

## Excerpts from Writings

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The following excerpts come from the *Train of Chance* (2016), poems, notes, and works on paper and canvas written between 2015–2018. They were written in response to people I met, and still know, while working in and around the border region of Northern France. Some of the writings became the basis of artworks. Throughout the excerpts, idiosyncrasies of format and spelling are intentional reflections of time, place, and voice. —S.G.

THE SECOND TIME I was in Calais' Jungle camp I found myself returning to the camp at night by the back entrance, the route everyone used to get to the train. It was already dark and there were hundreds flowing past me: groups of three, four, sometimes eight or nine, almost exclusively men. Some carried small backpacks or sleeping bags. Many carried nothing, but most were well bundled-up. It was a solemn procession. Everyone – refugee, migrant, or typical Calais resident – knew that this was the route to the train. And everyone also knew that those making this special pilgrimage were considered “illegal” in France, and on an “illegal” and dangerous, yet determined mission to reach the United Kingdom on a normal road, intensely visible.

French philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of the Event describes the process by which “spectacular” happenings – such as popular uprisings, revolts, discoveries and inventions – create ruptures in historical situations, and thereby, their structuring of reality and perception. The Event is an exceptional moment or encounter that breaks the rules of a status quo, or what Badiou calls a “situation” by pushing what is excluded from a particular social order or worldview to the forefront of visibility, and, as such, initiating an encounter with truth. The state is coterminous with the situation, as the body that names, orders and classifies according to its categories; it counts what is determined as belonging or not belonging and tries to hide that which does not. However, as this “structure” is not itself counted as an element within the situation it structures, “there is always the risk that the void of the situation could somehow emerge, as the collapse or absence of structure.”<sup>1</sup>

The word “crisis,” solidified in dominant discourse, is appropriate in the context of present-day Europe: “All States defend themselves against any attack on their way of arranging parts.”<sup>2</sup> This makes it so that the current migratory influx is not a crisis for Europe, but a crisis of Europe. It is the crisis of calculation that the Event forces – what counts and can be counted within a situation: Who are we? Who lives on this land? Who occupies these streets and how did they get here, by birth or by spectacular means? Calais' new residents are miraculous violations that defy all rules – of the Sahara, border controls, states and the power of technological strength over individual. FRONTEX. The European border regime in place since 2004, did not come even close to predicting 2015, and since then, despite all attempts by the EU to secure its borders, migration has only risen. Emigration is counted as a fundamental right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but paradoxically immigration, or arrival on another shore, is not. Migrant travelers force themselves into Europe – “force” because of the extreme effort required and sustained; such force is what you could call a courageous act.

Badiou describes the 2011 uprisings in Cairo's Tahir square in “evental” terms, where the existence and self-determination of the masses in Egypt were dramatically and popularly asserted on an unprecedented scale, constituting a breakthrough and sparking parallel uprisings in neighboring countries. In the same year, in the small Syrian town of Daraa, fifteen teenagers graffitied revolutionary slogans including “*Democracy now*” and “*Syria can do it too*” on the side of their school, the first such outburst in more than 30 years of media-censored dictatorship. Badiou emphasizes how the uprisings in Egypt and Syria, among others, temporarily turned neighborhoods or whole cities into what he calls “evental sites,” where different social groups united to protect one another, with common needs being dealt with by volunteers in the face of the state and in lieu of official channels.

1 Hallward, Peter 2003: *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 95

2 Hallward, p. 98 and 123; Robinson, Andrew 2014: ‘Alain Badiou: The Event’ in *Ceasfire: An A to Z of Theory*

*To solve insoluble problems without the help of the state – that is the destiny of an event. And that is what makes a people exist, suddenly and for an indefinite time, there where it has decided to gather.*<sup>3</sup>

When Akram first arrived in Calais, he had nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep. The door of the house we were sitting in swung open to the inside and closed by a piece of string that wrapped around a nail. Everything underneath was white sand. Calais was close to the beach but no one ever saw the beach. When he saw the Jungle for the first time, he couldn't believe his eyes. He found a food distribution line where they were giving out bread with a jam-like substance in the middle. "Something like a sandwich," he told me. "Is it free?" Akram had inquired at the time. "Because I have no money to pay." Akram is so polite in his tone but I'm imagining a really bad English sandwich. Brazilians are adamant that sandwiches are not *food (comida)*, they never can be. *Food* is beans, rice, meat and vegetables cooked together or a plate piled with meat, rice with some kind of lime flavor and raw onions that we eat together with our hands at Eid.

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"Arabic is a very easy language. If you want to learn it, you will learn it." he tells me repeatedly. "Aiwa" and "ana" were about the only words I could make out, but over a few days I felt it changing. We were sitting in two chairs outside their kitchen. Unbelievably, it was frequently sunny in Calais. He tried to describe crossing the desert. "It's unbelievable," he smiled. "I don't know if I can make you understand how unbelievable it is." He was lucky because he had a good car and they managed to cross in two weeks. For others it can take up to two months. If you step out of the car, the sand goes up to your knee ... I plan on telling him later that I admire the way his journey has changed him – he is no longer only from Sudan. He is not European but he can also no longer be only from Sudan. "The two things I will never give up are my culture and my religion."

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One day felt absolutely like the apocalypse. This was because of the cold and the wind and the thin clear ponchos that someone was handing out to everyone waiting in line while I was helping give out tickets, the ponchos would fly off from moment to moment and wizz through the air until they slammed onto the tops of telephone poles, caught wrapping around the column. The ticket system was bullshit, the whole thing was bullshit. I was wearing several coats, the outer one being a thick rubberized one with reflective stripes like the one traffic or construction workers wear. When I got home my face stung to the touch. That was the strong wind as it spit and sucked and my whole body felt dizzy and outside of itself, just like I was those ponchos that didn't stand a chance in the wind. Also what a ridiculously useless thing to give out, the consistency was of the thinnest plastic, the material quickly sucked in against every body and the arms and scarves underneath. When I was giving out tickets most peoples' faces were covered by hats, tight hoods and then this thin layer of plastic casing. They wanted me to recognize and remember the faces in case someone was in line twice or took two tickets, which was basically impossible. I felt like I was working for the mafia and we were out to trick people. "Have you seen me in that line?" ----- said one day. "I am so ashamed to stand in that line." and also like him I imagined that there were

<sup>3</sup> Badiou "Tunisie, Egypte: Quand un vent d'est balaie l'arrogance de l'Occident" in *Le Monde*, February 2011, emphasis mine.

others who wouldn't, and also others whose eyes met my gaze, theirs weary but understanding; we both knew how fucked up both of our positions were. The back of the van wouldn't open suddenly and the woman in charge wanted us to stall the distribution, people were made to wait in line for so long. It was over an hour waiting and I met guys who showed me their shoes, one where the rubber sole was peeling away and others that looked soaked through, thin tennis shoes. ----- liked to take pictures of bad shoes that they would then use in their donation campaigns. One guy said that he couldn't wait for us because he was going to try that night. The main thing the medical team deals with is foot blisters and foot fungus. They clean mens' feet, crouched on the floor, use talcum powder and put on new socks. There is something about this that seems very appropriate. She is holding his foot as he sits in a folding chair by the side of the road, she wipes his big toe. Someone got frustrated and wrote fuck something on the side of the van. Finally the other van showed up loaded with more things. It was already dark at this point but the distribution still went on for hours. Many people lost their tickets or else they were smashed between their fingers, the number bleeding and torn because they were paper and everything was wet, which caused a lot of delays. The volunteers were instructed to always ask for the ticket and then take it away from him even though it was dark and nobody could read. They had to stand in numerical order for some reason, which started with the 10s and then ended in the 60s. There were shoes, sleeping bags, bivy bags and sweatpants which was obvious to everyone was grossly inadequate because it had snowed the day before. There was one volunteer who looked really unwell, she walked back and forth in a daze. That day ----- asked me to move the other van around the corner out of sight and wait for further instructions because it seemed like things were getting tense. "I fixed it" a new volunteer said from in the passenger seat, he was referring to the back door, so we were wondering if we were going to distribute the things, there were plenty of shoes in the original van. It had been hours of standing in the cold and in line but they were running out of shoes. ----- said there was no way, that it was too dangerous to bring the other van around at this point. One of the first people to run out of shoes was 16, he burst into tears.

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"This voice always reminds me of Libya" he said.

What voice I thought. We were on the beach. He was speaking about the ocean I realized.

"When you are there in Libya and you are about to get on the boat you are so scared all you hear on all the sides is this voice." When he was crossing the border from Italy to France the French police launched their dogs at him. When I fell down my legs were covered in blood. They threw things at me, they said Go back to Italy screaming  
I CANT MOVE I yelled back

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The tent is a kind of soft monument to history, love and thinking, parallel to how the term 'soft power' is used to refer to the influence of culture, knowledge and creativity in contrast with material force.

Sahel and his friend wanted to show us their things that had been burnt. “Did they burn other tents?” It was about 4:00 and it was getting dark and starting to rain slightly. Suhil’s friend was going to Paris that night to try. “Just ours, for nothing. One month ago the police came and destroyed all the tents. This time they burned just ours ... Sometimes I feed the horses. I bring them bread. They eat out of my hand.”

The other day Aziz and I watched the most captivating video of an Afghan singer and musician, Arif Shadab, Aziz sang along. He said that in the army at night he would play this instrument – like the video but it was even better he said – and sing, every night there were many people. “It was very good, very very good.”

Sahel asked me to go speak to the police who were next to the fence about going back into the woods to get their phones. There was a small red car there the man was trying to tie closed the parts of the fence that had been cut. These are my horses he said, this is my land. “Non C’est interdit” the police said about going back on the land. “ils coupent tout” he said about the fence but the next morning we were able to cross the field and no one said anything. One week later the fence was gone.



Hannah Arendt describes human action as a decisive and creative remedy against the uncertainty of the future – poverty, destruction wrought by war, indiscriminate abuse, and imprisonment – as well as what unleashes its own unpredictable process and story whose consequences are unlimited. Action is the driving force of history, at once the most impossible and most common of earthly occurrences, like crossing the Sahara.<sup>4</sup>

In Erik Orsenna’s proclaimed novel *Madame Bâ*, about colonial Mali and the magnetic pull France exerts on its African citizens, the narrator, Madame Bâ, composes a letter to the President of the French Republic, which after politely detailing the differences in hospitality practices between Mali and France, states her decision to reach France even after the country had refused to grant her a visa:

“So I warn you now.

I fought.

In vain.

So here I am, forced to give in, like the others, all the others, those who have already arrived and the others who are going to follow:

I am coming.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, Hannah 1998: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 233

<sup>5</sup> Orsenna, Eric 2003: *Madame Bâ*, Paris: Fayard p. 244, translation mine.