EUROPE MUST ACT.

JULY 2026

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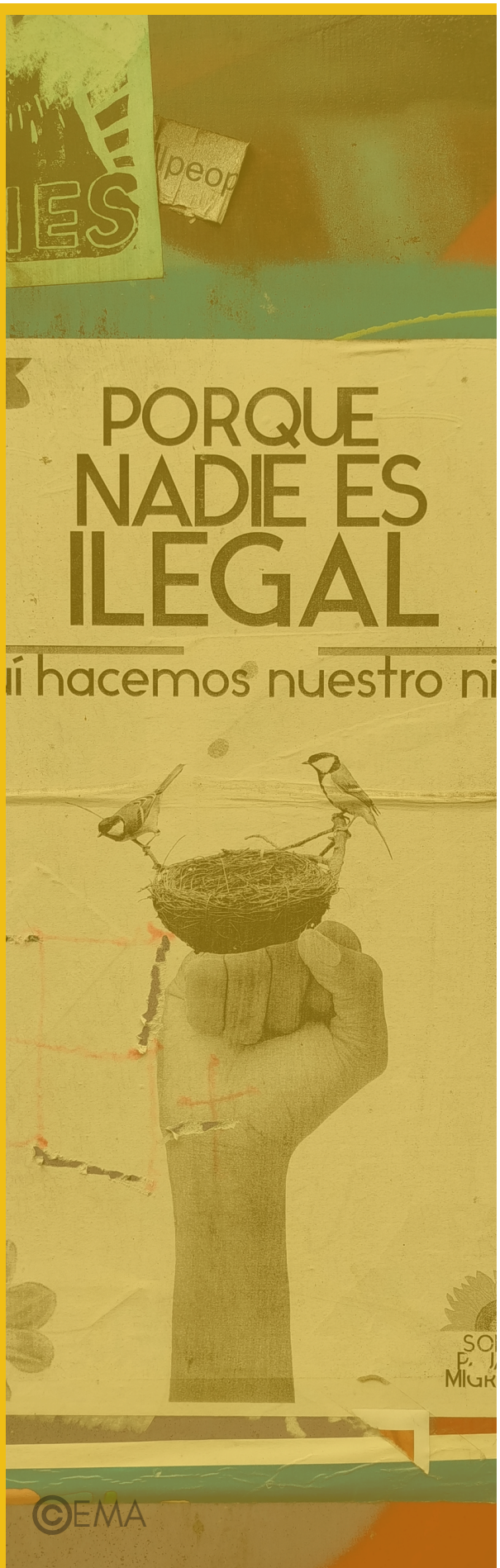
EUROPE MUST ACT.





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# INTRODUCTION

In our current world of growing division and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, coupled with the increase of AI and computer-generated outputs, resistance through art is one of the most positive and powerful methods available to challenge oppression and create change. Resistance can take form in many ways, not always through politically inspired creations and art-activism, but also through art's power to bring people together through joy and freedom of expression, and as a way of channelling your voice to tell your story. Art is often placed on a pedestal and described as a medium that is capable of transcending language, borders and difference. And while its ineffable quality is unarguable, art is undoubtedly political. It is, therefore, important to take a look at who is creating and for what reasons.

This report has chosen a range of examples of how art is used within the context of migration and asylum in Europe, grouped together under three headings – perspective, welcome and belonging, and resistance. It looks at projects and analyses and critiques ideas of voice, authorship and perspective, exploring how art can be used as a tool for welcome and integration between local and new communities, and showcasing different examples of how it can be used to resist.

Different art forms are examined: we take a look at filmmaking and authorship, exploring the idea of the importance of perspective and voice behind the camera, and looking at whose narrative is being presented on canvas; we discuss examples of different homegrown projects in Europe that blossomed from locals wanting to extend the hand of welcome to people who were new to their communities; we explore different forms of resistance – by European activists using currency to cleverly highlight the issues at borders, and by Hong Kong artists in exile in England. Each section gives a different example of how art can be used to tell stories, highlight truths, and spread hope in an often hostile and negative context.

# PERSPECTIVE

## WHO HOLDS THE CAMERA?
AUTHORSHIP AND MIGRATION CINEMA

In October 2025, the Argentinian filmmaker Lucrecia Martel gave a lecture at the New York Film Festival where she reflected on the role of cinema in relation to a narrative that goes well beyond it: the narrative that transforms the other, the neighbour, into the enemy – dehumanising them to the point where dispossession and violence become permissible. Martel considers it essential for filmmakers to rebel against this culture. What she does not extensively address, however – even though she acknowledges it – is the question of the author's point of view: in other words, who is holding the camera?

The production of migration-related cinema has grown significantly in recent years, yet as Lorenzo Piccoli has shown, most of these films are set and produced in the Global North, and tend to frame migration as irregular, dangerous, and crisis-driven – what he calls a "spectacle of human mobility". The Belarus-Poland border, and the humanitarian crisis that erupted there in 2021, is a telling example of this pattern: a crisis in the heart of Europe, extensively mediated, yet mediated almost exclusively from the outside. The films it generated raise a pressing question: what does the choice of who holds the camera reveal – and conceal?

In their documentary The Guest (2024), Zvika Gregory Portnoy and Zuzanna Solakiewicz entered the restricted zone along the Polish border and found themselves filming an unexpected story: Maciek and his family had taken in Alhyder, a 27-year-old Syrian man who had knocked at their door. The film unfolds mostly within the intimacy of that house – conversations, waiting, Alhyder in contact with friends still stranded in the forest. What the documentary captures, through this accidental proximity, is something that neither journalism nor official documentation could access. And yet the border remains just outside the frame: the Polish guards are glimpsed only through a window, the camera hesitating behind the curtain – hidden, like Alhyder.

Agnieszka Holland's Green Border (2023) shares the outsider perspective of The Guest, but makes a different formal choice: fiction. Holland drew on extensive research – interviews with refugees, activists and border guards – yet the exclusion zone that sealed off the area to journalists and humanitarian workers made direct documentation impossible. Fiction filled the gap that reality had forcibly left open. And fiction, crucially, allowed Holland something a documentary could not easily do: a multi-voice structure that follows a Syrian family, a group of activists, and a border guard in parallel – refusing the simple moral division between victim and perpetrator, and showing the crisis as a system that implicates everyone caught within it.

These examples – and others like Lidia Duda's Las or Kasia Smutniak's Mur – share a common feature: the perspective is always that of an outsider. People on the move are seen, but their voice is filtered through someone else's gaze. This is not inevitable. What Raminder Kaur Kahlon and Mariagiulia Grassilli call "fifth cinema" – developed primarily by people on the move, and able to "question identity formations, address displacement, challenge national and ethnocentric myths"[1] – offers a different mode of representation, one where the subject becomes the author. Films like Les Sauteurs (Estephan Wagner and Abdou Bakar Sidibè) and Midnight Traveler (Hassan Fazili) show what this looks like: an unmediated urgency, a different relationship between the image and the body that produced it.

In the Belarus-Poland context, no such film exists. That absence is not incidental – it reflects the same enforced invisibility that Holland tried to compensate for with fiction, and that the camera behind the curtain in The Guest could only gesture toward.

The Belarus-Poland border produced documentaries, fiction films, and activist footage – but no film made by those who crossed it, or tried to. That silence is part of the story. It is precisely in this gap that Martel's words, addressed to filmmakers at the NYFF, resonate most: "El sentido de nuestro trabajo está unido al destino de los pueblos" ("The meaning of our work is tied to the fate of peoples").

## CHANGING DISPLACED PERSONS' NARRATIVES THROUGH PERSONAL STORYTELLING

Mainstream media and public discourse often dehumanise people on the move, using metaphors of inundation such as "waves, floods or tides". This portrays them as a homogeneous group, defined mainly through suffering, loss and trauma. Instead of being recognised and respected, they are portrayed either as helpless and hopeless victims or as hordes of invaders threatening European identity. This creates a huge boundary between the receiving society and migrant persons. As Yuval-Davis et al. argue, "Processes of bordering always distinguish between 'us' and 'them', those inside and those outside"[2], which creates hostility and hinders integration.

[1] Kaur, R., & Grassilli, M. (2019). Towards a fifth cinema. *Third Text*, 33(1), 1-25

[2] Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2018). Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of British immigration legislation. Sociology, 52(2), 231

Challenging these public narratives can be done through stories shared via written forms, images, audiovisual media, interviews or artistic expression. Stories of migration grant migrant persons "full authority and control over their narrative." By engaging with their testimonies, the receiving society feels closer to migrant persons.

However, NGOs and humanitarian organisations often rely on "vicarious storytelling", when third parties tell the stories of migrants. This creates the border again and leads to excessive victimisation. While vicarious narratives can raise awareness and make migrant persons' experiences more accessible to others, they often seek to evoke empathy for a specific purpose."[3] This ignores the complexity of migrants' experiences, which are not based solely on trauma and suffering. Therefore, rehumanisation requires allowing people to tell their stories on their own terms, challenging simplistic or victimising views.

To overcome the hostile borders and change narratives, the projects give a turn to tell the stories. 1000 Dreams is a project that tells the stories of 1000 refugee persons across the US and Europe. As the project states, "For attitudes, policies, and practices to change, the narrative must change. For the narrative to change, the lives of refugees have to be authentically represented, and their voices must be heard.

The portraits of 1000 refugees personalise refugees: they become individuals to whom the audience can relate, rather than a homogenous group of outsiders."

Similarly, Refugee Tales project organises a large-scale walk every summer in solidarity with refugee persons, who share tales about their experiences of migration and show the reality of indefinite detention in the UK. Besides, Refugee Tales leads a self-advocacy project to share the tales with parliamentarians and people of influence and call for change.

Other projects counter victimisation. The CIVIS project, called Home as Story. Stories from Home. Transformations of Belonging allow participants to express their experiences and emotions through artistic works, including images, poems and short stories. In addition, Fondazione Imago Mundi has organised an exhibition, Out of Place: Art and Stories from the World's Refugee Camps, which shows 284 small artworks, along with photography, video, installations and interviews, made by artists who live in refugee camps or have had similar experiences. The aim of the exhibition is "to present refugee persons first of all as artists, considering their current and past refugee status as accidental in their biographies."

In any form, storytelling is important to help rehumanise those who are too often reduced to statistics or stereotypes. These projects provide a platform to give voice to refugees and change prevailing narratives. Furthermore, they help participants heal, teach lessons of determination and confidence to others, preserve their culture and gain income from their creative work.

[3] Gebauer, C., & Sommer, R. (2024). Beyond vicarious storytelling: How level telling fields could help create a fair narrative on migration. Open Research Europe, 3, 10.

# WELCOME & BELONGING

## CREATING BELONGING THROUGH ART: THE CASE OF RESIDÊNCIAS REFÚGIO[4] IN LISBON

In the context of displacement, asylum seekers and refugees frequently experience legal precarity and uncertainty during their journeys. Aside from the instability that can arise from legal status, they also face turmoil in their everyday lives[5]. Displacement can often lead to the loss of community, language and the networks that give people a sense of belonging. Integration tends to focus on areas that include housing, employment and legal status, which can leave out these dynamics of recognition and belonging. Nevertheless, belonging, as involving social bonds and a sense of respect and shared values, has been identified as the "ultimate mark of living in an integrated community"[6]. Participatory art and creative collaboration have played a role in creating spaces that cultivate these dynamics and help enhance the inclusion of people seeking sanctuary.

In Portugal, several initiatives have emerged, combining artistic practice with inclusion. Residências Refúgio, a project based in Lisbon, helps illustrate this role of art in creating a sense of belonging.
The project combines community mediation and cultural activities, including arts and crafts, jam sessions, creative workshops and an annual festival, with the aim of supporting the inclusion of displaced people and bringing them closer together with the Portuguese community. More recently, the project has also developed artistic residencies, in which professional local artists work together with artists from displaced communities across painting, music, textiles, and design.

What stands out in projects such as this is that participants are not mere beneficiaries, but active agents in the creative process. It offers a collaborative space, where they work alongside artists and the surrounding community. Similar dynamics have been noted in art projects in Portugal more broadly where participants are often positioned not as "social cases" managed by institutions, but as cultural producers who make active decisions on what is created and how. The participants in these projects also report building strong bonds within the community, using the language of family to describe the relationships they form.

[4] "Refugee Residencies"
[5] Rottmann, S. B., Josipovic, I., & Reeger, U. (2020). Beyond legal status: exploring dimensions of belonging among forced migrants in Istanbul and Vienna. Social Inclusion, 8(1), 241-251
[6] Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework. Journal of Refugee Studies, 21(2), 178

This raises a further question on how inclusion is structured. In Portugal, refugees still face persistent barriers to integration and inclusion, including limited access to Portuguese language classes, recognition of their professional and academic qualifications, job searching, and housing. In this context, some civil society initiatives have addressed these gaps, for instance, some local projects combining art with language learning have achieved more effective results than the services provided by the state. An initiative like *Residências Refúgio* illustrates this more broadly, by showing how a sense of belonging can be created through shared creative practices and collaboration, rather than depending only on legal status. This also exemplifies how local initiatives can work alongside formal asylum and integration systems, addressing needs that these systems often struggle to meet.

## ART AS A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL HEALTH AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER COMMUNITIES IN IRELAND

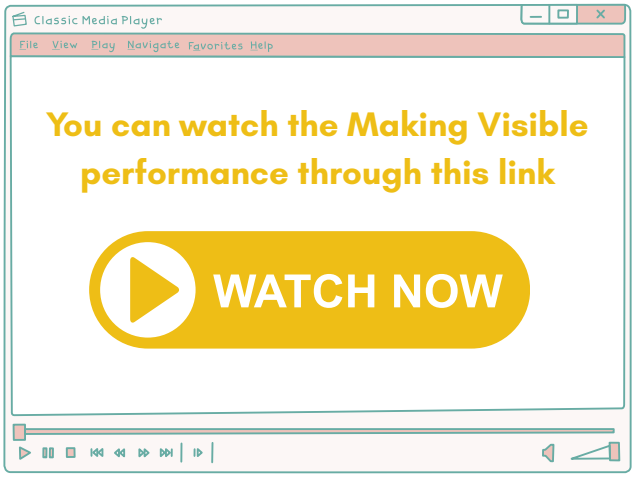
Across Ireland, a growing number of arts-based initiatives are helping to promote intercultural health, social inclusion, and well-being among refugees and people seeking international protection. By providing safe and creative spaces for self-expression, these projects help participants build confidence, develop social connections, and foster a sense of belonging within their communities. As highlighted by Haley Toll's study on arts-based research and newcomer refugees, creative activities can provide safe, non-judgemental spaces where individuals are able to express experiences that may be difficult to communicate through conventional language-based approaches.

- **Creative Workshops Supporting Well-being:**

The Creative Connections project, implemented by Smashing Times in partnership with Samaritans and supported by the Health Service Executive (HSE), demonstrates how the arts can be used to support the well-being of refugee communities in Ireland. Working with refugees residing in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs), the initiative employed participatory theatre, storytelling, and collaborative creative activities to foster positive mental health and social connection. Rather than addressing mental health issues directly from the outset, facilitators prioritised creating a safe and welcoming environment through trust-building exercises and engaging artistic activities. This gradual approach helped participants feel comfortable before exploring themes such as stress management, resilience, emotional well-being, and available support networks. The positive outcomes of the project led to the development of an arts-based toolkit designed to assist artists, educators, community workers, and healthcare professionals in using creative methods to promote well-being and intercultural engagement in diverse settings.

- **Making Hidden Experiences Visible:**

The Making Visible project demonstrated the power of art to raise public awareness and encourage dialogue around the experiences of asylum seekers in Ireland's Direct Provision system. Supported by the Arts Council's Artist in the Community Scheme, the project brought together participants to share their experiences through song, voice, and performance. Inspired by the traditional Irish practice of 'bean caoineadh', which translates to the keening woman, one who mourns with and on behalf of a community and with the group choose to explore this through song and voice the performances highlighted themes of loss, resilience, and hope. The project not only empowered participants to tell their stories but also encouraged audiences to engage more deeply with issues facing people seeking asylum and to consider how they could offer support.




- **Empowering Young People Through Creativity:**

Another successful initiative is Elevate Youth Arts, from the Irish Refugee Council which is an 18-month multidisciplinary arts programme designed for young people aged 18 to 24 who are seeking international protection. Running since 2023, the project focuses on creativity, confidence-building, skills development, and youth participation. Through artistic activities and leadership opportunities, participants are encouraged to develop their talents, express their identities, and strengthen their connections with others. The programme also highlights the importance of sustained funding and community partnerships in creating meaningful opportunities for young people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The above initiatives highlight how arts-based approaches can strengthen well-being, foster a sense of belonging, and encourage social inclusion among refugee and asylum seeker communities. Creating opportunities for creative expression in safe spaces is crucial for everybody.

# RESISTANCE

## ART, FREEDOM AND IDENTITY: CREATIVE EXPRESSION AMONG UK DIASPORA COMMUNITIES AFTER MIGRATION - HONG KONG EXAMPLE

For many diaspora communities, art has always been a form of expressing homesickness, delivering the community's culture, and creating a community. However, art can also act as a form of rebuilding belonging after displacement, giving people a different sense of who they are allowed to become.

Not all displacement looks the same. Hong Kongers who moved to the UK under the BN(O) visa took a legal route, but many describe their departure as exile all the same, shaped by the same political pressures explored elsewhere in this piece. Among Hongkongers in the UK, creative expression has become one way to claim an identity that many felt unable to fully inhabit before migration: the identity of being an artist.

Since 2021, more than 200,000 Hong Kong citizens have moved to the UK under the British National (Overseas) visa route, under the growing political pressure after the 2019 social movement. In Hong Kong, the space for cultural expression has narrowed. Yet the constraints on artistic identity are not only political. Several Hong Kong artists now living in Britain described a longer-standing difficulty in calling themselves "artists" in Hong Kong, as art is often not seen as a "proper" occupation and creative ambition can feel impractical, or even embarrassing to openly claim.

In this sense, moving to the UK represented an opening of opportunity to pursue their dreams. There are still difficulties in being an artist, and many of them still face homesickness, financial burden, language barriers, cultural differences, and the emotional weight of restarting. But the cultural environment around artistic identity can feel different. For some Hong Kong artists, Britain offered more social space to introduce themselves through their creative work, and to be asked not only whether art was practical, but what kind of work they wanted to make.

One example was the group exhibition, "Blue Days in the UK", held in 2025 in New Cross, London. It features six Hong Kong illustrators and artists who had recently made the UK their home. They explored the quiet emotional landscape of migration: loneliness, adaptation, homesickness and the search for a new rhythm of life. The exhibition became a public space of becoming: a space where they could stand in front of others and say that they were artists.

As the host of the exhibition, also one of the participating artists, Koong said: "Here, we can finally uphold this identity, and keep exploring new possibilities in a larger world." The six artists all explored different themes, from the shared memories and vanishing symbols of Hong Kong, to acknowledging loss while also suggesting adaptation and hope in a new country. They all circled back to the same theme: artists can express freely what they wanted to say, without pressure, without the worry of political sanctions, but with a bit of sentiment and homesickness, which they will always travel with.

A more political example can be seen in the work of Lumli Lumlong, a London-based Hong Kong artist couple in exile. Their grotesque-style oil paintings focus on social realities, human rights and authoritarianism, using disturbing visual language to confront viewers with realities. Their case shows another side of Hong Kong diaspora art in the UK: preserving political pains that showed who the communities are. The history we bear is a part of our identity.

**Lost symbols, new voices: Hong Kong artists bring migration stories to London Blue Days in the UK exhibition homepage**

## FROM HAND TO HAND - TUNING PAPER MONEY

Some think money is the measure of all things, both material and intangible. For many of us, money is a source and medium of suffering, as it is a key that blocks access to fundamental rights and to many needed goods. Banknotes are one of the main material forms money takes. Banknotes know many people and keep meeting new people. Day to day and for so many purposes, we pass banknotes from hand to hand, always within the confines of a fenced-off territory: Currency applies within borders and defines a national or international identity. This is most evident in the case of the Euro, which was launched at the beginning of the century as an icon of the European project, its material forms (coins and notes) becoming a canvas for the graphic expression of European identity.
As Andreea Micu pointfully describes, "the design of the Euro banknotes perfectly captures the essence of Europe as a colonial capitalist project, but it does so under a seemingly innocent celebration of progress as a core European value". All Euro bank notes feature architectural iconic images related to various styles and times (although none of them is a representation of a real place or monument anywhere in Europe). The front of each bill has images of windows or gateways; the back features bridges, together with a map of the Union.

The design traces a chronological progression of architectural history corresponding with the increase in the value of bills. Does this progression represent a historical evolution of culture and civilisation, or the unstoppable and uncontrollable fate of inflation? The architectural images surely represent enclosed spaces which may be open or not, insinuating the crossing of obstacles and borders as much as their selective closure: The whole architectural composition evokes the Schengen dilemma: opening the borders within the fortress, while closing its external borders.

At the same time, this design is completely depopulated: Buildings with doors and windows that can be open or closed, bridges to cross, but nobody there. So Greek artist Stefanos Andreadis intervened on the paper money to bring people in: human figures in black ink were added to the monumental architectural settings of the Euro banknotes' design. Now the monumental doors were surrounded by many people trying to cross in or out; others were climbing fences; some while other people, mind you, were aggressing one another or committing suicide. Stefanos was bringing to the paper money canvas the concerns generated by the Greek economic crisis through 2014, at a time shortly after the rise of Syriza's rise to power, and shortly before the historical referendum that would confirm the Greek people's rejection of austerity measures (after which Syriza would introduce an even tougher package of such measures).

For about a year, Stefanos transformed every euro note he came across by drawing on it scenes that reflected stories seen on the Greek news. Taking advantage of the fact that European central banks are not required to retire a euro banknote unless it is more than 50% damaged, he then put the transformed banknotes back into circulation. At some point after the first few months, Stefanos lost count of how many banknotes he had transformed, but has stated that they definitely reached the thousands.

Inspired by stories depicted on the news, many drawings in the Banknotes Project refer to episodes of the Greek economic crisis and, later, the arrival of Syrian refugees that would culminate in the great Summer of Migration. One of the most iconic notes by Stefanos features people flooding down into the map to Europe:

©Andreea S. Micu - newalphabetschool

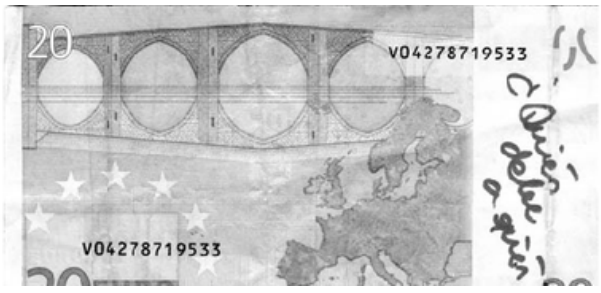
Stefanos' project follows other initiatives to respond to paper money design and re-create it, mostly focusing on the imperial and colonial history of Europe. Particularly in Spain:

- In 1992, to commemorate the conquest and invasion of America, the Bank of Spain issued banknotes with faces of conquistadores on them, to commemorate 500 years of colonial expansion that fed Europe with gold and silver. In 1999, Fermín Muguruza published the song "Diru espainol zikina"* (in Basque, "Dirty Spanish money"), a song referring to the "arrogance and irritating contempt" of these "honourable killers on paper money" ("Prepotentziz ta mespretzuz irarritakoa... Ohorezko hiltzaileak paper monedan").

©Fichier d'origine - wikipedia

- At the end of 2002, when the North Western coast of Spain was hit by the ecological disaster of the Prestige (an oil tanker that sank, spilling tons of oil in the Atlantic Ocean), people would turn the map of Europe on Euro notes to indicate how the pollution was spreading along the coasts of the North of Spain and reaching South West France. The slogan "Nunca Mais" (in Galician, "never again") was written on the map, on the part of the ocean where the disaster started. In this way, European money was used as a bridge to disseminate public response against the ecological disaster that was affecting the continent from one of its corners.

In 2005, a campaign from the Spanish Citizen Network for the Abolition of External Debt (RECADE) was tuning euro notes, adding the question "¿quién debe a quién?" ("Who owes whom?")[7].




[7] These two last examples of bank notes are discussed in Figueroa-Saavedra, F. (2007) El Graffiti en Metálico, Revista Historia y Comunicación Social, 12, 23-44.

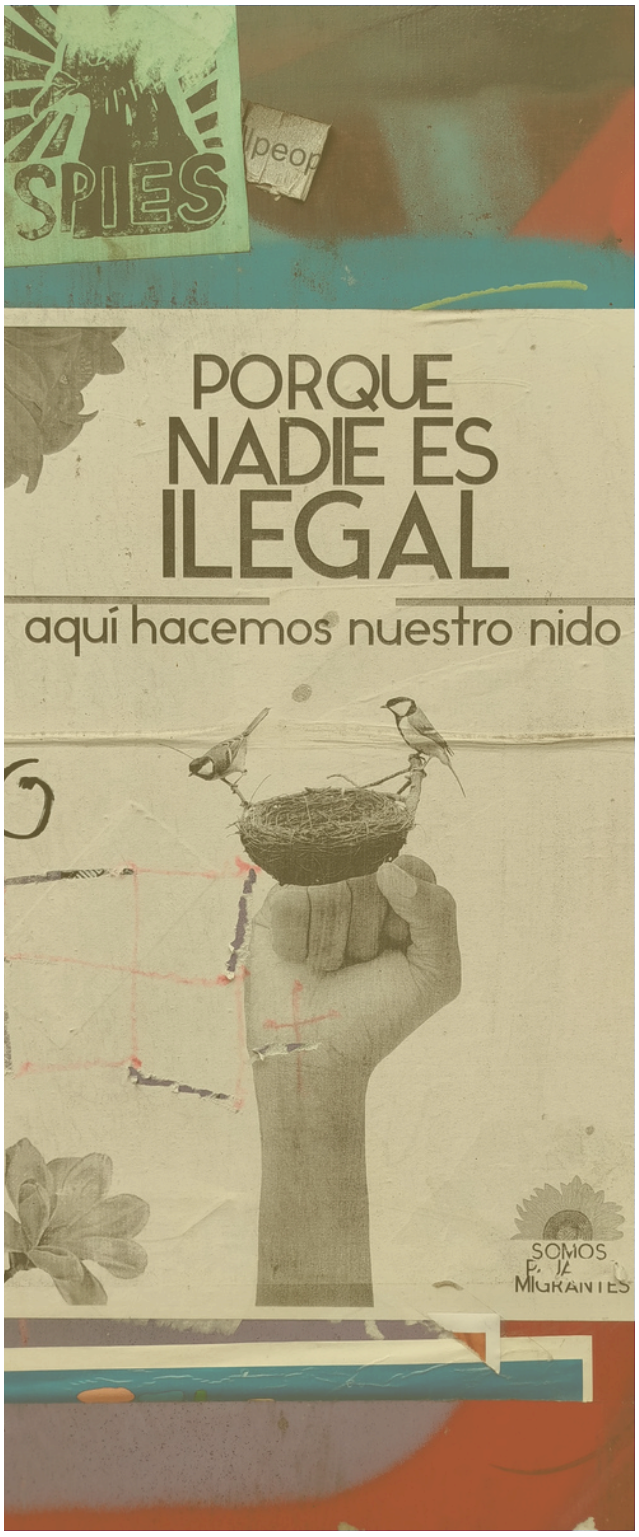
Whenever we hand out or pick up a banknote, we are holding between our fingers a highly meaningful piece of graphic design, which others before us have observed, interpreted and contributed to create. The euro has provided us with a huge number of small paper canvases where we can draft drawings and write short statements telling the truth to power. Money is not for free, but we can keep applying our freedom of expression to it, to respond to those official designs of artful buildings with nobody inside and those historical bridges nobody can cross.

EUROPE MUST ACT.

# CONCLUSION

Art cannot wave a magic wand to right all the inequalities that are rife in our society. Asylum procedures, the harsh new measures of the EU Pact and the difficult situations faced by people on the move in Europe will still exist; however, art has its own unique power – the power to change narratives, build empathy and create a sense of belonging. It also has the power to spread awareness and capture people's attention in ways that other media can't.

As discussed above, however, art can also reinforce stereotypes and remove agency. When engaging with artistic projects and outputs, therefore, it is crucial to do so with an analytical eye. Who is the creator, and what are their motives? Living in such a globalised world, with uneven connections and unequal access, as we do, there is a responsibility on creators and audience members to take a deeper look, because art, at its best, can bring people together, while also telling an unbiased truth.



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*WE'RE VOLUNTEERS AND ASYLUM AND MIGRATION IS A COMPLEX TOPIC. THIS MEANS WE TRY TO INCLUDE A VARIETY OF OPINIONS AND APPROACHES TO A TOPIC. WE DO OUR BEST TO RESEARCH AND USE OUR EXPERTISE ACCURATELY HOWEVER, WE ALSO BELIEVE IT'S VITAL TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHY DISCUSSION AND STOP MISINFORMATION. THEREFORE WE ENCOURAGE ANY FEEDBACK OR CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM OF OUR WORK.

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*Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.*

EUROPE MUST ACT 2026