

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Horsti, Karina

**Title:** Curating Objects from the European Border Zone : The “Lampedusa Refugee Boat”

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © 2019 Springer Nature Switzerland AG

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Horsti, K. (2019). Curating Objects from the European Border Zone : The “Lampedusa Refugee Boat”. In K. Horsti (Ed.), *The Politics of Public Memories of Forced Migration and Bordering in Europe* (pp. 53-70). Palgrave Macmillan. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30565-9\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30565-9_4)

## CHAPTER 4

### Curating objects from the European border zone: The “Lampedusa refugee boat”

Karina Horsti

Abstract: The cultural politics of the present encourage museums and artists to seek an ethical vision within a Europe navigating the knowledge of ongoing mass death at the border. This is one explanation for the interest in objects symbolising present-day irregular border crossing among museum curators, artists, designers and activists.

Wooden fishing boats, inflatable dinghies and life jackets appear regularly in exhibitions and installations. This chapter focuses on the meaning of “the Lampedusa boat” and argues that the narrative context within which the boats are exhibited guides the work of imagination that animates the object. While exhibiting the boats carries the critical potential to relocate the border and make it visible, this potential is disrupted by a political context that simultaneously militarises and humanitarianises the border.

Keywords: Museums, art, objects, border deaths

#### Repetition of images

The wooden North African fishing boats used to cross the Mediterranean Sea – along with rubber dinghies and orange life vests – have come to symbolise present-day undocumented migration in Europe. These three objects are powerful visual tropes that the public immediately understands as referring to the migration “crisis”. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003: 22) argues that a single photograph can function as “a memory freeze-frame”, becoming a culturally shared reference – an iconic image – that the public immediately connects to a particular era or event (see also Hariman & Lucaites 2007).

In the present, however, it is not a single frame, but rather the continuous digital sharing of similar images originating from various sources (in particular, professional photographers, humanitarian NGOs, the military and coast guards) that produces “the memory freeze-frame” (see e.g. Horsti 2017). The wooden fishing boat, inflatable dinghy and life jacket reappear from image to image. While some professional, prize-winning photographs and images such as those of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi’s dead body on the Turkish shore have emerged as more traditional photographic “freeze-frames” representing the so-called refugee crisis, I argue that in the digital era, memory freeze-frames are increasingly produced by the repetition of similar images. Moreover, in a visual circuit where people, places and situations are constantly changing, it is the object – the boat, the dinghy or the life vest – that remains recognizable, emerging as a representation of bordering and its consequences: militarization, exploitation, humanitarian rescue, solidarity, suffering and death.

This chapter traces the onward journeys of boats originating from the border zone: journeys that transport the boats from the Mediterranean to an art project, design workshop and museum exhibition in other parts of Europe. While the scope of the present chapter is necessarily limited to only a few, select instances of the wooden boat, both the boats and the other objects, particularly the life vests, reappear in many other contexts as well.<sup>1</sup>

There may be several reasons for the increased interest in objects that symbolise present-day border crossing, beginning from the fact that representing suffering by means of objects (such as shoes, clothes or suitcases) is a well-established practice in museums dedicated to genocides and at memorial sites of destruction and disaster (see e.g. Violi 2012). The objects that remain after destruction serve as material testimonies of violence. However, memorial sites and museum exhibitions are usually created only once the violence is over, in at least some sense: musealisation takes place in the “post-conflict” moment. The wooden migrant boat, on the other hand, testifies to the on-going occurrence of precarious border crossing and mass death.

The cultural politics of the present moment encourages museums and artists to seek an ethical vision for a society navigating the knowledge of ongoing mass death on its waters. The arts and the cultural sector have strived for cultural diversity and more

self-reflexive policies (Feldman 2006; Message 2006; Burch 2011; Marselis 2016). Museums and cultural producers have expanded the notion of national heritage in ways that allow for the inclusion of the memories and histories of migrants (see e.g. Cimoli 2015; Marselis, forthcoming). Contemporary collecting and rapid response collecting are strategies through which museums are beginning to realize that the present is a “future past” (Adam 2010), and that future examiners will include some who were intimately touched by current events at the border.

My exploration of the meaning of Lampedusa boats in Europe is based on close observation of the boats themselves, as well as of the other objects around them and their surroundings. I have also spoken with the people who curated the objects and decided to exhibit them in their particular contexts. In this chapter, I discuss what kinds of moral registers the objects are meant to produce and how the boats are made sensible in different ways depending on the discursive context in which they are exhibited and on who is looking at them. Although I am able to examine only a few cases in detail, the questions and observations presented here can also be used to unpack other contexts in which these objects are displayed.

It is significant that the boats discussed here originate from the Italian island of Lampedusa, which came to symbolise the militarisation of the border, emergency and crisis even before 2015 when the Greek island of Lesbos gained similar significance. These islands are also symbols of exceptional hospitality and humanitarianism: residents of both islands have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize – Lampedusa in 2011 and 2014, and Lesbos in 2016. In 2017, UNESCO awarded the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize to Giusi Nicolini, the mayor of Lampedusa. That same year, the mayors of both Lampedusa and Lesbos were awarded the Swedish Olof Palme Prize. And while Lesbos and Lampedusa have served as stage for various performances of bordering and hospitality, they have inspired performances on other stages, as well, featuring in theatre plays, films and artworks: Gianfranco Rosi’s film *Fuocoamare/Fire at Sea* (2016), Anders Lustgarten’s play *Lampedusa* (2015), Gernot Grunewald’s play *Lesbos – Blackbox Europe* (2017) and Ai Weiwei’s film *Human Flow* (2017), to name but a few.

\*\*Insert Image 4.1. here

The artists, curators, and designers who have made use of the boats from Lampedusa became familiar with them not only through media images of boats filled with migrants on their way to Europe, but also on the ground in Lampedusa, at what the locals call “boat cemeteries” – sites where the boats and the debris in them are dumped. The boat cemeteries are not dumpsites for just any kind of garbage; only debris originating from border crossings and rescues is collected there, making them sites for “dark tourism”. As the exact locations of disasters at sea are difficult to identify, visit and memorialise, the boat cemeteries stand in as places where one can witness – and collect – the material remains of the dangerous crossing.

*Genoa, April 2015*

A boat from Lampedusa has been on display in the Galata Maritime Museum in Genoa since 2011. The boat is part of *Migrazioni & Memoria*, an exhibition that connects historical Italian emigration with present-day migration by sea to Italy. Above the main entrance, a colour image of a black man in modern-day clothing – a red jacket and jeans, with a rucksack on his back – has been inserted into a black and white photograph of an early-twentieth-century passenger ship. The man of colour, in colour, stands out among the Italian migrants on the passenger ship’s dock.

Inside the museum, after passing through an interactive and well-lit section on Italian emigration to the New World, visitors enter a dark room, introduced only with the wall text “Italy 2011”. Dramatic images of migrant rescue operations carried out at sea by the Guardia di Finanza, an Italian militarised police force, are projected on the walls, lighting the otherwise dark space. A small North African wooden fishing boat lies on a platform. Inside the boat is a life vest and empty plastic water bottles bearing Arabic labels. These objects, along with the pair of binoculars and North African coal brazier displayed in small glass vitrines beside the boat, indicate to the visitor that the people on board had prepared for their journey. A sneaker lying next to the binoculars makes me wonder where its pair is, who owned it and what happened to that person.

The shoe, like the two torn notebook pages filled with Arabic script that have been placed in the same vitrine as the coal brazier, are more personal objects than the boat

and the water bottles and life jacket inside it. However, the exhibit makes no mention of whom they may have belonged to. No translation or explanation of the notebook pages is provided, nor any information about the people who travelled in the boat, where they came from and why they embarked on the dangerous crossing. The informational text on the platform says that the objects are displayed so that “the hospitality of the islanders would be known”, focusing on the Lampedusans – people who may not have even had any contact with the people who were on the boat.

The informational text also acknowledges the museum visitors who observe the objects, stating that the boat and the objects are on display “so that we can empathetically learn about the difficulty and insecurity of the landing”. By exhibiting the boat, the museum attempts to mediate the experience of migrants and produce empathy towards them among the Italians who presumably make up the majority of visitors.

While on my way to visit the exhibition a second time, I stopped to talk with some men who were selling key rings, refrigerator magnets and cheap sunglasses along the harbour where the museum is located. Three Malian men, in their twenties and resembling the man in colour in the museum’s otherwise black and white image of the passenger ship, agreed to see the exhibition with me. One of them spoke English and had completed high school. The other two hadn’t gone to school and had never been to a museum. They had all been rescued at sea between three and six months earlier, and I was particularly interested in hearing what they thought of the exhibition.

As we entered the first part of the exhibition, the part about Italian emigration, we were given paper copies of old Italian passports and attempted to enter the United States through a recreation of Ellis Island’s Great Hall. Three of us failed the inspection procedure and were issued deportation orders. We walked through a reproduction of the *Città di Torino*, a steamer that took migrants to the New World, and learned that Europeans travelling across the Atlantic were divided into different classes. Those travelling on cheaper tickets were crammed into bunk beds and afforded no privacy during the month-long journey. My companions stopped to have a conversation in front of a large, life-size image on the wall. Italian immigrants, blankets wrapped around them, crouched on a deck. The man who knew English

explained what they were talking about: “We didn’t know that before, the Italians were like us.”

The engagement and interest with which our group had toured the Italian migration portion of the exhibition dissipated as we entered the dark space of “Italy 2011”. The perspective of the visitor changed: we were transformed from “immigrants” into spectators. My companions seemed disinterested; clearly the boat was not an object they identified with – it wasn’t “theirs”. In addition, they were unable to understand the migrant narratives, which were retold in Italian. Most of the narratives were performed by amateur actors, a decision that further underlined the positioning of the visitor as a spectator of a staged performance. The English-speaking man seemed to think that I expected a response, and referring to the footage of a sea rescue said, “We were also ordered to sit still in the boat during the rescue.” We then continued our tour to the military submarine moored in front of the museum.

The Galata Maritime Museum positioned visitors as spectators of the 2011 border spectacle (which played out in the media, as the projections suggested) and offered two kinds of emotional registers: the suffering of migrants and the humanitarian response by the Italians. Through this identity position, the presumed Italian visitor could encounter the suffering of migrants without feeling guilty or implicated. The politics that produce the violent border were invisible in the museum. When presenting Italian emigration and the rejection of migrants in the past, both in Italy and in the United States, the museum provides political context. For example, the museum website offers an Italian-language document from 1911 listing categories of people who would not be admitted to the United States (including “anarchists”, “idiots” and “epileptics”), the US Immigration Act of 1917 and Italy’s Immigration Act of 1888. But no similar documents are available concerning the present-day political context.

However, the museum has continued to develop the exhibition since I visited with the Malian men in 2015. At the time, stories of present-day migrants were available in two media installations: one in which students read life narratives on-screen in a classroom, and one in which amateur actors performed migration narratives. Giovanna Rocchi (2015), a museum curator I interviewed, said the museum would

soon start archiving the narratives of migrants living in Genoa to add the perspective of the “subjects involved”. Beginning in 2016, the museum has added migrant narratives to both the exhibition and to its website. However, these stories are not directly related to the objects on display in the museum.

The boat and other objects symbolising the precariousness of present-day migration further established the museum as a part of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience: “safe spaces to remember and preserve even the most traumatic memories” (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience 2017) – a coalition the museum had joined. In this context, the purpose of the boat was to help “preserve traumatic memories”, but after visiting the exhibition with the Malian migrants, I was unsure about whose trauma was being preserved: it seemed that the exhibition’s focus was not on migrants, but rather on the Italians’ traumatic experience of witnessing the painful bordering of Europe.

*Amsterdam, June 2018*

Contrary to the musealized artefact at the Galata Maritime Museum in Genoa, a similar wooden fishing vessel, Egyptian *Alhadj Djumaa* operates as part of the Rederij Lampedusa canal cruise line in Amsterdam. One summer evening in 2018, I board the vessel, and next to me is Teun Castelein, the Dutch artist whose idea it was to bring two North African fishing boats to Amsterdam from the Sicilian islands. These fishing boats had been used to transport undocumented migrants across the European Union’s external Schengen border in the Mediterranean Sea. I was about to take part in an artistic and social project that offers “alternative cruises” of Amsterdam: during the cruise, tour guides of refugee background present the city’s migrant histories or perform a cultural program.

\*\*Insert Image 4.2. here

Here, the “Lampedusa boat” is a mobile memory site. Its function is to provide an authentic experience – not by preserving the boat as it was during the crossing, but by renovating it for use on the river IJ as a tour boat. The Friday evening cruise I participated in marked the end of Ramadan. At least half of the about twenty people



on board seemed to be from the Middle East or at least very familiar with the Syrian folk songs that Khaled Warrak, a recent refugee, musician and actor from Aleppo (and now living in Utrecht), played on his guitar. On this particular outing, there was no tour of Amsterdam; instead, the boat was anchored at a quiet spot on the IJ to serve as a stage for Warrak's performance.

The boat stood out on the waterways of Amsterdam: it was different from all the other boats, though at the same time, it may have been familiar to onlookers from the news images of overcrowded boats in the Mediterranean. Critical contrast and surprise were the artistic strategies of Teun Castelein. The boat, a material remnant of the border spectacle in the Mediterranean, had the potential to create critical awareness in the Netherlands – to make bordering visible to the citizens of a country implicated in the creation of the European border.

Castelein's original idea was to participate with the boat in Sail Amsterdam, a major sail boat festival, but he became concerned that attention would be directed more towards him than towards the boat or refugees. "I was afraid that people would come and congratulate me, 'Well done, great that you're raising awareness'", he told me in our conversation during the cruise. Instead, he let a book he found inside the boat, *How to Play Guitar*, guide his engagement with the object, which led to the boat becoming a floating performance space. The boat that had first been used as a fishing vessel in Egypt and had later carried 217 Eritreans and 65 Ethiopians across the EU border became a stage for performances and a vehicle for tours of Amsterdam with refugees as performers and guides.

Our guide that night, Tommy Sherif, had escaped political persecution in Egypt in 2014 by purchasing plane tickets to Turkey via Amsterdam. When he arrived for his layover at Schipol airport, he sought asylum. While migration by boat is not a part of his own migration narrative, being on the Egyptian fishing vessel *Alhadj Djumaa* nevertheless "always makes me feel very close to home", he says. The boat is familiar to Sherif not because of his journey, but as an object from "home". The story of the boat, as told both on the cruise line's website and by Sherif at the beginning of our cruise, underlines its transformation first from an Egyptian fishing vessel to a vessel of fleeing, then to rubbish, and now to a floating performative art project, stage for

performances and tour boat. By contrast, at the Galata Maritime Museum, the social life of the boat begins only at the moment of its landing in Lampedusa.

Both the Galata Maritime Museum in Genoa and the Rederij Lampedusa cruise line in Amsterdam make analogies to emigrants and immigrants a century or two ago, potentially producing solidarity with present-day refugees. The boats function as a means for using the past to understand and relate to events in the present. These uses of the boats and of past histories make present-day migration seem not completely new and strange – a sudden “crisis”, as is typical for media representation – but as a continuum of mobilities that have shaped societies for centuries. The connection made by the Malian museum visitors (“the Italians were once like us”) can also be made by Italians (“the migrants are as we once were”). In Amsterdam, Rederij Lampedusa advertises that its multicultural group of tour guides will “teach about the importance of immigration in Amsterdam’s past”. This could potentially translate to an understanding that present-day migrants and refugees will also contribute to the city’s development. But while these connections offer an opening for critical thinking beyond borders and difference, looking at the boat in Genoa and being in the boat in Amsterdam can nonetheless be experienced as focusing on “us” – the hospitable Italians or the welcoming Amsterdammers. An Al Jazeera (2016) video accessible through the Rederij Lampedusa website demonstrates this position well: “The Lampedusa cruises want to celebrate Amsterdam’s history of welcoming immigrants.”

For migrants who engage with historical Italian emigration or with the immigration history of Amsterdam either as museum visitors or as tour guides, opportunities may arise for understanding and for belonging in their new environment. For example, by narrating Amsterdam’s history and weaving their own stories into that history, the migrant tour guides become a part of Amsterdam. The boat not only becomes a performative space, but performatively moves across space, making new and unexpected interpretations and encounters possible.

Seeing the boat in the museum in Genoa and being on the boat for a cruise in Amsterdam left me somewhat confused about the meaning of the boat as a symbol of migration to Europe. In the museum, the only information provided about who had

been on the boat during the border crossing was the number of passengers and whatever the visitor might infer from the objects found in the boats; in Amsterdam, the nationality of the passengers was also stated. The boats remained *generic* objects, rather than *personal* objects that could mediate an individualised experience of border crossing. The conversation in Genoa with the migrants from Mali revealed that as generic memory objects, boats can be problematic. As such, boats that were used for migrant crossings may be more meaningful for those who witness migration through mediation than for those who have crossed the European Union external border in such a boat.

*Sydney, November 2017*

The complexity of the “Lampdusa boat” as an object symbolising the experience of refugees in Europe became even more apparent when I visited *Tu Do (Freedom)*, a Vietnamese refugee boat that is exhibited at the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM) in Sydney. *Tu Do* provides an analytical perspective that can be used to examine the boats in Genoa and Amsterdam. When the ANMM acquired the boat in the 1990s, the curators’ method of conservation and exhibition was that of “object biography” (Tao, 2017; see also Kopytoff 1996). They traced the object back to Tan Thanh Lu, a storeowner who had built the boat in 1975 for the escape of his family and friends from Vietnam. The museum’s conservation of the boat was based on instructions from Lu and his family. It was important to the Lu family and curators that the boat be conserved in its original form, with authentic colours and structural elements, but also that it be modified so it could be used and exhibited on water. (Tao 2016; Tao 2017.)

When I visited the boat, curator Kim Tao told me that I needed to get on it; only then would I be able to imagine what it might have been like to travel 6,000 kilometres across the ocean in the small vessel. Stories of how the family kept the children busy during the long journey and prayed for safe passage were told through photographs, objects and texts inside the museum, which made imagining their experience possible. The stories and the sounds of the creaking wood and the feeling of losing my balance as I moved around the boat helped me to get a sense of the incredible journey. None of this had taken place in Genoa or even in Amsterdam, where I was able to travel on

the boat. While I had been aware that refugees had used the boats to escape and of how many people had been crammed into the small vessels, no personal stories animated those objects or their journeys.

In Sydney, however, imagination was made possible because the boat was “theirs” – it had been built by Lu for a specific journey, and the making of the boat and the journey undertaken on it were stories of agency and subjectivity. Furthermore, the boat was and is an important and foundational symbol for the Vietnamese refugee diaspora (Nguyen 2016). As Kim Tao (2017) explains,

“Their story is a shared biography in which intertwined life histories of subjects and objects, people and things, unfolds. Indeed the very term ‘boat people’ signifies a relationship between a group of people defined by the object that transported them, whose subjectivity is explicitly shaped by the material world.”

Furthermore, the participatory conservation of the boat and its presence in a national museum reflect an inclusive curatorial practice. The relationships embedded in the object, its conservation and its display are transparent, offering the visitor a position from which to ethically engage with the materiality and memory of migration. While the Lampedusa boats exhibited in conversation with the histories of Italian emigration and immigration to Amsterdam can create critical openings in the present-day Eurocentric and ahistorical debates about refugees and migration, in those cases, the boat as a memory object is also somewhat problematic. In Genoa, the boat is exhibited in the same museum as objects and reconstructions representing Italian emigration; it does not, however, share the same space and is not displayed equally. In the museum narrative, the social life (Appadurai 1996) of the boat begins with its arrival in Italy, and its biography does not tell the stories of the people who travelled in it. Therefore, the “Lampedusa boat” acts to reinforce the spectacularisation of bordering and speaks more to European spectators of the mediatised drama of rescue and death at the border than to people who have crossed the border. While the object biography and the social relationships that existed on the boat during its crossing are also vague in Amsterdam, it is crucial to note that the contextualization of the boat there is not as fixed as it is in Genoa: the performance and the people who participate

in the cruise, as well as the response the boat gets as it moves along the river IJ, contribute to its meaning.

In Australia, the meaning of the boat as it pertains to Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s is specific and cannot be extended to present-day migration by boat to Australia. Both then and now, the Australian media spectacularised migration by boat. However, *Tu Do* succeeding in bringing its passengers to safety: the Vietnamese on board were granted refugee status. The boat is therefore a rather uncontroversial object to be displayed as part of the national Australian history. It can be presented as an object of Australian hospitality and the protection of human rights. Today, however, the context of a boat carrying people seeking protection is different, and to display such a boat in a museum would be much more controversial. Since 2013, Operation Sovereign Borders, led by the Australian Defence Force, has prevented arrivals at sea by turning boats back or by sending migrants back to sea in “survival capsules”. When boats have succeeded in reaching Australia, the government has sent asylum seekers to be processed at offshore detention centres, and in cases of resettlement, they are sent to another country and not allowed to resettle in Australia. Under these circumstances, what would a present-day migrant boat represent in a national Australian museum?

Indeed, the complexity of displaying such a boat in Australia is demonstrated by the case of the Sri Lankan vessel *Bremen*, which was purchased by the Western Australian Museum in 2015. The tuna fishing vessel, which had been donated to Sri Lankan fishermen by Deutsche Bank in the aftermath of the 2009 tsunami, arrived in Australia on 9 April 2013 – that is, before Operation Sovereign Borders was launched. Within two weeks, Australia deported 38 of the approximately 60 Tamil passengers and put another 25 in detention.<sup>2</sup>

The curators at the Western Australian Museum argue that the boat and the objects found in it offer “a subversive insight into the lives of those people aboard the *Bremen* – an insight that, for all intents and purposes, undermines populist discourse that would seek to define them as the ‘generalised other’.” They also believe that the boat’s presence establishes “a talking space for other asylum seekers, successful in seeking refugee status or otherwise.” (Leenders & May 2017.) The same assumption

could be made of the Lampedusa boats in Genoa and Amsterdam: while the curators and the artist do not know what happened to the boats' passengers after they reached Europe or whether the boats and their contents are meaningful memory objects for them, they could be meaningful objects for others. They could help to counteract the influence of populist discourse and show that the passengers were human – that they played guitar, made coffee, wore shoes. The objects may be seen as emotive traces of individual lives – used by one rather than another person (Marselis, forthcoming). The boats are also spaces where the stories of other asylum seekers – of those who were able to stay – are being listened to. This nevertheless allows visitors to ignore the questions, What happened to the people on board? Were they deported, detained, exploited? Were they given the chance to start a life worth living?

Framing the Lampedusans as hospitable and the Italian military as rescuers provides a context in which an object with the potential to be read critically can be displayed for the public in a less controversial way. Suvendrini Perera (2014) makes a critical reading of the *Bremen* and says that it is “another kind of trophy of sovereign power over the borderscape, perhaps as a source of shame and symbol of defeat, neutralized and out of place – high and dry”, words that I would argue apply equally the “Lampedusa boat” in Genoa. The boat fits comfortably within the narrative of “humanitarian bordering” that was prominent in Italy for a few years after the Silvio Berlusconi government ended in 2011 (and which finally ended when the Giuseppe Conte government and its Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini criminalised solidarity in 2018).

### Debris as spectacle

The boats extracted from the boat cemeteries of Lampedusa are the debris – the leftovers – of the bordering constructed by the entangled spectacle of securitisation and militarisation (Walters 2011; Horsti 2012; de Genova 2013; Cuttitta 2014; Gatta 2018). However, the debris itself is also a spectacle. Following Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) notion that *things* can be *events*, I argue that the display of the boats produces a performance in which our perception animates the objects. The “aura” - to use Walter Benjamin's term (Hansen 2007) - that underlies the power of authentic objects appears through the viewer's perception. The object becomes

animated and vibrant as we look at it, and its meaning is produced in the eyes of the one who sees it. This cultural approach (akin to Appadurai 1996 and Kopytoff 1996) differs from the new materialists' approach, which sees objects as vibrant matter (such as Bennett 2010; Coole & Frost 2010). Anthropologist Gianluca Gatta reminds us that the vital energy of objects that some claim to keep "pure" by not interpreting or conserving the objects nevertheless "has to be put on *display*" (Gatta 2016: 187, italics in the original). Often, the point of those who engage with and curate objects from the border zones is to put them on display, to make a spectacle of authentic debris.

This display of "authenticity" also produces value. An obvious example is Cucula, a German refugee design workshop that since 2014 has used wood sourced from Lampedusa boat cemeteries in its furniture. The "Ambassador" chair, which costs 500 euros, incorporates a piece of wood cut from a boat used by migrants. The same style of chair without the piece of boat wood costs only half as much, 250 euros. The boat wood doubles the chair's value and makes the person who owns it an "ambassador". One could argue that it is suffering that increases the value of the chair and that producing and selling such a chair is ethically questionable. However, as the chair is manufactured and sold within the framework of a participatory social project (providing educational and social opportunities for refugees), such ethical questions can be avoided: the European Commission celebrated Cucula as a winner of the European Social Innovation Competition in 2016.

In all cases, the connection to the symbolic island of Lampedusa adds value that has been gained through the mediated circulation of images. In addition, the artist or curator who collects a discarded object from a well-known site in the border zone transforms it into something valuable with his or her cultural capital. Both the connection to Lampedusa and the cultural capital of the European artist or curator create value for the object. Except in the case of Rederij Lampedusa in Amsterdam, the boats generally do not continue to be used as boats. The boats or the wood taken from them become art, artefacts in exhibitions or design objects. Their cultural biography (Kopytoff 1996) and social life (Appadurai 1996) are transformed. The presumed suffering of those who crossed the border or died at the border becomes part of the object's imagined biography. The "authenticity" of the object then

increases the value of the “new” artefact or event – the chair, the tour cruise or the exhibition. Whereas the curators of the *Tu Do* display in Sydney researched the actual biography of the boat and provided narratives, photographs and other objects for visitors to use in their work of imagining, engagement with the other objects I have examined relies on the stories of asylum seekers and refugees not directly related to the object on display.

The narrative context within which the objects are exhibited guide this work of imagination. The boat is familiar to those who have witnessed militarisation, humanitarian rescue, death and the crossing of borders through mediation – the visual circulation and repetition of similar images. Certain objects – the orange life vest, the rubber dinghy and the wooden boat – emerge from this continuous flow of similar images, exemplifying the “freeze-framing” of the digital era. The boat is an object to which “we” can relate; familiar enough to appeal, yet sanitized enough to engage with in everyday life. The instances I have discussed in this chapter draw from two narratives in particular: the critical and the humanitarian. Both of them put Europeans, not refugees, at the centre of attention. Moreover, the critical potential of the objects as testimonies of European implicatedness in border-related fatalities is disrupted by the European political context, in which the border is simultaneously militarised and humanitarianised and the objects discarded by migrants can be framed as testimonies of European humanity, of so-called humanitarian bordering.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Kim Tao, Giovanna Rocchi, Teun Castelein, and the three anonymous Malian men for sharing their experience. I am also grateful for Gianluca Gatta, Randi Marselis and Klaus Neumann for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

Bibliography

Adam, Barbara. 2010. “History of the future: paradoxes and challenges.” *Rethinking History* 14(3): 361–378.



- Al Jazeera. 2016. "Would you tour Amsterdam's canals on a former refugee boat?" *AJ+*, July 25, <https://twitter.com/ajplus/status/757479027066011648>.
- Appadurai, Arjun 1996. Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value. I A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 5–63.
- Bennett, Jane 2010. *Vibrant matter*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Coole, D. & Frost S. (ed.) 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, agency and politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cuttitta, Paolo 2014. From the Cap Anamur to Mare Nostrum: Humanitarianism and migration controls at the EU's maritime borders. I Claudio Matera and Amanda Taylor (eds.) *The common European asylum system and human rights: Enhancing protection in times of emergencies*. *CLEER Working papers* 2014/7. <http://dare.uvu.vu.nl/bitstream/handle/1871/52604/cuttitta.mare.nostrum.cleer.pdf?sequence=1>
- De Genova Nicholas 2013. Spectacles of migrant 'illegality': the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(7): 1180–1198.
- Feldman, J. D. 2006. Contact points: Museums and the lost body problem. I E. Edwards, C. Gosden & R. B. Phillips (eds.) *Sensible objects: Colonialism, museums and material culture*. Oxford: Berg, 245–269.
- Gatta, Gianluca 2016. Stranded traces: Migrants' objects, self-narration and ideology in a failed museum project. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 7(2): 181–191.
- Hansen, M.B. 2007. Benjamin's aura. *Critical Inquiry* 34, 336–375.
- Hariman, Robert & Lucaites, John 2007. *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Horsti, Karina 2012. Humanitarian discourse legitimating migration control: FRONTEX public communication. In M. Messer, R. Schroeder and R. Wodak (eds.) *Migrations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Vienna: Springer, 297–308.
- Horsti, Karina 2017. Communicative memory of irregular migration: the re-circulation of news images on You Tube." *Memory Studies*, 10(2): 112–129.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 2004. From ethnology to heritage: the role of the museum. SIEF Keynote, Marseilles, April 28, 2004.

- Kopytoff, Igor 1996. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. I A. Appadurai (eds.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 64–91.
- Nguye, Vinh 2016. *Nước/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora* in Lynda Mannik (ed.) *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival*. Oxford: Berghahn. 65–79.
- Tao, Kim 2016. Representing Migration by Boat at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Lynda Mannik (ed.) *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival*. Oxford: Berghahn. 49–64.
- Tao, Kim 2017. Tu Do: Restoring a Vietnamese Refugee Boat Called Freedom, paper presented at the Tenth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, University of Manchester, UK, 15 September 2017.
- Marselis, Randi 2016. [On not showing scalps: Human remains and multisited debate at the National Museum of Denmark](#). *Museum Anthropology* 39(1): 20–34.
- Marselis, Randi forthcoming. Exhibiting refugee routes: Contemporary collecting as memory politics. Unpublished manuscript.
- Message, Kylie 2006. *New museums and the making of culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Rocchi, Giovanna 2015. Research interview with the author Genoa, 8.5.2015.
- Violi, Patrizia 2012. Trauma site museums and politics of memory: tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(1): 36–75.
- Walters, William 2011. Foucault and frontiers: notes on the birth of the humanitarian border. I U. Bröckling, S. Krasmann and T. Lemke (eds.) *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges*. London: Routledge, 138–164.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. the Lampedusan activist collective Askavusa presents a collection of life vests and hypothermia foils at the “anti-museum” PortoM; Timo Wright’s installation *Kharon* displayed a pile of life vests from Lesbos at the Anhava Gallery, Helsinki, 2016; Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei has created multiple installations of Lesbos life vests, such as the one at the Konzerthaus in Berlin, 2016; two children’s life vests were on display in a glass vitrine in the exhibition *Violence and Gender* at the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden, 2018; the civil rescue operation Sea Watch exhibited a pile of life vests in a rubber dinghy during an anti-racist parade in Hamburg, 29 September 2018; and in 2019 Venice Biennale exhibited a wrecked ship in which 700 - 1100 people had died on 18 April 2015 as installation *Barca Nostra*. The earliest examples I have found of “migrant boats” on display in Europe were a West African boat used on the catwalk during Antonio Miro’s fall-winter 2007/2008 show during Barcelona Fashion Week and Kalliopi Lemos’s installation *At Crossroads*, made of boats collected from Chios, Greece, and exhibited at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in 2009 during the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

---

<sup>2</sup> Perera reports that there were 67 on board, while Leenders & May (2017) indicate 60 people.