KommunaleGalerieberlin

An der Schwelle
EXIL

Sergey Bratkov
Ben Greber
Atalya Laufer

kuratiert by Eleonora Frolov

EXHIBITION READER

English version

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Programm
2. Juli, 17:30 Uhr
Ausstellungsrundgang mit Kuratorin, Künstlerin und beiden Künstlern
28. Juli bis 8. August
Workshop „Gestalte Deine Stadt der Zukunft!" für Kinder und Jugendliche
3. September, 17:00 Uhr
Screening: Infinite War + EXILE

12 June to 7 September 2025

1. Prologue –
At the Threshold: EXILE

You –
are here.
Still.

A place.
A body.
A name. Still.

But the ground:
disappears
beneath you.

What remains of you,
when everything
is taken away?

A suitcase.
A word.
One last look back?

Here:
Artists in exile.
From countries. From eras. From lineages.
Escaped from themselves.

They show themselves
in fragments.
They show
what is no longer visible.

No image gives an answer.
Each work, a riddle.
They challenge.
They resist.
They ask back.

And the place –
a building made of Wehrmacht stone –
asks with them.

Believe nothing.
Believe
what trembles
within you.

This is not an exhibition.
This is a threshold space.
An echo.

Step inside.
Lose yourself.
And see
what remains.
Of you.

2. Exhibition Text – *At the Threshold: EXILE*

The Present
An artist sits in his studio. The studio is in Moscow. It is the year 2022. The canvas of his last work is still not dry. Yet his thoughts are not on art, rather on the impending danger. He knows they will come for him – maybe even tonight. Every sound in the stairwell makes him listen intently, every knock on the door could mean the end. **Sergey Bratkov** books a one-way flight.

A cut. A rupture. A fall into the unknown. *Exitus* – the end. *Exodus* – the departure. Exile is both at once: radical caesura and forced new beginning. Whoever goes into exile not only leaves a place, but also leaves themselves behind. They save their bare life – and lose everything that made up their real life.

The Threshold
Exile is a threshold – psychological, social, political, metaphysical, artistic. A moment of radical uncertainty, in which the familiar disintegrates and the new cannot yet hold. This exhibition is dedicated to the in-between: the state of uprooting in which the individual is no longer anchored anywhere.
Exile as a life threshold – that is the leitmotif of the exhibition: the lingering in suspension, where the past fades and the future is uncertain. The works shown here do not only capture the crude physical act of fleeing, but above all the inner fragmentation it triggers, the loss of identity. They describe artistic work in a foreign land that becomes a survival technique. An ancient motif of art, literature and philosophy – and at the same time, distressingly relevant right now.
On the Threshold: Exile explores exile as a liminal state. How does this existential uncertainty manifest in art? And is transformation possible – can one rise anew from the ruins of one's existence – like the phoenix from the ashes?

Memory
A small boy sits aboard a ship, the endless sea before him, the horizon his only anchor point. The journey into the unknown is long, and from time to time something pulls him out of his daydreams – the voice of a soldier or a piece of candy in an outstretched hand. The horizon promises hope, but the arrival turns out to be a mirage: the closer one comes to it, the further away it moves.
The ship *Exodus 47* departed from France in 1947 with the goal of reaching the British Mandate territory of Palestine – a journey full of hopes and disappointments. Nearly eighty years later, **Atalya Laufer**, the daughter of that boy, undertakes a subjective-poetic (re) construction of his cosmos of memory and makes visible how exile continues to have transgenerational effects and becomes anchored in family memory through the passing on of myths. In doing so, she addresses the urgent contemporary question: how can we remember when there are hardly any eyewitnesses left?

The Backstory
A man sits in front of a model landscape. It shows a peaceful mountain idyll with a railway, a clock tower, countless shunting tracks, and trains moving through a seemingly intact world. It was built in 1951 in destroyed Wuppertal – by the artist's grandfather, as a retreat, an imagined place of escape. Decades later, the grandson transforms this model into a different view: an emptied, grey, dystopian landscape. Hanging above the installation is a painting – the artist's great-grandfather looks down on the scene – a civil servant with the Reichsbahn who was killed in a bombing raid in 1944.

Ben Greber's works do not address exile itself, but the space of possibility before it: the mental and societal conditions that give rise to suppression and exclusion. By engaging with traces of familial memory from the Nazi era, he shows how historical imprints continue to influence images, ways of thinking, and desires across generations – often unspoken, but palpable. By examining the displaced imaginary worlds of his ancestors, Greber reveals how deeply history shapes our self-image. His works expand the notion of exile to include a quiet, preceding perspective: the conditions that drive people into exile.

The Place

The location of the exhibition itself is also a threshold – between past and present, between architecture and memory. The building at Hohenzollerndamm 176, today home to the Kommunale Galerie Berlin, was constructed between 1938 and 1940 in the style of the National Socialist demonstration of power. It served the Wehrmacht as an administrative building – a place for the planning and organization of war. Today it becomes a resonance space for questions of exile, memory, and responsibility. The history of the building is part of the narrative – a silent witness to the ruptures this exhibition addresses.

This exhibition is dedicated to all those who set out from somewhere to nowhere to begin anew – and to those who were denied this new beginning.

Eleonora Frolov

© **Sergey Bratkov, aus der Serie LOST,** 2022
C-Print, Acryl, 210 × 160 cm,
Courtesy of the artist

3. Work Text – Sergey Bratkov, Studio and Suitcase Handler

The Present

An artist sits in his studio. The studio is located in Moscow. The year is 2022. The canvas with his most recent work is not yet dry. But his thoughts are not on art – they are on the looming danger. He knows they will come for him – maybe even tonight. Every noise in the stairwell makes him prick up his ears; every knock at the door could mean the end. ***Sergey Bratkov*** *books a flight with no return.*

At the Handle of the Suitcase / The Handle on the Suitcase

To live on the border – it is as if you were living between the hemispheres of your brain: with one leg in the left, the other in the right. More precisely: with one leg still in the familiar, "my" world, the other in the foreign, "other" world. And there you stand – completely alone. If you have questions, you have to pay. Everything has its price. Sometimes, that can even be rather charming. One feels like a breaded schnitzel beneath a leaf of green lettuce between two halves of a bun. In my case, this lettuce leaf is a Schengen visa in a Ukrainian passport.

The Hotel Ameron in Frankfurt lies on the boundary between the station district and the financial district – right along the dividing line between poverty and wealth, between the hard-won right to enter the bank at eight in the morning, and the privilege of lying all day on the sidewalk. It's the best hotel in the city, because only here does one feel, at every moment, the stark contrast between fragrance, coolness, and safety inside – and what happens outside. From my Soviet experience, I would say: It's like coming from socialism into capitalism. For that, I am very grateful for this hotel.

My room is in the basement. The interior was designed by someone whose name is written at the entrance. When I lie on the bed, I see my reflection in the ceiling above me. So I never look up. Because then I feel lonely – and I'm physically too worn out to sink into self-pity.

I have two windows here, one in the room, one in the bathroom. Through the frosted glass of the room window, you can make out the outlines of garbage bins – probably why it's covered with a black curtain. Through the bathroom window, I see every morning how the bins are emptied. Instead of clouds, garbage bins drift past my window – but I don't mind that. The sounds inside the hotel differ from those outside – they are more muffled, quieter. In the two months I've now been living in this hotel in the middle of Frankfurt's red-light district, I've never heard the sounds of sex through the walls – and that's a good thing in my situation.

Before going to bed, I step outside the hotel for a few minutes to smoke a cigarette of medical marijuana. I stay near the front steps and look around. I always feel as though a bony hand might dart out from one of the bushes, drawn by the smell of my joint. The station district is a zombie district. I've never seen aggression come from them. I see uncontrolled movements; many sleep on the sidewalks during the day after sleepless nights. When I walk, I don't hurry – my pace is slow and sad.

Time since my departure from Russia passes quickly, and the more time goes by, the more I become a zombie myself. I am a zombie among zombies. By now, I consciously walk to a more distant supermarket to enjoy the time on the street a bit longer. But at night I no longer dare to go out – I am afraid. There are many films about zombies, but to simply photograph them is improper. So I prefer to photograph e-scooters. It's a popular pastime here to toss them into the street at night. In their horizontal position, they remind me of worshippers struck down by a plague in mid-prayer. The facade of the central station is the altar, the tram stop in front, the fan zone. Kaiserstraße, the aisle between the rows of chairs.

Since August 1, I have a studio! Small, 14 square meters. An asceticism sent to me from above. There is a window, two walls to paint on, a chair, and a ladder. In Moscow, I had 60 square meters with a beautiful view over the city, through huge windows made of crystal-clear glass. I admit: Sometimes I gave in and photographed the sunsets. Here, I look onto the wall of the neighboring building. Good thing at least: All windows in that wall face unoccupied rooms – so no one can accuse me of being a peeping Tom. When I take these photos with their clear architectural geometry, I feel filled with German orderliness. As if I were registering myself at a new place of residence.

In August, the studio building is almost empty. From the closed windows of the German artists hang virtual banners, written in Gothic letters: *RIGHT TO VACATION.*
I am now the sole master of the third floor and no longer lock the toilet door when I go to the bathroom. In the morning, on the way to the studio, I buy vegetables, cheese, and water at REWE. I wedge a piece of cheese into the window to keep it open – because of the heat. It's so hot that sweat drips from my forehead onto the canvas because I work on the floor.

My task for the coming month: to colorize fourteen large-format black-and-white photos, each two square meters, which I had printed here in Frankfurt. A series about Ukraine, about the war unleashed by that disgusting Putin.
Women are the heroines of this series – they are the heroines of this war in general. They carry the children. They carry the burden of waiting. They mourn the dead. They are victims of sexual violence. They are fighters. The photos used come partly from my archive, partly from the internet.

But do I have a Ukrainian voice today? Do I have the right to this voice – as an artist who has not experienced the war on home soil?
22 years of life in Russia with a Ukrainian passport, the deliberate renunciation of Russian citizenship – is that an argument for a deal that tastes a little like masochism?

Sergey Bratkow

Curatorial Commentary:

To live on the border means standing on tiptoe between two poles: between countries, between languages, between the worlds of poverty and wealth, of safety and danger. Everything is measured, everything has its price.

During his stay in Frankfurt, Sergey Bratkov lives in the Ameron Hotel, located at the threshold between the station district and the banking quarter – a place that itself marks a boundary. From there, he observes the social contrasts of the city, the bodies on the sidewalks, the silent coolness of hotel rooms, the daily movement of garbage bins outside his window. In his reflections, personal experience intertwines with a sharply observant societal gaze.

"I walk slowly and sadly. Since my departure from Russia, I have become a zombie myself – a zombie among zombies."

Bratkov's observations are laconic, precise, full of absurd poetry. Even the e-scooters, knocked over onto the asphalt at night, become symbols – silent witnesses of a society in imbalance. The central station becomes a cathedral, Kaiserstraße a procession.

Since August, Bratkov has been working in a small studio in Frankfurt: 14 square meters of asceticism, two walls for painting, one window facing the blind wall of the neighboring house. There, he colorizes large-format black-and-white photographs – part of a series about Ukraine, about the war started by Russia. Women are at the center of this work: as mothers, as mourners, as victims and fighters alike.

"I can take photographs, but I'm not a photographer. I've made sculptures, shot videos, painted pictures. But do I have a Ukrainian voice today – a right to raise it as someone who has not lived through the war on Ukrainian soil?"

Bratkov's work speaks of life in exile, of inner conflict, of the search for a position amid torn realities. His art becomes an act of self-location – tentative, tentative, with a firm grip on the suitcase.

Eleonora Frolov

© **Sergey Bratkov: Nō – On Bureaucracy as a Rite of Passage in Modern Societies**, 2023,
Video (DVD), 3 Min., Courtesy of the artist

4. Work Text – Sergey Bratkov, Number

Sergey Bratkov's video piece *Nr. (Number)* deals with the assignment of numbers as a symbolic act within biopolitical power structures. It negotiates the threshold between visibility and erasure, between recognition and dehumanization. In a modernity organized by bureaucracy, the number assumes a paradoxical function: it both individualizes – and deindividualizes.

Numbers accompany people from birth – as an ID, as a tax or social security number. But in moments of existential uncertainty, for example in a reception center's waiting room, they acquire a new meaning: they become markers of hope, but also of dehumanization.

Bratkov's work brings this tension into focus. People on the run – facing mortal danger, lacking language skills, under stress and in extreme situations – encounter a system that seeks to create order, but often produces coldness, rejection, and exclusion. Whoever receives a number enters into a testing mode: access to society, participation, protection is either granted or withheld.

In the sense of an initiation rite, according to Arnold van Gennep or Victor Turner, this phase marks a liminal zone – a transitional structure in which the subject loses their old social identity, but has not yet adopted a new one. The assigned number becomes the symbol of this suspension: it promises connection, but simultaneously signals the provisional suspension of individual biography.

Bratkov deconstructs bureaucracy as a system that not only administers, but differentiates, sorts, and selects – what Foucault termed a biopolitical regime. The apparent neutrality of numbers is exposed as a vehicle for systemic exclusion. The act of numbering constitutes a subject under reservation, a humanity under administrative observation.

“War turns people into numbers.”
In this sentence a brutal truth is condensed: in warlike states of exception, the individual is reduced to a function, a numerical identifier, a potential victim. The violence of war manifests not only in physical destruction, but also in the reduction of the person to measurable, countable units – a necessary abstraction for organized mass murder. Bratkov’s *Nr.* points to this practice without overt exposition. It is atmospherically palpable – in the exposed state of those waiting, in the camera’s gaze, in the bureaucratic soundscape. War and flight, control and powerlessness, hope and dehumanization: these tensions interlock in the work in subtle ways.

At the same time, *Nr.* opens a resonance space for collective acts of remembrance: history knows countless examples where humanity was buried under numbers – from the inmates of the Shoah camps to refugees who disappear into anonymized waiting systems. The number stands not only for hope, but also for a history of radical estrangement.

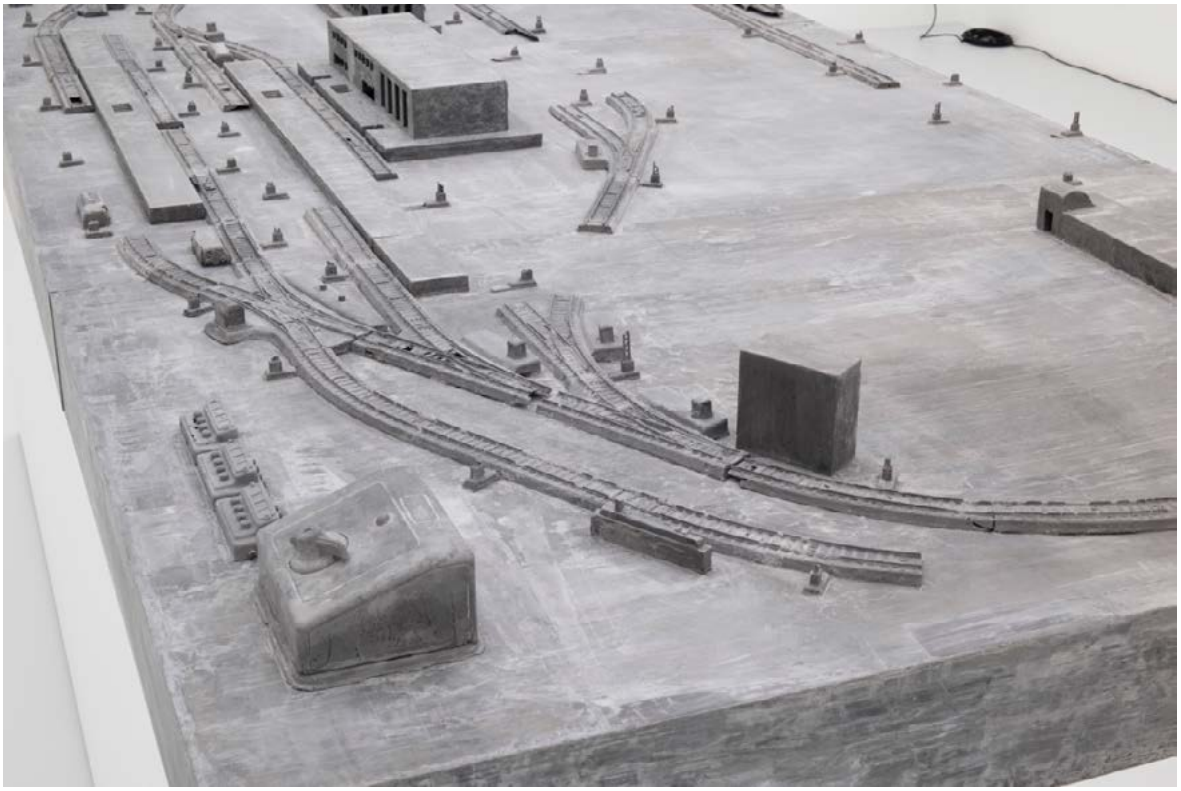
Michel Friedman’s words from *Fremd* can be read as a bitter echo of this experience:

“Have you still understood nothing?
Go home.
Your homeland was engraved for you with numbers.
That was where you belonged.
That was your new home.”

Bratkov’s work is dedicated to those who had to depart from somewhere to nowhere – carried by hope, exposed to the logic of hesitation, rejection, waiting. And it recalls those to whom even this hope was denied.

This work was developed specifically for the exhibition On the Threshold: EXILE and premieres at the exhibition opening. In doing so, Bratkov not only emphasizes the temporal and thematic connection, but also makes his work itself a moment of threshold: between testimony and remembrance, between individual experience and collective reflection.

Eleonora Frolov



© **Ben Greber, Decommissioning, Anlage 1**, 2018,
Plastic, paint on MDF, 250 x 125 x 81 cm,
Courtesy of the artist, VG-Bildkunst

5. Work Text – Ben Greber

The Backstory
A man sits in front of a model landscape. It depicts a peaceful mountain idyll with a railway, a clocktower, countless marshalling tracks, and trains traversing a seemingly intact world. It was built in 1951 in war-torn Wuppertal – by the artist's grandfather, as a space of retreat, an imagined place of escape. Decades later, the grandson transforms this model into a different vision: an emptied, grey, dystopian landscape. Above the installation hangs a painting – depicting the artist's great-grandfather, a civil servant with the Reichsbahn, who died in 1944 during an air raid.

The installation is strongly autobiographical and examines a generational shift in idealized worlds as a counter-design to one's own lived reality. The main focus of the examination is a reinterpretation of the model railway layout of Ben Greber's grandfather, based on photographs. In 1951, he created a mountain idyll in the bombed-out city of Wuppertal. Greber's "Anlage 1," by contrast, depicts a grey, emptied, dystopian landscape.

"Anlage 2" (not shown in the exhibition *On the Threshold: Exile*) on the wall refers to a later period when Greber's grandfather no longer built model railways but only collected model locomotives without using them in any form. They were stored in a cupboard and only looked at on special occasions – as objects, they perhaps held the same imagined value of escape from everyday life as the entire layout. The boxes reconstructed by Greber form the silhouette of a futuristic architecture in the three display cases and thus become a miniaturized model landscape themselves.

Hans-Georg Greber, Untitled, 2018, Oil Painting, 120 x 80 cm, Courtesy of the artist and VG-Bildkunst*

The painting was created by Greber's father and depicts his grandfather, who worked for the Reichsbahn in Cologne and died in 1944 in a bombing raid in front of the bunker, which is recreated in both the painting and the layout.

Substation (Bogensee), 2025 Epoxy resin on cardboard, brass, paint on chipboard and acrylic glass 270 x 41 x 36 cm

Substation (Ismaning), 2025 Plastic, colored acrylic glass, glass, stainless steel, rubber Eight screens, each 32 x 160.4 x 18 cm

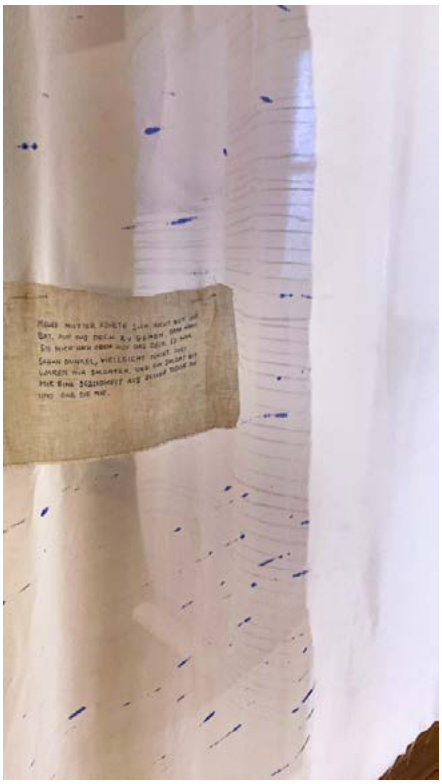
The cycle "Substation" consists of reconstructions and constructions of technical and architectural elements that have a special connection for Greber not only to his own past but also to German history.

"Substation" is constructed from elements with which Greber, during his studies, built a dystopian work of a barred space with an electricity pylon standing above it.

"Substation (Bogensee)" is designed as a reconstruction of one of the retractable windows in Joseph Goebbels' holiday residence. In this crude architectural mix of National Socialist Heimat style and modern elements such as the retractable window, Goebbels celebrated wild parties with the cultural elite of the Nazi Reich. Greber's sculpture points to the interface between inside and outside, between architecture and landscape, which served the purpose of showcasing the landscape. His work is simultaneously an architectural detail and, in its uniform structure, a reference to Nazi architecture.

"Substation (Ismaning)" shows empty steles on the walls that recall Marian shrines or the stations of the cross. Their dimensions are derived from an element of the former transmission mast in Ismaning from the collection of the Palace Museum (Ismaning), which Greber studied during his research for this exhibition. The transmission mast was used to disseminate Nazi propaganda, but in April 1945, during the last days of the war, it was used by the "Freedom Action Bavaria" to call for resistance against the National Socialists. Greber's empty shrines take up the principle of the transmitter insofar as they are open as empty shells for a wide variety of forms of presentation.

From the exhibition text *Ben Greber – Fall and Present* at the Kallmann Museum Ismaning, more at: https://kallmann-museum.de/2025_kallmannpreis-greber/



Atalya Laufer, EXODUS (Detail) 2024,
Chalk, pencils, gouache on fabric, Dimension variable
Courtesy of the artist

6. Work Text – EXODUS by Atalya Laufer

The Memory
A small boy sits aboard a ship, before him the endless sea, the horizon his only point of reference. The journey into the unknown is long. The horizon promises hope, but arrival proves to be a mirage: the closer one gets, the further it recedes.

The ship Exodus 47 *left France in 1947 to reach the British Mandate of Palestine. On board was the boy with his parents – survivors of the Nazi persecution of Jews, bearing a history of flight that led from Poland through Russia, Uzbekistan, and France. Nearly eighty years later,* ***Atalya Laufer****, the daughter of that boy, creates a subjective-poetic (re)construction of his memory fragments. Her work makes visible how exile continues to have transgenerational effects – anchored in familial memory and reflected in one's own biography.*

Atalya Laufer on the work *EXODUS*:

Exodus is based on a specific childhood experience of my father, who, in 1947 at the age of three and a half, was on board the ship Exodus, attempting to reach the British Mandate territory of Palestine.Only recently – nearly 80 years later – and at my prompting, did he begin to speak about that time. I recorded his sparse, sober recollections – they form the documentary foundation of the work.

I'm interested in how personal stories – often fragmented or shaped by silence – can take on visual and spatial form. *Exodus* moves between individual memory and collective history, between inner images and shared narratives, between the personal and the political. It speaks to questions of belonging and in-betweenness – culturally, geographically, and

linguistically.

At the center of the installation is the sea: vast and abstracted – a place of passage, of danger, and of hope. The horizon, that thin line between sky and water, becomes a symbol for the "no-longer-here and not-yet-there" – a suspended, uncertain space. The fabric panels, falling from ceiling to floor, hold this liminal state: between above and below, between connection and separation.

While working on Exodus – amid the political and humanitarian upheavals unfolding since October 7, 2023 – this process became for me an anchor in a period of disorientation: a transitional refuge within a landscape of shifting and polarizing political realities.

Historical Context
"Exodus 47" – A Refugee Ship and the Founding of Israel

In the summer of 1947, the refugee ship *Exodus 1947* attempted to bring around 4,500 Jewish Holocaust survivors from Europe to the British Mandate of Palestine. The passengers, many of them children, had hoped for a new life in safety after years of persecution and disenfranchisement. Most had reached Sète, France, via Displaced Persons camps in Germany and gathering points in France, where they boarded the ship, which sailed under the Honduran flag. The operation was organized by the Jewish underground organization Haganah.

On July 18, 1947, just off the coast of Palestine, the heavily overcrowded *Exodus* was forcibly intercepted by the British navy. A violent clash ensued, killing several people and injuring many more. The survivors were forced to transfer to three British transport ships. But instead of being sent to Cyprus – as had been done previously in similar cases – they were returned to France. There, the refugees refused to disembark. Ultimately, and amid international protest, they were deported to the British occupation zone in Germany – a traumatic return for people who had just escaped the Holocaust.

The international press reacted with outrage. Images of emaciated Jewish refugees being forced by British soldiers onto trains in Hamburg circulated worldwide. The scandal marked a turning point in public perception of Britain's Mandate policies. The events surrounding *Exodus 47* significantly increased international pressure on Britain to revise its restrictive immigration stance. Just a few months later, in November 1947, the UN voted in favor of a partition plan for Palestine, and in May 1948, the State of Israel was founded.

Exodus 47 remains a symbol of the hope for a life in freedom and self-determination following the unprecedented rupture of civilization that was the Shoah.

Atalya Laufer
(*1979, Kibbutz Hazorea, Israel; lives and works in Berlin*)
Atalya Laufer's drawings, collages, sculptures, and installations often involve the appropriation of biographical and/or art historical materials. Her work explores questions of identity, boundaries, and projection. She earned a BA in Fine Arts (First Class Honours) from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London in 2005, and an MA in Art in Context from the Berlin University of the Arts in 2012. Since 2020, she has been a recipient of the MAX Studio Grant from the Stiftung Brandenburger Tor.

Sergey Bratkov
(*1960, Kharkiv, Ukraine; lives and works in Berlin*)
Sergey Bratkov is a politically contextualized artist working across various media including painting, photography, installation, video, and performance. He is considered one of the most important contemporary artists from Eastern Europe and represented Ukraine at the Venice Biennale in 2007. Prior to the war in Ukraine, he lived in Russia and taught at the Rodchenko School of Art in Moscow, where he influenced two generations of emerging artists from across Eastern Europe. In 2022, he relocated to Germany with the support of the Artists at Risk program. In 2024, he was awarded a Weltoffenes Berlin Fellowship by the Berlin Senate.

Ben Greber
(*1979, Halle/Westphalia, Germany; lives and works in Eberswalde and Berlin*)
Ben Greber's sculptural and installation-based work investigates the effects of technological processes on society, the environment, and human perception. His practice addresses the tension between visibility and invisibility of human intervention in an increasingly digitized world. Greber studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Münster under Katharina Fritsch and Ayşe Erkmen. His work has received numerous awards, including the GWK Art Prize (2011) and the Kallmann Prize (2024).

Imprint

An der Schwelle
EXIL

Sergey Bratkov
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Atalya Laufer

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Di bis Fr 10–17 Uhr | Mi 10–19 Uhr
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