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Political Beauty in an Ugly Reality

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Last Sunday a funeral took place. Thousands of people gathered in the governmental area of Berlin for the so-called March of the Determined, which could be called a demonstration though it was more than just another political protest. The Center for Political Beauty had announced the event to lay to rest the bodies of those who died while attempting to escape war, crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the hope of finding refuge in Europe. The endeavour was to construct a cemetery in the Chancellery's forecourt in front of the politicians responsible for the refugees' deaths, namely Angela Merkel and the German government. Predictably, the district authority forbad those plans beforehand. Still, the protesters arrived to mourn, carrying flowers and crosses, marching along to the parliament, where they forced open the barriers, entered the pasture, and dug more than hundred symbolical graves while the police corps tried to prevent their actions.

The March of the Determined had been organized by The Center for Political Beauty, a group of political action artists fighting for human rights. Their actions had already caught the attention of mainstream media in March: In the light of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, they removed crosses that had been installed in Berlin's governmental district in remembrance of those who got killed while crossing the wall in order to get to West Germany. The members of the action-artistic group carried the crosses to the current death zones: to the external borders of Europe. In doing so, the media discourse about the victims of the past shifted to a discourse about the victims of the present, revealing the continuity of politics of deathly seclusion. From the group's point of view, the German government operates as EU's control center in sealing off the borders. Calling art a crucial political force, their interventions appear scandalizing, hence they are highly debated in German media, being deemed as sarcastic and impious, but also gaining blatant respect. Surely, the collective is criticisable in many aspects regarding their sensationalist strategies; for a lack of concrete political impact; for acting out representative politics from a white middle-class-position. The local refugees-movement had indeed disapproved the public funeral as disgraceful. As grave and valid theses critiques are, in light of the recent event it becomes obvious that their symbolic interventions bear the potential to shift the discursive dynamics, the pro-and-contra-dialectics of institutionalized politics and human right-activism in questioning the political reality through creating political fiction.

Who are these victims that are being or will be buried? The information posted by the artist collective remains enigmatic. According to their statement they researched the identities of the victims whose bodies had been buried carelessly, blistered as merely bureaucratic obstacles, or stored like dead animals as for example in Augusta, Sicily. On arrival, the members of the collective found 17 corpses, stuffed in a huge fridge in the post-mortem room of the communal hospital, wrapped in garbage bags. Unidentified, unburied. Ahead of the March of the Determined the collective exhumed, among others, the body of a woman from Syria that drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in March together with her two-year-old kid. Her family, who is living in Berlin, agreed to lay her to rest in a Muslim cemetery. Other burials are being planned, announced secretly in order to avoid disturbances by governmental forces.

Waiting for the funeral march to start, the atmosphere is strangely calm. An activist from Syria, member of the artist collective, talks about the background of their action, how they had found the families of the victims, why they had brought the bodies to Berlin. He is serious and smiling, simultaneously fragile and forceful, laughing relieved after each paragraph of his speech; the accumulating affects, articulated in this speaking, are contagious. No one moves, no one talks, everyone listen to him. There might be no bodies buried today, but the idea of a funeral unfolds in its performative power. Then the event transforms again into

a more regular demonstration. There is no music, but the traditional black bloc is screaming standard slogans that are slightly missing the point – while everyone came to mourn those who died and were killed on their way to Europe, the slogans claim the right to stay. But you have to first make it to Europe to be able to fight for your right to stay. The field in front of the parliament is crowded with protesters, the police tries to push them from the ground declaring it a crime to dig a symbolical grave. Everyone pushes back, calling out "grave desecrator" to the cops, and in-between the struggle, people still take care of the graves rearranging the flowers and crosses. Until now symbolical graves are spreading all over Germany and beyond, all over Europe, and other places to come.

Such a spectacle over dead bodies, over victims that remain unnamed, leaves an aftertaste of bitter sarcasm. For us, it opens up the question whose lives are being mourned; living in the comfort zone of a city so untouched by the crisis, where death, violence and misery is cosily invisible as it is for most of the people protesting – including myself. This morbid happening brings us in touch with deaths that are caused by the idea of an enclosed Europe, as costs for a comforting way of life in fancy Berlin. The affective-political action only mirrors the sarcasm of politics, of media, and for a second shakes the self-referentiality of public life in Germany. Bringing those unnamed bodies in the middle of Berlin's individualist, consumerist life-styles reveals the logics of European necropolitics, where refugees are enlisted as pure numbers, treated as statistical data, and maintained as administrative problems. The funeral that took place is one possible answer to the question of how to recognize those unmourned lives as grievable lives.