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Globe, Global: Social Change and Media Art'

Ingo Günther, 2001

REFUGEE REPUBLIC

The philosopher Paul Feyerabend understood scientific progress as linked to a fundamental breaking of the previously established rules. This has been condensed into the idea that 'anything goes' – a rule that suggests 'there are no rules.' Much of my work fits neatly into this category. But on another level, 'anything' is potentially all-inclusive, so 'anything' can also be understood as a selective totality. One such totality is the global, and it is the selective framing of the global through a project of thematic globes titled *Worldprocessor* that I have been working on since 1988.

On traditional globes, the world is outlined in common, recognizable codes: lines represent borders and specific colors depict mountains or forests. The globes that form the *Worldprocessor* project, however, depict a broad spectrum of statistics, ranging from political conflicts, socioeconomic studies, and environmental problems to technological developments and the spread of disease. It was through this geography of information that I was ultimately led to the apparent 'discovery' of an entire country – a country that exists, so far, only in the intangible dataland of statistics. I called it the

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This essay was first written in the mid 1990s and updated for publication in 2000. It reflects the author's observations and views at that time. The author published a review of the project *Refugee Republic at 20. Looking back in Cartographies of Hope* Dox Center, Prague, 2013

Ingo Günther | Media Artist

Ingo Günther is a New York-based German-born artist. He studied ethnology and cultural anthropology at Goethe University in Frankfurt and sculpture and media at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Fritz Schwegler, Günther Uecker and Nam June Paik. He played a pioneering and crucial role in the evaluation and interpretation of satellite data for international print media and TV news. He was a founding professor at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne in the early 1990s. In 2000, he was invited to show his works and present at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos. Currently he is an adviser to New York Hall of Science and also an adviser and artistic director of Tochoji, one of Tokyo's oldest Zen temples.

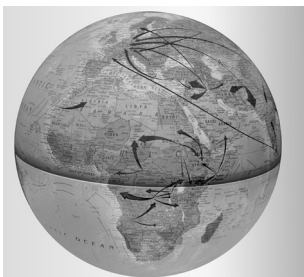
Refugee Republic. This is not a metaphor but a construct that has recently started to take hold in the circles of policy makers and scholars. The project, sanctioned to a certain extent by Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture, looks to place the problematic issue of refugees on its feet. But it is not quite walking yet, despite many art installations, web sites, critical reviews, awards, and, perhaps most importantly, encouraging responses from refugees themselves.

The Refugee Republic project seeks to establish an experimental, transglobal, supraterritorial, state as an instrument for refugees to represent themselves worldwide and to fuse their experiences into a global cooperative. The result would both accommodate investors as well as meet the increasing need for a socioeconomic, political, and ideological avant-garde, and perhaps simultaneously serve as a structural model for the rest of the world.

The media thrives on feeding us of refugees that provoke an overwhelming sense of pity and sympathy. These images, however effective and necessary for mobilizing the donation of money and goods as well as political resolve, do not reflect the reality in most of the camps, which are characterized by boredom and desperation rather than by immediate physical dangers. A refugee spends an average of five years in a camp. There is a need to address the time that remains after the initial chaos – about one percent of time spent – has been managed by such able organizations as Médecin Sans Frontiers, the International Red Cross, and other NGO.

REFUGEE = CAPITAL

Refugees and migrants represent not only a set of problematic challenges but offer also solutions. If configured as a transglobal net that would inculcate its own form of statehood, the world's refugee population would become the best candidate for a socioeconomic, political, and ideological avant-garde. The refugee republics of modern history, principally the United States, show that a steady influx of foreigners is an essential ingredient for becoming an economically successful country; nonetheless, public consciousness of this correlation seems to be at an all-time worldwide low. Refugees are known to suffer through crises of identity. At the same time, national borders all over the world have become ever



Refugee Currents 2000 to 2010

less permeable, as partly revealed by the easy availability of surveillance electronics and passive war machinery – notably land mines. Borders now can be projected at whim. On the other hand, ethnic, national, and geographical zones of tolerance have fallen victim to the transportation and information explosion. Wars are now easily started but are more difficult than ever to end.

Officially, as recognized and registered by United Nations agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there have been approximately 20 million refugees in the world between 1980 and 2000 – a population larger than that of Australia – the majority of which have been housed in UN camps. Unofficially, as reported through organizations such as the United States Committee on Refugees, the estimate was more than double that figure: in 2000 unregistered displaced persons accounted for one percent of the world population. If it would have been possible for refugees to pack and carry with them a proportional part of their country's land (measured at approximately 37 people per square kilometer), they could have pieced together a state the size of France, Germany, England, and Italy combined. Configured as an intercontinental federation, it would circle the globe.

The original refugee states developed partly because there were still large, sparsely inhabited areas to be discovered and conquered. Today all of the world's territories have been located, charted, and populated. Even in the recent past, traditional refugee republics like the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel actively sought refugees and competed for the right to absorb them. Today, in contrast, industries are lured from one country to another through tax incentives and other inducements, while refugees are regarded as an economic and social burden and a cultural liability. Recognized as refugees by the UN (and several international conventions), they survive in camps as prisoners of international charity. The simplicity of the generic term refugee does not reveal the wide diversity of this population. This group is not just supranational but also multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious. It commands neither territory nor capital. It has neither democratic structure nor any suitable form of political representation, let alone any kind of government. A next generation refugee republic, then, would have to evolve as an experimental supraterritorial state that would

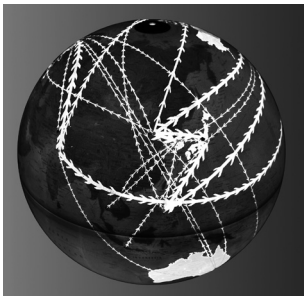
be able to anticipate socio-ideological and economic challenges. It would both force and enable solutions.

Refugees from World War II were mostly European and were absorbed relatively quickly into other Western nations. Today's more heterogeneous refugee population is a global phenomenon comprising widely divergent cultures that resist simple assimilation.

In the 1980s, this group was the fastest growing segment of the world's population, increasing by an average of between ten and twenty percent each year. If represented as a state, it would have been ranked within the top ten percent of the world's most populated countries, immediately above Turkey and just below Italy and England.

NATION, STATE, AND TERRITORY

If one is to accept the definition of *nation* as an integral territory with a common culture and language (and thus identity), then there is hardly a country today that is not multinational. There are, however, nations that exist without country status or sovereignty – the Kurds, the Navajo, the Palestinians, and many other groups. Perhaps, a refugee republic of the next generation does not require the delineation of a traditional, territorial national boundary. Sinti and Roma, for example, are two nations that neither have nor demand their own land but whose people have created a nation while circumventing the occupation of an exclusive territory. Singapore, Hong Kong, and Liechtenstein are also highly successful countries, despite the fact that they control negligible territories. Geostrategic position can therefore be more important than size, just as education and communication infrastructures are more important than raw space. The enormous physical territory covered by the former Soviet Union, formerly the largest country on earth, contributed to its ultimate collapse rather than guaranteeing its survival. The only token territory that the Refugee Republic would need could be leased by the UN from larger countries or those which have few opportunities to profit from their land. Alternatively, segments of the electromagnetic spectrum could qualify as a quasiterritorial area. 'The Network' could then become a home. Refugees, just like anybody else today, could claim a right to information and to telecommunications access. Such rights could easily be derived from the



Refugee Republic(camp) Network
Migration Flows

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Mass Media Declaration, and other conventions and treaties. Refugees, always the last to have access to network technologies, would as victims of territorial borders benefit most from the borderlessness of these technologies.

GOVERNMENT

Refugees lack self-representation, and this has always been a problem. Even though this may render them more manageable for those agencies that decide their fate, it deprives them of and representing democratic exercise – an inevitable liability when being repatriated or admitted for permanent resettlement in a democratic country. An international refugee network would help in developing democratic modalities inside and outside the camps. In addition, the Refugee Republic's sphere of influence would be structured by migration routes and communication structures. Conceptually, its 'citizenship' would be defined not so much by passports as by a universally acceptable worldwide transit visa and by the ownership of shares in an 'owner-operated' country. At a certain point this country could make an Initial Public Offering (IPO) for itself, offering the potential of reaching and representing more than 100 million eyeballs. The Refugee Republic's stock price would reflect the success of this corporate country.

ECONOMY

Calculating both the existing and potential world refugee economy is more than just a statistical challenge. For example, in the 1990s the income generated by the approximately two million Egyptian migrant workers could serve as a reasonable indicator of the economic potential of the migrant economy – a figure that equaled 75 percent of Egypt's annual exports. Similarly, Bangladesh would not be able to survive without the financial support of its emigrants. Even the emigrants from the former Yugoslavia constituted a significant 30 percent of the country's export, making them the single largest export 'article.' In addition, there are countries profiting directly from the existence of refugees on their territory. For example, in order to house the Cambodian refugees in 1979, the UN was forced to lease land from the Thai government for more than ten years. All relief care for the 300,000 refugees was to be purchased in Thailand,

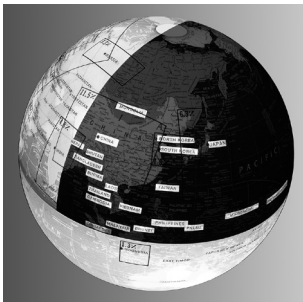


Company vs. Country

greatly benefiting the Thai economy.

The Refugee Republic, alternatively, could significantly benefit from, rather than simply reinforce, the advantages of global power. It could develop without a clearly defined territory and currency, but with infrastructural network connections and NGO and UN support; without physical trade but with transnational knowledge and contacts not affected by laws and borders; without historical and political structures but with a strong sense of peace and freedom; without a common language but with common fates, interests, and experiences.

THE MODEL STATE



G8 vs. G20

The United States adopted and benefited from the constitutional and philosophical ideals of Europe, and then reframed these ideals, independent and unencumbered by historical baggage, as a model for the rest of the world. Europe is still reaping the fruits of this American perspective, which provides a plausible reflection of Europe's own present and future. But because those countries that used to accept immigrants have now reached saturation and are no longer capable of representing the global spectrum, America, and indeed the entire world, would actually benefit from a new refugee republic.

This republic would be a mirror of a world which, to some extent, is partly pre- and partly postpolitical – a world where diverging trends of globalization have led to retribalization (ethnification and regionalization). Geographical isolation has virtually vanished in the fog of the information and transportation explosion. As a hypercultural, hyperlingual, multiethnic, transglobal net-state, the Refugee Republic would present an opportunity to finetune international law and ordinances as well as to implement the decisions and ideals embodied by the UN. Above all, it could pioneer a contemporary and overarching understanding of human rights and duties – the state of being human under adverse conditions; a situation that increasingly threatens to become the norm for the multipolar world.

FEASIBILITY

But will it really happen? In 1994 The Refugee Republic project was initially intended to be something like an advertising campaign for

refugees. However, as recent technological developments have outpaced their conceptual use, the project looks less outrageous and less utopian by the day: second and third generation computer systems were waiting to be recycled and revitalized open software and a host of other software products that have become available under public license; geographical distance is no longer a significant obstacle to business, education or social interaction; Internet communities have superseded the populations of many countries and continents; Microsoft toyed with commercial electronic passports as early as 1998 (could the loss or rejection of such a passport constitute exile?); Hong Kong and Singapore have started to export themselves as success packages along with banking laws, civil codes, education systems, and industries;² Oracle, the software company noted for database applications, has worked on a Government Online/Electronic Management System ('GOLEM') since the late 1990s. According to the *Economist*, illegal immigrants are the contraband of choice – it is less risky and more profitable to traffic in them than to engage in cross-border drug trades.

Statistics, technologies, and necessity may all suggest a refugee republic but the perspectival shift required not only to embrace the idea but also to actively pursue it would, it seems, only come naturally to members of post-Aristotelian societies – not exactly the typical locale of refugees. The further we move away from an American point of view, the more arcane and outrageous the concept appears. Globalism, I have come to understand, is really a Western, if not American, invention that can be replicated, more or less, by other Western nations – but this replication does not come easily. I have yet to find a culture that has the same total (and in some way totalitarian), or indeed global, definition of space and its sphere of action. Using a fixed point at the center, monotheism lends itself to and encourages all-encompassing ventures. China and Japan, for example, have had throughout their histories designs on their neighbors, but neither of them was ever truly global: former Japanese Premier Nakasone even saw the need to initiate the government-sponsored *Kokusai*, (internationalization) of Japan.³ Without this initiative, it was feared, Japan would have remained unfit to take on the global marketplace.

It is no coincidence that the first globe on record was made just

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For example, after initially being invited by the Chinese government to help develop the economy in Zhuhou, the Singapore administration was subsequently asked to provide social engineering and establish compatible administrative services.

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The Greater South East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was to liberate the South East Asian Countries from European colonial rule and create a common market under Japanese leadership. The sphere was to cover roughly the territory occupied by the Japanese forces in World War II.

over 500 years ago by the German-born Portuguese navigator Martin Behaim. Globalism does not appear to be one of the default settings in the cosmologies of other cultures, and therefore will be something which can, at best, be simulated by tracing the deep imprints of the West's footsteps on this globe.

Of course, for the project to be successful, a Refugee Republic would never emerge.

Refugee Republic at 20. Looking back.

Refugee Republic emerged at a time when the vast majority of people had not even heard about the Internet. It was a dramatically different landscape, even though only 20 years ago – hard to re-imagine what that was like. I recall telephone charges to the tune of \$5 for a 3 minute cross border (= international) call.

But deregulation of markets and junk-bonds (themselves a product of deregulation) exploded all over and an epic economy, communication and transportation revolution was unleashed in America. Europe and Asia happily copied and cooperated and with little delay generated a second wave. The turbo-capitalist driven globalization also created a refugee wave of unknown proportions and extreme diversity.

After visiting refugee camps in China and Indochina as a self-styled reporter for one of the main German daily papers (in itself a proud but dubious achievement at that time) I realized that I was not writing an in-depth 30 page piece for the New Yorker magazine. My report got chopped into meaningless reinforcements of stereotypes at the expense of the real story. How about a headline "Refugees bored to Death in Camps Along the Thai/Cambodian Border?" Closer to reality – but just could not be sold.

My writing was probably pretty atrocious as well... and did not help either to convey "the story." At least I figured that I had understood something that the vast majority of the players in the refugee industry (including refugees themselves) had not. And that

something had to be done about it.

The ambiguous and anonymous format of the website that was created to establish the idea of the Refugee Republic lead to some unwanted attentions from copyright lawyers, UN administrators (and lawyers) and developers. In my first Photoshop work ever I corrupted the Rolls-Royce logo – or rather – appropriated it. RR was then temporarily in the hands of the Volkswagen Company before it went to BMW that still owns it now. It seems that they quickly figured that dissolution of the brand was not exactly against their interests. Besides, the joke was on me: When I was able to fly the RR flag on the flagpoles surrounding Berlin's famous Ernst-Reuter Place by special permission from the Senate of Berlin, my sense of achievement did not last long. The flagpoles are reserved for flags of other nations greeting their heads of state when driving from the airport to the Brandenburg Gate. But the Berliners complained: "What a sell-out – now even the government sells their flagpoles for Rolls-Royce advertisements." The flags were taken down unceremoniously after a few days. So much for the power of a good logo and the good intentions of clever appropriation.

Beside the politically minded art critics left leaning paper I used to write for though "tasteless" and "disgusting" were the proper words for my project and the use of the RR logo.

Maybe I overdid it. At conferences I would show up in a suit and tie and talk about the creation of an investment vehicle so that far sighted speculators could literally pump money into Refugee Industries. I started a Refugee Republic Corporation with 20 million shares (one for each refugee). Using the turbo-capitalist tools (that I thought were at least in part to blame for the rapidly expanding crisis and amount of refugees worldwide in the early 1990s) seemed to make perfect sense to alleviate the malfunctioning politically led refugee administration that would keep people for years literally parked in camps with nothing to do and worse – no chance to exercise their culture.

UNHCR – the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is one of the better functioning temporary agencies the UN has. But even in

1995 they did not even have as much as a website. When I built my website for the Refugee Republic I included a lot of supporting material from UNHCR. And – I figured that since the UNHCR.ORG domain was not taken – I should create a gateway to the refugee.net site. After all, refugee.net was the first site dedicated to refugee issues. Eventually UNHCR took notice and panicked: Even before I received a toothless cease-and-desist letter from Geneva, an article in the Economist took issue with what some UN bureaucrat in Geneva thought was a scandalous exploitation of weak domain name regulation. Before the next issue of the Economist was out I had managed to put UNHCR.ORG back into the pool of available domains. That took a lot of calling and writing, but it worked. And there the domains sat for close to a year – unclaimed. Eventually I registered it again and set up a dedicated site for it pointing an obscure URL at the UN server that at that time was not even called UN.ORG but UNICC.ORG/Gatekeeper/agencies/temp/refugees.

In the meantime I got a few calls from some people at UNHCR who wanted to hire me to pool resources and do their website. I felt much better – but declined. Eventually UNHCR established their own site and right on the main page you could read “We are not Refugee Republic. We do not have any connection with Refugee Republic”. Ahh – those lawyers...

Unintended consequences. And then there was this developer from Hawaii. He just thought the idea was brilliant. Could I cooperate with him and send some 20,000 refugees to a pristine island in the middle of the Pacific? He had a document that gave him title over the island – just needed a population. And soon he could be not only owner of an island but perhaps a head of state and print his own postal stamps. And money as well. Refugees he thought were true political capital. And he was ready to use them. I was not. Even if I had had 20,000 refugees at hand – which I had not.

I do believe that I sold him a few shares in the company though which expired a year later. And I was wildly entertaining to visit the elderly gentleman in Waikiki. I also learned that a significant amount of Japanese think that they are a special type of individual

refugee inside their own country.

After 20 years the website and the project itself, has pretty much made itself unnecessary. I am glad that I could funnel all offers for donations and investments to organizations such as US Committee on Refugees (now USCRI) and other NGOs – including UNHCR. And even better, one of the core ideas to offer communication to refugees just as much as food and shelter has been absorbed into the standard manual. Good examples are the dedicated radio stations that Internews has set up for refugee camps in Darfur and elsewhere.

As one of the first projects of this type and scope it was rife with plenty of novel ideas and perspectives. And as such it has been copied and replicated and stolen by many in the art world – and even better – the real world. For that, I am thankful. And of course as I hoped, for the project to be successful, a real Refugee Republic would never emerge. ∞