

The Refugee Crisis Seen Through a Heat-Detecting Camera

Richard Mosse's video installation *Incoming* gives migrants anonymity while emphasizing their humanity.

Tanner Tafelski



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Since October 31, 2018, the nonprofit arts organization No Longer Empty has been hosting one-day-only events throughout New York City as part of their yearlong project InResponse: (Im)migration. InResponse develops “a series of panel discussions, workshops, community-based gatherings and an online website that brings into one forum the creative work being done by artists, activists and organizations at the intersection of arts and immigration.” In the fall of 2019, the project will launch a site-specific exhibition.

As part of the initiative, No Longer Empty's most recent program was held in multiple parts. Ridgewood hosted the launch of Strange Edition, a spacious artist-run studio and center three years in the making. Electronic composer Ben Frost performed an in-the-round concert entitled "Widening Gyre." Trevor Tweeten's five-projector 16mm installation *Exquisite Corpse, Movement in Five Parts* (2018) screened throughout the evening. But the main event was a panel discussion and screening of Richard Mosse's three-channel video *Incoming* (2014-17).



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Incoming, which Frost and Tweeten worked on as Mosse's close collaborators, garnered great acclaim when it screened at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Barbican Art Gallery in 2017. These are two relatively large spaces which visitors can walk in and out of to view the looped film. At Strange Edition, a packed house watched *Incoming* projected floor-to-ceiling on one wall. Coupled with large speakers, this made for an immersive experience, discombobulating yet meditative. It leaves a viewer feeling unmoored, which is the intent.

Mosse, with Tweeten's cinematography, captured footage of the ongoing refugee crisis — brought on by war and climate change — with an unwieldy military-grade heat-detecting camera which rendered the recorded images in textured, ghostly monochromatic gradations. They photographed refugees traveling perilously along two major routes into the European Union: huddled in rafts wracked by the Aegean Sea, attempting to land on Greek islands, and temporarily safe at Berlin Tempelhof Airport, functioning as an emergency camp.



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As Tweeten noted in the discussion afterwards, *Incoming* is a film of ambivalence. The fridge-shaped camera, able to see up to 18 miles away, transforms people into spectral figures. In one way it dehumanizes them, stripping them of their individual features. But in another way, this is an asset for the people being filmed; they don't have to fear the repercussions of being represented because of the cloak of anonymity. And by using slow motion and concentrating on moments, Mosse injects humanity into the images. A little girl holds a smart phone, full of curiosity. A man prays, radiant while looking toward the camera. Another person carries a painting of Christ out of some ruins. The film forces you to pay attention to details and gestures.

Judging by the brief, uncomfortable pause immediately after the screening, as well as the high-quality discussion that ensued, *Incoming* did its job. With its aural and visual onslaught (an “aesthetic violence,” as Mosse put it), *Incoming* is a shock to the system, jarring loose one’s sense of ethics. What’s the viewer’s relationship to these images? Where do their sympathies and support lie? The questions and questioning is endless. Although Mosse is strictly focusing on Europe, *Incoming*’s call for empathy and reflection certainly relates to the state of immigration in the US two and a half years into the Trump presidency. As Mosse is ready to point out, all are complicit in the ongoing humanitarian crisis.



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InResponse: (Im)migration continues at various venues through November 1, 2019.