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Adrian Paci, *Broken Words*, 2019, 5 channel videoinstallation. Courtesy of the artist, kaufmann

repetto, Mailand/New York and Peter Kilchmann, Zürich. Produced with the contribution of

Sant Egidio community, Rome.

Adrian Paci. Broken Words

October 18 – December 1, 2019

Press conference: Fr, October 18, 12.30am

Artist Talk with Omer Fast: Fr, October 18, 7pm

World Premiere and Opening: Fr, October 18, 8pm

Adrian Paci presents artworks that oscillate between experiences, history, fiction, poetry, and documentation; capturing the tensions between. His projects focus on what emerges after war, upheaval, flight or forced migration, often exploring themes of loss, displacement, and the struggle of identity to re-assert itself. Paci often works with displaced people, migrants and refugees. Collaborations recently conducted with refugees are combined in this exhibition with other works that examine and depict means of expression beyond language. While chronicling trauma and tragedy, his work altogether exerts a powerful, humanist empathy, exploring the limits of language, to bring about another level of expression and reflection.

*A catalogue will be published in collaboration with Kunsthalle Krems.*
Catalogue presentation & opening of the show [*Adrian Paci. Lost Communities*](http://www.kunsthalle.at/en/exhibitions/17-adrian-paci-lost-communities?set_language=en)at Kunsthalle Krems on

Sat, 23 November, 6pm (24.11.2019-23.02.2020).

Adrian Paci was born in Shkodër, Albania, in 1969. In 1997 he left for Milan, escaping the violence of the armed uprising in Albania. Paci’s position as an exile holds a central place in his oeuvre. His work frequently addresses themes of geographical separation, nostalgia, and memory, and conveys a keen sense of the mutability of life and art. Paci is known primarily for his work in performance and video, although he explores similar subjects in painting, photography, and sculpture.

**Chronicles of Severed Words, Chronicles of Displacement**

On Adrian Paci’s exhibition *Broken Words*
*Text by Séamus Kealy*

*The bodies are what we are left with, after all the journeys, the experiences, and the travails.*

Adrian Paci[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Firstly, we don’t wish to be called refugees.*

Hannah Arendt[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Refugees are not considered people.*

Reem, former refugee[[3]](#footnote-3)

## *Memory must be created against the overabundance of information as well as against its absence.*

## Jacques Ranciere[[4]](#footnote-4)

Born in Albania and now long living in Italy after fleeing his homeland in the 1990s, Adrian Paci has a history of working with displaced people, especially migrants and refugees, or those caught between institutional or geo-political networks. Paci himself is an exiled chronicler of these experiences. His artwork has reflected his own experiences of migration, and has often derived out of collaborations with newcomers to foreign lands. His research and projects have also focused on what emerges after war, upheaval, flight, or forced migration, often exploring themes of loss, displacement, and the struggle of identity to assert itself in uncertain contexts. What emerges between all these topics is a depiction of the human condition. Paci presents artworks that oscillate between experiences, histories, fiction, poetry, and documentation; always capturing the tensions existing between. Recently he has broadened his scope from more personal reflections to an approach that more outwardly examines collective experiences. He has namely sought out new collaborations with individuals affected by the current refugee crisis. We experience in this work a powerful, humanist empathy in the video portraiture of his subjects, both in his treatment of the topic and as well as each person he works with.

Further, and in this exhibition specifically, Adrian Paci’s artwork explores profound territories outside language. Here we find a powerful and thoughtful analysis by the artist on matters of contemporary representation, the limits of language, topics of current socio-political spheres, and the unavoidable matter of a global humanitarian crisis. Paci folds these matters together through a combination of different formal approaches with a particular focus on displaced individuals. The exhibition could thus easily also be titled *Broken Bodies*, but Paci decidedly skirts more conventional means of tackling these difficult topics. This artwork presents critical representation of individuals’ experiences in a precise manner that confounds mass media’s hegemonic tendencies to isolate human tragedy and trauma into packable stories or even convenient ideological terms, or to even dismiss them altogether. This text will later explore these notions briefly in comparison to other contemporary artists’ work in order to flesh out this distinction.

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The exhibition *Broken Words* is made up of a five-channel video installation (*Broken Words*), five large, standing mosaics in frames (*Untitled*), a series of photographs titled *Malgrado Tutto* (In Spite of Everything), a series of prints that arise from the artist’s elementary school notebooks (*Bukurshkrimi,* meaning Calligraphy), and the 1997 video *Albanian Stories*, the first video the artist made. With artworks deriving from the

experiences of those who are displaced or on the outskirts of society, this exhibition is no exception from Paci’s usual frames of reference, but here we may observe a deliberate focus on matters of trauma as it slips in and out of the cracks of language. Paci clarifies, “the whole exhibition will be focused on the relation between trauma and the possibility and impossibility of bringing it into language.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Ultimately his current approach includes his beloved themes of migration, displacement, and marginality.

The five framed mosaics are enlarged versions of drawings and writings made originally by disabled and autistic individuals. At first glance, the images might appear to be enlarged glitches—scratches of error, dissent, or vandalism even—but then one may begin to see the humanist poetry of Adrian’s intentions when one reads how he has sensitively re-contextualized these very forms. Paci had been invited to join an Italian community that works with disabled and autistic people in order to collaborate with them. When he saw their notebooks, he was immediately attracted by the purpose of their writings, especially because these writings did not convey meaning in terms of codification. These suggestive, quickly-made marks exist both within and outside language and writing, and their expressive strength lies in their relationship with the being and bodies of these people combined with their powerful urge to express themselves. By putting them into mosaic form—a traditional technique needing dedication and concentration—he thought to give these expressive forms another kind of materiality and bring them into another time, so to speak, into this time-consuming art form most associated with antiquated, architectural grandeur or religious icons. Paci wishes to place these fragmented lines onto “the level of the monumentality of a staged, ancient technique,”[[6]](#footnote-6) to focus on their form rather than their meaning, to enunciate the primal need to transform impulses of life into signs, which, while existing outside of language or codification per se, express ever more a sense of *presentness* and mystery. Paci’s pain-staking abstraction of these markings into mosaics opens them up to a spectrum of associations, but the artist wishes to especially stress means of expression that arise despite language or in situations where language is hindered.

The series of photographs entitled *Malgrado tutto* (In Spite of Everything) depict traces (words, signs, and drawings) found by Paci on Albanian prison walls. Some seem to represent calendars, where one can ascertain the prisoners marking their time, even awaiting their release if they are so lucky. Upon discovering them, Paci felt a kinship between them and ancient cave drawings, where human gestures on the walls leave a mark of time, a vulnerable but determined human touch that remains long after its making. These photographs express the universal need to leave a mark, even in a state of ultimate deprivation, or most certainly because of it. There is significant pathos in this work, where the desires and sufferings of the former prisoners within difficult, isolated, even inhumane circumstances are revealed in so delicate a manner that is also outside forms of language. Here this work links to the other works in the exhibition, and enriches an overall poetic pathos through the entire exhibition.

The single channel video *Albanian Stories* (1997) links the current work in the exhibition with a trajectory of Paci’s artwork from the past two decades. A three-year-old girl combines elements of children’s stories with her own traumatic experiences, as a means of reconciling the latter. This girl is actually Paci’s daughter, who

was caught by Paci on video as she was making up these stories for her dolls not long after the family had fled the civil war in Albania. Her story combines the usual characters from Albanian folk tales she had previously heard—a cow, a cat, a cockerel—together with soldiers and members of the international intervention forces. The child’s endearing vision demonstrates the complex, emotionally entangled and psychological means that individuals of all ages must cope with after conflict, migration, and adaption to a new home. Here in his early work, one sees how Paci has long employed a blurring of narratives, between fiction and reality, illustrating in this case how histories of war and trauma are managed by a child during early development, and how traumatic experience—inexplicable in its first experience—repeats itself through different expressions.

Another work is a series of framed papers from Paci’s elementary schoolbooks. These markings demonstrate a process of deciphering and constructing language into a written format. The forms begin tentatively and later become elements of writing and then phrases develop, revealing at the end terms such as “long live our dear communist leader,” whereby ideological structures are imposed early onto these children. This is a contamination of the development of these language structures from dominating outside forces (the *sovereign*, as Giorgio Agamben titles them), perhaps provoking us to consider how this kind of interruption or displacement of children’s language development may continue in any context, even with the best of intentions. The work also reiterates how language is not easily free from ideology or the trappings of socio-political structures as they trickle down from parents or schools or society to children. When we link this work to the new video installation (where Paci has worked with refugees), other considerations arise, such as how does language reinforce tension (between peoples), and how might we find commonality between different languages instead of partitioning of thinking by virtue of cultural and linguistic difference alone. These considerations are all active within Paci’s entire oeuvre, and they come to audiences in a suggestive, empathetic manner that is quietly convincing. These two works (his notebooks, the video of his daughter) come from a personal frame of reference, and doing so form a conceptual framework around the entire exhibition, entwining the entire exhibition not only around language and its development but connecting it to humanistic empathy and universality.

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*The fact of being at a crossroads, at the frontier of two separate identities, underlies all my work on film.*

Adrian Paci[[7]](#footnote-7)

The newest work in the exhibition, set off to the side as a five-channel video installation, depicts Syrian refugees during interviews about their plight and flight. Paci met these individuals near Beirut after their escape from the Syrian war. After recording these interviews, Paci edited each video to present only the moments when the refugees have stopped talking, and are listening to the translator repeating their story in a language that they, presumably, do not understand. These are thus video portraits, but presented deliberately out of sync. What we see is their silent but expressive face set to a non-diegetic soundtrack of their own voices, so it appears that they are listening to their own stories. The voices altogether in this installation are thus mixed into a chorus, an assemblage, a cacophony; further complicating any intelligibility for the viewer. We do not hear their stories; we *see* their stories on their faces. This editing decision is in keeping, on the one hand, with Paci’s wish to confront and present quandaries of language and expression in the face of trauma and displacement. On the other hand, this process and structure of the video portraits, one could argue, parallels the process of trauma. Again Paci demonstrates that with recounting difficult experience into oral narratives there is an active amount of coping, often urging memory via language or notions to take different

forms, sometimes fracturing into other narratives—as we have seen with *Albanian Stories*—or disappearing altogether. Here this all goes through a process of translation, which Paci articulates as a kind of mirroring of how trauma repeats itself over and over again. Freud remarked that trauma is not only the initial experience itself but also the repetition of this experience within memory and indeed its reiteration through speech. This repetition is also a coping mechanism, a means of explicating or coming to terms with what is inexplicable, namely catastrophic experience. Instead of forgetting something that is traumatizing, it is remembered, repeated, altered, fragmented, and “worked through” as a means of keeping the individual’s psyche intact. All of this has a wide resonance today in terms of ongoing collective trauma, such as that experienced by individuals caught in the new waves of migration and flight caused by wars, crisis, and conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, Darfur, Sudan, Libya, and many other nations today.

## The video portraits also adapt a documentary style of interview, where Paci has decided that instead of words adding up to the usual conveyed message in film format, there is instead a deliberate reduction of the language to a non-concurrent sound of voices and a concentration on the individuals’ faces. There is a powerful connection between this work and the mosaics, for example, where the need to express within a forced state of deprivation or being confined (applying to the experiences of both the prisoners and refugees respectively) is captured in these formats by the artist to reveal a *bareness* of expression, something beneath and beyond language. This *bareness* can manifest or be presented through different art forms, and here Paci brings the voices and experiences of others into his *oeuvre* while deliberately preventing them from being contaminated by conventions of language. This is a stark contrast to the prevalence of strong political rhetoric today, and speaks to a humanity within expression unbound by language structures. Thus we might argue, that the ongoing global geo-political situation—in which multitudes are reduced to a life without dignity or human rights as well as a loss of political identity—is the grand backdrop to these video portraits. These geopolitics are confronted by Paci’s sensitive representation of elements of *homo sacer*, that is, what Giorgio Agamben calls *bare life* in these very videos.

For Agamben, the term *bare life* describes the unspeakable, inhumane condition of those who are displaced from nation states, including refugees. Their condition, he says, is a “state of exception,” where their dignity and rights are cast out from the seeming universal protections that most citizens enjoy. The term *homo sacer,* Agamben says, arises from the non-transcendental sacred, a historical figure of Roman law, who was once a citizen and is then sentenced to a diminished status of *bare life*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The individual is reduced to a mere biological entity, set apart, lacking transcendence, lacking any inclusion. Today, this very exclusion that pertains to contemporary refugees, he argues, pronounces the insufficiency of the very institutions meant to protect human rights. That is, a refugee embodies these insufficiencies by virtue of their very exclusion from basic universal rights, which should pertain to them especially. Agamben serves to illustrate the injustice and incapability of democratic institutions today that continue to exclude despite enshrining human rights as something universal. When we consider this representation of *bare life* by Paci in this video portraiture, we may ascertain a stripping down of the narratives around trauma to a physical and visual empathy. By erasing the story from intelligibility, and simultaneously presenting the individuals as they are immediately reflecting upon their own trauma as it is being re-iterated, Paci arguably, in part, restores the dignity and humanity to those who have had it stripped from them. Their story is, in short, not the summation of who they are.

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Other recent artwork representing today’s refugee crisis while deliberately confronting current injustice and the perpetuation of *bare life* includes the work of Ai Weiwei. He has recently depicted the immeasurable representation of the global refugee crisis, for example, by making an enormous vinyl flooring endlessly listing

links to online articles. He has also represented the crisis with uncountable photos of refugee camps attached to walls as an enormous wallpaper, with long racks of abandoned refugee clothing he and his studio team have collected, ironed, and presented in installations. He has had long lists of deceased children attached to a wall alongside hundreds of tons of metal bars collected from the buildings that tragically crushed their bodies in an earthquake in China.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is a monumental, overwhelming representation, where we are faced with incredible scales of tragedy that confound but perhaps also inadvertently depersonalize those implicated. Paci’s videos however bring the topic down to a few individuals, making individual experiences legible, and making a universal statement without words. The videos involve a deliberate stripping down to the bare, but also enable an elevating of these individuals out of the conditions, if briefly, of this *bare life*.

We can also compare Paci’s approach to that of UK artist Steve McQueen, who has repeatedly represented *bare life* in his work. Based clearly on the artist’s research, principles, and concerns, his 2012 film *Western Deep* represents the bodies and plight of African miners in long, shadowy glimpses, between the darkness of

the mines and the eerie green fluorescence of their gruesome labor. Their bodies are pressed into large, caged elevators, descending into unbearable darkness or placed in rows whereupon they conduct orchestrated exercises overseen by unseen superiors. McQueen brutally portrays these individuals for what they are, namely the bottom of capitalist hierarchy. The encounter with *bare life* in *Western Deep* is almost pornographic in its illustration of servitude and suffering. This work serves to present to the viewer an empathetic understanding of the status of these African men, as well as the cruel, faceless hierarchical structures inevitably connected to global economic forces. Ultimately we are all implicated in these socio-economic structures. Almost as if unable to see properly or even process what is seen, the gaze in the video is often unfocused, seemingly suspended in disbelief, approaching a kind of blindness, evoking a poetical representation of *bare life*. Their reality is presented bleakly, with no way out, as an astonished act of compassion and rage. These bodies are like those of the refugees in Paci’s videos: stateless, excluded, and instrumentalized. They embody the essence of the biopolitical body, one formatted by a global sovereignty that enacts its power on these very individuals, keeping them in a dark, unjust limbo.

If we return again to re-consider Paci’s video portraits, we see that they mirror the original *voicelessness* of those who, as Hannah Arendt says, “had lost all other qualities and specific relationships but are somehow still human.”[[10]](#footnote-10) We are here also confronted with the un-representable (bare life, trauma), that which is forced outside our shared communion and kinship, of citizenship and dignity. McQueen also presents these conditions and unseen global forces in *Western Deep*, but with a pessimistic eye. Paci’s vision, on the other hand, presents a portrait that borders on redemption. Importantly, Paci’s work has continually confronted, albeit subtly and with a gentle precision, the reduction of individuals into miniscule parts of a collective entity, whether by capitalist or political structures. This depiction of those who have experienced forms of depersonalization of their individuality, here in the case of the refugees, carries alongside by necessity a reference to the very machinery of ideological powers which constrain democracy and human rights. The

videos simultaneously restore a discernible spirit to those who have been robbed of it. For the sake of the viewer, the humanity of these otherwise nameless individuals is represented without the barriers that language may bring; they are enshrined with dignity. Global neoliberalist forces, which present refugees as homogenic, bathetic, or even threatening, are revealed and thwarted in the very fragmentation of these stories. And then inwardly, within the subjects whom Paci collaborates with, it is evident that there is a cathartic rhapsody out from their dogged trauma, not as a psychoanalytic treatment per se, but a personal journey into the past through storytelling. Paci simply listens, provides them a platform for their expression, and they know their stories will be presented, perhaps re-told again somehow. The stories are verbally hidden

from us, taking the traumatic experience out of language into a pure and dignified expressionist form. This formal approach stresses a human connection and in doing so, binds their experiences to the viewer’s, not as a universality per se, but as a deep kinship of human spirit. Paci reminds us that their narratives should not be immediately conveyed, however, one may seek it out in the texts adjacent to the video.

Another artist who currently tackles representation of the vulnerable is Richard Mosse. Most recently, the Irish artist uses long-range thermal imaging photography that was originally developed for military use. He can thus record subjects up to fifty km away in total darkness, such as refugees fleeing the Syrian Civil War. Mosse has also used infrared photography, again able to depict African refugees, victims, and soldiers, rendering the landscape around them an intense pink from the photo technology. In his earlier work, the represented people and landscape are transformed by an all-encompassing aesthetic that beautifies tragedy. Mosse maintains a non-invasive distance from his subject, and thus captures these people in often very

difficult situations untampered by the close proximity of the camera. With the new work, we see refugees in great danger. We see bodies of refugees being revived by volunteers. The newer work with the long-range photography has taken a different turn and presents the struggles of refugees as they are unfolding, not unlike McQueen’s depictions. The technology also renders the individuals into an alien-like form, and, for example, eerily reveals the passage of heat from hands to bodies, making visible elements of life normally

unseen. To aestheticize this tragedy as it unfolds, as Mosse undeniably does, brings a level of fascination alongside pity not unlike more mainstream documentation of war and crisis today.

Instead of depicting that which brings trauma (war, danger, flight) directly, as has Mosse, or depicting the *bare life* as it has sovereign power enacted upon it (McQueen), or presenting the enormity of the refugee crisis (Weiwei), Paci has taken a quieter, more personal approach. His concentration is on trauma as it unfolds, in the process of *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, where the traumatic experience repeats itself in memory and expression, as Freud first demonstrated. But in the moment of the story’s telling, Paci removes the narrative to focus on the individual, eclipsing the possibility of meaning to be directly conveyed to the viewer via language. In placing these video portraits deliberately alongside the other works that explore the precariousness of language and memory and the impulse to express in means outside language, Paci enshrines everything in dignity and universality, without any intention of revealing or representing anything in excess. As he has often done before, Paci depicts human experience as on the threshold, not only “as a place of transit but a space in which to live.”[[11]](#footnote-11) His work is a balancing act, representing the identities of these migrants under pressure from trauma and past and present situations. Paci enacts a politics of representation and chronicles our current world and its impact on the dispossessed individual. This is a bold, politically charged art that conveys its message gently, and—although arising out of a complex analysis—ultimately convinces through rationality and common sense. This is an *oeuvre* of an informed, refined humanism from a modern-day chronicler of our times.

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Hours Exhibition: Tue-Sun 12-7pm

Hours Café Cult: Mon-Fri 11am-11pm

1. From an interview with the artist with Séamus Kealy, July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vor allem mögen wir es nicht, wenn man uns „Flüchtlinge“ nennt. Hannah Arendt, *Wir Flüchtlinge*, 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Mark Tran](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/marktran)and Laurence Rowley-Abel*.* “*‘*We want to change things’: Syrian women begin UK theatre tour.” *The Guardian* (July 5, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jul/05/syrian-women-uk-theatre-tour-queens-of-syria-refugees>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jacques Ranciere. *Film Fables* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Interview with the artist by Séamus Kealy, March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Adrian Paci, “Lives in Transit,” Jeu de Paume & Musee des arts contemporain (Montreal, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These notes arise from visiting Ai Weiwei’s impressive exhibition at the K20/K21 Kunstsammlung NRW in Düsseldorf, July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hannah Arendt, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Adrian Paci, “Lives in Transit,” Jeu de Paume & Musee des arts contemporain (Montreal, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)