervasive in its reach, in its shaping of response, while unthinking and unfeeling bureaucracy enables passivity.

'The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.' The Doorways Project claims the space within culture that does these things and inserts instead human beings with all their complexity, able to tell their stories of survival, to resist the desertification of life within neoliberal cities.

Home and the absence thereof. It is more than housing that needs to be addressed to shape a world we may be able to live in, regardless of means. We find ourselves in a time where the myth of individualised action and the normalising idea of progress through self-development are dominant. But we cannot genuinely move forward in isolation from each other – or are we now indeed existing in a space where we have learnt to mask ‘othering’ in a way that appears benevolent? Where cultural annihilation precedes the unspeakable?

‘The purpose of the mouse is not to evade the cat. The purpose of the mouse is to exist.’ Bekki’s work challenges profoundly an unthinking, collective belief in an easy, universal progress. What purpose do pity and charity serve if not the conscience of the perpetrator whose crime will never be judged? Who and what is responsible for the despair of others? We know, but we must become much more aware of the mechanisms by which passivity, apathy and emotional fatigue in the face of such inadequate structures prevail, is even encouraged and dare we say, desired. The Doorways Project opens onto a shared, aware and active space where this process might begin.

ENDS 2019