

DIARY FROM A REFUGEE SHIP AT DOCUMENTA14 IN KASSEL

By Ilya Bernstein

Day One

Once when my friend and I were walking past our old elementary school we saw a group of 6 or 7 Asian kids our age playing basketball. My friend turned to me and asked me, *is that what we look like?* To who?

I asked. *To them, he said.* And I'd realized we'd both had the same thought. As white kids, our majority was the marker for normal, to us a group of white kids was just a group of kids, notice the special qualifier earlier in the story. We'd both thought of it as some kind of special congregation, like they were part of a club and had sought each other out specifically. And his question made me wonder what a gathering of white people looked like to non-white people, were we the same non-descript matrix of the hair and skin prescribed our race? My friend's question made me think, and still makes me think, about our notion of other. About how racism or maybe race scepticism is innate to the human condition as animals, from a time before a globalized world where only those conditioned to our environments made sense in them.

Arriving into Kassel I felt my brain pulling thoughts from this same chamber. I looked around me and saw something different inhabiting something familiar. The varied skin colors walking through the scenery I was used to confused me for a second, and I felt a part of my brain trying to defend a culture based on coincidence. Then I remembered where I was, or more specifically when I was. In the 21st century most societies aren't binary like they used to be, they aren't kill or be killed, basic human survival isn't really a thought most people have anymore. In some places they are, the places we tend not to think about, and some of the people I saw were those, or the kids of those escaping a reality which hasn't existed in the west for hundreds of years. As we moved further into Kassel towards our actual plans I began to realize how cultured our notion of other is, and our first day in the trip deconstructed this for me even further.

We left Odense at 9 in the morning in a van full of the things we'd need, plus supplies for the trip. Coffee, sandwiches, juice, anything. The ride was long and as captivating as an 11 hour drive can be, but fun. We pulled into Flensburg to pick up Jesper, our skipper whom we'd never met before. He sat next to me in the van and we talked about things we had in common, starting

with a conversation about how my name generally tends to have a girl behind it, which is true. We talked about his time in Israel, he'd stayed in Tel Aviv close to where my grandmother had lived. After a few hours we noticed one of the tires to the trailer had popped and been ripped to shreds by the road, it looked more like a propeller than a wheel at that point. As Jens and Karsten worked on changing it Jesper and I smoked together, (I later found out he quit and regretted offering him as many as I'd had especially because he'd received them so kindly, but it bonded us.) Traffic slowed and added hours to the trip, but we pulled through.

We arrived in Kassel after an 11 hour drive, to check out the ship where we would start our journey. We were greeted by members of the association OUTLAW, a German organization whose focus is to help the refugees entering the country. The differences in language seemed difficult at first, but it created an optimism and a willingness between people to make themselves understood, and to seem friendly, especially friendly. When communication is reduced and nuance compromised the most important thing is to remain friendly, because of the dangers of limited communication it becomes doubly hard to defend yourself if you happen to offend. But this limited communication proved to be the best case possible, as everyone tried to endear themselves to everyone else it created a humanity, a self-consciousness that wouldn't otherwise be there had we been left to our usual comforts. I talked with Gerhardt, one of the leaders of the organization outlaw about his time as a captain, he'd told me that in the 70s they had a prison program where prisoners serving relatively little time could supplement it by being trapped at sea so to speak, spending their sentence working a boat for months just to keep it sailing. When they refused to work he told me they would just have to stay under deck, the smell and boredom alone was enough to draw them out back on-board to help manage the ship. After getting a sense of the surroundings and the boat we'd stay on I volunteered to sleep in the van overnight just until we'd have time to unpack our things the next day. We got a sense of our itinerary, made a little more small talk, then we left for dinner. We talked and laughed in our patois, eating dinner at a Greek restaurant that kept its kitchen open specifically for us. Although this notion of other stems from a basic animal instinct to defend ourselves, it also creates an empathy once we recognize the same basic human traits in the other, and an urge to defend that self when seen elsewhere.