

History Thesis

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Barca Nostra
*The
tragedy of a
monument*

An analysis on memory and its
spectacularization

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*To those who fight and resist, and to the borders they
will cross.*

Index

Introduction

12 Chapter I The Barca Nostra case

The wreck: the story behind the tragedy

The political case: strumentalization of the event

The making of the artistic perfromance: the steps from relic to artwork

The docking: arrival at the Biennale of Venice

22 Chapter II The perceptive reading

The caprice: Büchel and Fitzacarraldo

The position: the choices of the artist

The perfromance: Büchel and Aldo Rossi

28 Chapter III The use and abuse

The spectacle: on the notion of memory and spectacularization

The actors: missed responsibilities and the migrations crises

The parallel: Büchel and Ai Weiwei

34 Chapter IV Present

36 Conclusions

Introduction

In 2019, the wreckage of a ship that sank in the Mediterranean in 2015 with up to 1,100 migrants on board appeared at the Venice Biennale Arsenale. [1] The boat was given on loan for one year to the artist Christoph Büchel, as part of the project *Barca Nostra*, curated by Maria Chiara Di Trapani, and the 18th of April Committee. [2] Considered as one of the most controversial artworks of the last years, the ship brought a lot of attention both by art critics and the public to the topic of migration towards Europe, and the life losses caused every year by shipwrecks. Notwithstanding, the ship was moved from Sicily, where it was stored in Augusta, [3] to Veneto; the moving of the ship from its place of tragedy to an exhibition space can be interpreted as an act of trauma erasure from the specificity of the site where it occurred.

A question stems: why people are so easily oblivious to the trauma in the place and moment in which it occurs and at the same time eager to see it as an art piece?

OBJECT OF THE THESIS

The case of Christoph Büchel's artwork at the Venice Art Biennale touches upon ethical and moral obligations of art and architecture and question the way they conceive and express the recurring trauma of losses due to clandestine migration, or even more remarkable, why there is any need in monumentalizing material artefacts witnessing the traumatic event.

The need for a *place* to commemorate the victims of a tragic event has been discussed in many architectural and philosophical dissertations, however, what will be investigated in this thesis is much more related to the physical manifestation of the object representing the *commemorandus* (Casey, 1987), [4] and how does the *commemorabilis* (Casey, 1987) [5] interact with its place and with its spectators, and why the idealization of the trauma happens through artistic manifestations. Referencing the Loosian [6] argument that monuments and tombs do not pertain to the architectural field, but to the field of art, we can start to make some considerations about

the relationship between the work of art -in this case, we could more specifically talk about the main example, the Barca Nostra by Christoph Büchel- and the origin and manifestations of the trauma: the commemorandus. What is essential to highlight is the reason why a very precise

Is it pure opportunism to monumentalize the trauma through an object that is ripped from its *place* of traumatic experience?

object was chosen, moved, and exhibited in another region of the country, 1.340 km away from its departure point, implying an expansive maritime operation.

The boat is representative of a specific tragedy, the loss of numerous lives on the night of the 18th of April of 2015, considered as “the deadliest incident in the Mediterranean that we have ever recorded” by the UNHCR’s spokesperson Adrian Edwards (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Moore, 2015), and the artist gives a singular meaning to an object that represents the tragedy. However, he subtracts the reminiscences of its origins from the object itself; moving the boat to a dedicated place to exhibit the products of a creative process it is a strong statement; but is a strong strategy for the memory of the trauma? The trauma, in this case, is manifested through an object without depicting the experience of the trauma itself.

Why do we tend to fetishize the trauma that we did not experience in the first person, by means of the nickname of art?

Migration has been at the center of the European political agenda for years. However, the role of

the European Union in taking strong decisions and dialogue with the different European countries experiencing a more conspicuous flux of people crossing the borders has never

profoundly influenced the general treatment of the topic and the consequences of the different disasters going over. Through the analysis of the *Barca Nostra* case, I will highlight how much the making of this specific art piece, its exhibition, and the consequences of its artistic representation, gave resonance to the topic of migration without touching first-hand the essence of the problem itself. The case became smoke and mirror hiding the alleged provocative message that it was aiming to provide, becoming full *mediatic prosecution*.

METHODOLOGY

The research will be based on a set of key steps that will guide the reader through the process of analysis of the discussed topic. The first step will consist of drawing a general context for the specific *Barca Nostra* case, explaining the timeline from its departure -or what is known about it- to its wreck.

Moreover, after giving a definition to this topic, the research will interrogate the role of some works of art and architecture, thought to commemorate the trauma (see the example of *Barca Nostra* and Ai Weiwei's lifejackets installation). At this point of my dissertation, I will question whether the work of art/architecture is a monument, or in some cases it is just pure *voyeurism of pain*. Is it pure opportunism to monumentalize the trauma through an object that is ripped from its *place* of traumatic experience? Why do we tend to fetishize the trauma that we did not experience in the first person, by means of the nickname of art? All these questions will be addressed keeping in mind traumas that have deeply -although too silently- influenced Europe's recent history.

[1] More precisely, as the public opinion also points out, the object was -and still is- placed in front of the bar of the Biennale, and in addition parked right near a large hydraulic crane. Monument or pure voyeurism of pain?

[2] The 18th of April committee was constituted in August 2015 to preserve the memory of the tragic shipwreck of migrants happened on the April of the same year, on the initiative of CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, namely “Italian General Confederation of Work”), Legambiente (an Italian environmental association), some parish priests and people sensitive to the subject.

[3] The wreck had been recovered from the seabed by the Navy in 2016, and then brought to the NATO naval base of Melilli (Augusta, in Sicily).

[4] From the Latin, passive gerundive verb, meaning to be commemorated.

[5] From the Latin, adjective, meaning memorable.

[6] “Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfils a function is to be excluded from the domain of art.” (Loos, 1910)

Chapter I: The Barca Nostra case

The wreck: the story behind the tragedy

The critical reading of all the steps behind the existence of the so-known *Barca Nostra* and the artistic, social, and political responses it stemmed will be my starting point.

In the April of 2015, the twenty-three meters long Eritrean fishing boat, originally meant to transport 15 fishermen and divided into three different levels, sails from the Libyan port of Tripoli with an unknown number of people inside. Between the night of the 18th and 19th of April, the smugglers piloting the boat send a request for help -like many others that were usually sent in similar cases- knowing that European ships would launch rescue services to save the people and complete the crossing while they tried to escape: an experienced, lethal, and unscrupulous protocol. A Portuguese 147-meters-long merchant, that had already saved other migrants in the days before, [7] is urgently advised by the Italian coastguard of the presence of the Eritrean ship, 100km from the Libyan coast and 200km from the coast of Lampedusa. The Portuguese merchant, called King Jacob, started to approach the fishing boat for rescue. When the King Jacob arrived, the situation is much more difficult than expected.



Migrants on a
Sinking Ship during
the Rescue
Operations, n.d.

According to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Catania, the commanders of the Eritrean fishing boat operate a series of wrong maneuvers to board the Portuguese merchant, until the unavoidable collision. (Micheli, 2019) However, as the commander of the King Jacob testified in

We should feel the failure of an entire continent's socio-political agenda when a kid coming from an unfortunate background feels the need to prove that he is worth something in front of a white majority.

court, it seemed that the passengers moved too much in the euphoria of the moment and the boat slowly started sinking. The Italian coastal guard intervened after the collision to save the migrants, but there was nothing to do, the boat sank with all its passengers inside.

From now on, I will refer to the boat as the *boat of innocents*, as the media named it by that time.

Only twenty-eight people survived the wreck. The smugglers were arrested for illegal human traffic and condemned to eighteen years in jail.

Among the people who died between the metal sheets of the boat, a 14-year-old boy from Mali was identified. He had his school transcripts sawed in the interior of his coat, to give proof that he was *worthy* of Europe, the same Europe that made him die with other hundreds of people. This is for me the exact metaphor of the so-called *white privilege*, the unduly and misused binomial that is

infesting all the mediatic platforms all over the world for the last two years. [8] We should feel the failure of an entire continent's socio-political agenda when a kid coming from an *unfortunate* background feels the need to prove that he is worth something in front of a white majority.

The political case: instrumentalization of the event

In June 2016, Matteo Renzi, former Italian Prime Minister, and Roberta Pinotti, former Minister of Defence, order to pull the boat out of the sea surface. In a tweet, the Prime Minister states: “To recover the boat and to give burial to the victims has been a due choice. It is inhuman to state “The godsend has ended!”. [9] To these people, it has never started. [...] Let us stay human.” But how many people died without being considered at all in the months before and after that tragedy? The Italian political situation was on a very precarious balance by that time, and the public opinion was split between supporters of the Prime Minister -theoretically left-winged- and supporters of the right-winged leader Matteo Salvini, promoting populist -I would dare to say xenophobic- policies to face the migratory issue. Having the latter started a mediatic battle against the European Union and mentioning the necessity to close the borders and make the departures stop from the Libyan coast, [10] the *boat of innocents* was then officially at the center of the Italian political puppet show. The case was totally instrumentalized by the former Prime Minister Renzi that, as a propagandistic strategy, kept releasing heart-melting interviews about the importance of giving a proper burial to our brothers and sisters.



Tweet of Matteo Renzi about Barca Nostra,
n.d.

Once the relic was recovered, the process of identification of the bodies of the victims took place. After more than one year from the moment of the tragedy, which happened on the 18th of April 2015, there was a need for an extremely meticulous operation to make the identifications of the victims possible. [11]



Donatella Piscionieri, pathologist of Palermo Polyclinic, analysing one victim's personal effects – a small piece of paper and a banknote – in Melilli. Tweet of Matteo Renzi about Barca Nostra. Max Hirzel, n.d.

The bodies were brought to the NATO base of Melilli, where forensic doctors tried to reconstruct them in a never-seen-before operation [12] in collaboration with laboratories and Universities in Milan, coordinated by Prof. Cristina Cattaneo. [13] To conduct the immense work of reconstruction, [14] legal medicine students between 22 and 25 years old were helping in carrying out the autopsies on hundreds of bodies the same age as them. [15]



The femur sections of 52 victims photographed at the Palermo Polyclinic laboratory. The analysis of these bones helps determine the range of victims' ages. Max Hirzel, n.d.

Photojournalist Max Hirzel [16] decided to document the immense efforts of all the protagonists involved in this process in a long-term personal project, even meeting some of the families of the victims of the tragedy in their homelands.



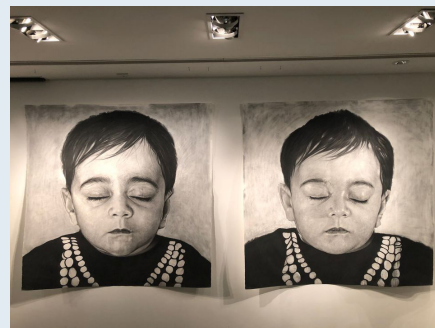
A pair of Real Madrid football gloves sporting the names of Ronaldo and Kaká are pictured with a pack of chewing gum from the wreck. They were photographed at the Labanof laboratory of forensic anthropology, Milan University.
Max Hirzel, n.d.

From this effort, an exhibition called *Sink Without Trace*, [17] was showcased in London with the work of refugee artists who had lived the struggle of crossing the Mediterranean themselves. Between the many artworks exhibited in *Sink Without Trace*, there is one that acts particularly as a catalyst. It is the work by the Kurdish artist Behjat Omer Abdulla who first arrived in Britain as a refugee from Iraqi Kurdistan and is now based in Sweden. The work is composed of two black-and-white portraits of two baby twins and entitled *Head of Child I (From a Distance)* and *Head of Child II (From a Distance)*, both 2016. The inspiration comes from a story that was being told in the refugee camps he was forced into, and sees as protagonists a mother and her two newborn twins. The woman, probably coming from the Middle East, decided to cross the Mediterranean to give her two sons a better future -maybe this was *the only way* to give her sons a future. During the deadly crossing, the mother lost one of her twin infants. The unspeakable pain and maybe the desire to give her little baby a proper burial, made the mother keep the dead infant with her for days on the boat. Smugglers started to force the mother to get rid of the body of her child.

She refused and kept the body with her. During one of the many nights of navigation, while the mother was sleeping, the smugglers acted and got rid of the infant. When the mother woke up, she realized that her living child was missing and that she had been left with the dead child.

“When you pass from information to a form of celebration, there is a risk that it becomes a monument of sorts to European compassion: so that we can feel sympathetic, getting emotional in front of this boat. But the next day, 40 people died at sea.”

The smugglers had mistakenly thrown the sleeping twin into the sea.

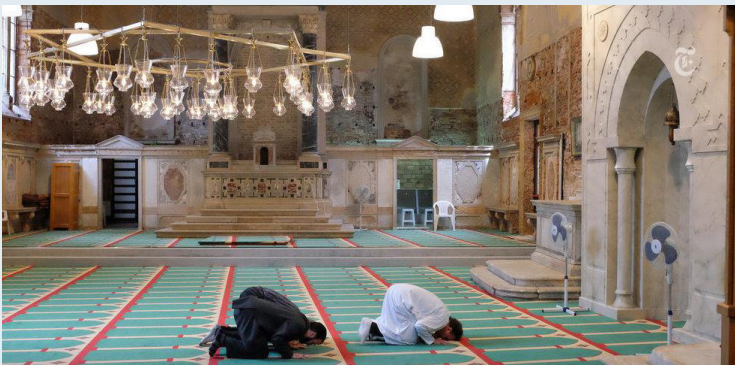


Head of Child I
(From a Distance)
and Head of
Child II (From a
Distance), 2016.

This is the price you pay for desiring a better life for your children when you are not given any other possibility but crossing the sea on a makeshift boat. We will probably never know if this anecdote is real or if it comes from a twisted word-of-mouth, but this and many similar stories, are a reality we need to confront to understand the inhuman conditions that people face while travelling to get to our so-coveted politically (*un*)hospitable continent. As the 14-year-old kid from Mali in the *boat of innocents* with his school transcript sawed in his coat, this mother could be the symbol of European failure. [18]

The making of the artistic performance: from relic to artwork

In 2019, the hypocritically addressed *boat of innocents*, lays in the NATO base of Melilli and still does not have an owner. Sebastiano Tusa, Sicily's councilor for Cultural Heritage, plays a cardinal role in trying to give a new identity to this relic, and Icelandic-Swiss artist Christoph Büchel shows his interests in the rusty ship that has been left abandoned for years. Büchel had already worked with the socially and geopolitically engaged theme of migration, and provocation have always been central in his oeuvre. As for the Icelandic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, where he converted a historic church in a mosque to raise awareness about the need for it by the hundreds of Muslims coming from twenty-nine different countries [19] and living in Venice and surrounding. The artist, helped by Tusa, circumnavigated the Italian bureaucracy in the Sicilian context and finally got his hands on the relic with the intention of showcasing it as its provocation tool addressing the migrant crisis during the Venice Art Biennale of the same year. However, the project is part of a bigger network, curated by Maria Chiara di Trapani and mediated with the 18th of April Committee, and sees the destination of the boat in a Garden of Memory in Augusta as soon as the Biennale ends. Unfortunately, Tusa, who had demonstrated an extreme interest in the making of this project dies in an airplane crash in Addis Ababa a few days before the project is exhibited at the Venice Biennale. The *boat of innocents* officially became *Our Boat*.



A prayer service in Büchel's Icelandic pavillion during the Venice Biennale 2015.
C. Kelbaugh, 2015

The project did not lose the opportunity to grab the attention of media and critics. An incredible number of articles can be found about the work, and most of the time, reviews are not positive. The bureaucratic problems did not stop until a few days before the exhibition's opening. The resonance of the project stayed also in the incredible amount of money spent on it, which for sure, helped its fame. The cost for the original salvaging by the Italian navy in 2016, is estimated at around 9.5 Million Euros paid by the Italian government. However, as artist and art curator Alexandra Stock mentions in an article for MADamasr (Stock, 2019), the cost of the project amounts to 33 Million Euros, where the limits between the needed operations and the caprice of the artist have faded.

The docking: arrival at the Biennale of Venice

The boat is finally settled at the Arsenale. The whole setting of the artwork makes its presence even more of a spectacle. The artist's choice to have this object as the representation of a traumatic experience makes the exhibition more of an abstraction of the experience itself. Passing by the Arsenale the boat looks like is part of that place's dimension. Everyone can pass by and give an identity and a backstory to the object. Is this freedom of interpretation an unavoidable process to passively understand the experience behind the object?



Barca Nostra placed in the Venice Biennale Arsenale.
Barca NOSTRA, 2019

With regards to Büchel's choice to exhibit the boat, Max Hirzel states in an interview about his documentation work -and the exhibition that followed- to *The Guardian* that "When you pass from information to a form of celebration, there is a risk that it becomes a monument of sorts to European compassion: so that we can feel sympathetic, getting emotional in front of this boat. But the next day, 40 people died at sea. [...] If I was a survivor of a family member watching Europeans take selfies with that boat... I'd be annoyed." (Bromwich, 2020) Hirzel takes a harsh position with respect to the work of Büchel, classifying it in the sphere of European western privilege.

[7] It is of extreme relevance to consider the protocol that was applied at that time for migrants' rescue. The rescue operation in vigour was called Triton and was led by Frontex, the European External Borders Agency. The mission of Frontex obliged all boats, commercial or passenger transport, to rescue migrants. This decision will be debated because of the lack of preparation of non-military ships for the rescue of migrants in often very complex conditions. (Micheli, 2019)

[8] Here I refer to the populist fold that the binomial white privilege assumed in the last years with respect to the beginning of Black-LivesMatter protests all over the world. The case, that I believe needs a separate extensive paper to be fully explained, is the perfect example of an ideology becoming the spectrum of civil mobilization through the extensive use of social media. Ideology as a social media phenomenon and not as "the study of notion" as it would literally mean by its Greek etymology.

[9] It is relevant to mention that this kind of affirmations were popular on social media, as the right political opposition lead by Matteo Salvini, started to fill with fervour its followers against migrants; a xenophobic and racist campaign, led by a neo-fascist ideology that gave as result a mass cheering for the death of innocent people at sea, so that the integrity of the nation could be kept safe from the stranger.

[10] The backdrop of this pièce is that the Italian Government keeps financing the Libyan coastal guards with millions of euros yearly. The well-known business between the two countries has started years ago with the Berlusconi government and Ghaddafi and never stopped. Only in 2020, more than 58 Million Euros were given to the Libyan authorities, financing the detention and torture camps in which migrants are obliged to pass by before having the money to pay the smugglers to cross the Mediterranean. This is the Italian strategy to stop migration, making people die before they can start the travel to reach

Europe. (Libia, “Dall’Italia 3 milioni in più alla Guardia Costiera del Paese africano, mentre in mare si continua a morire”, 2020)

[11] It is essential to mention that all the identifications, autopsies, and burials, were voluntary and not paid by the Italian Government.

[12] The process involved cataloguing the belongings of the victims, sometimes even comparing samples with ones offered by the families.

[13] Pathologist and Professor at the Università Statale di Milano, Cristina Cattaneo is one of the most relevant names in the field of anatomy and from 2019 she collaborates with Marco Caccaniga in the Forensic Science department of the University of Milan.

[14] Reconstruction here is meant both as anatomical and related to the bodies of the victims, both, more metaphorically, as the reconstruction of collective awareness.

[15] The identification brought to light that almost all the passengers were between 12 and 25.

[16] Max Hirzel is a freelance photojournalist based in Italy. After working in Africa, Middle East, and Europe, he decided to dedicate the last years to document the migration crisis in Southern Italy.

[17] Sink Without Trace presents work by eighteen artists about migrant deaths at sea. The exhibition includes artists from Denmark, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraqi Kurdistan, Israel, Italy,

Slovakia, South Africa, Sudan, and the UK—currently living in France, Germany, Italy, and the UK.

[18] As philosopher Byung-Chul Han states in his book *The Disappearance of Rituals*, “Values today also serve as things for individual consumption. They become commodities. Values such as justice, humanity or sustainability are exploited for profit. [...] Changing the world through consumption – that would be the end of the revolution. Neoliberalism often makes use of morality for its own ends. Moral values are consumed as marks of distinction. They are credited to the ego-account, appreciating the value of self. They increase our narcissistic self-respect. Through values we relate not to community but to our own egos. [...]” (Byung-Chul Han, 2020)

[19] The municipality of Venice counts 21.000 Muslims; however, the city never gave the possibility to build a mosque for the community, that now prays in a small section of an industrial shed. The Icelandic Pavilion of the Venice Biennale 2015 featured the temporal conversion of a historic church in a mosque by Büchel. Also, this time the work of Büchel was at the centre of many disputes and the Icelandic Art Centre financing the project tried in many ways to keep the pavilion open for the seven months of the Biennale, but after a lawsuit with the Veneto region, the pavilion was closed a few weeks after its opening.

Chapter II: the perceptive reading

The caprice: Büchel and Fitzcarraldo



Barca Nostra approaching
the Arsenale with Piazza San
Marco as a background.
A. Merola, 2019

The stubbornness of the artist to move this rusty relic, the now called *Barca Nostra* -more eager to be called coffin for the hundreds of people who died in it- created a mediatic resonance that made the work of art be the protagonist of the Venice Biennale in 2019. The provocation behind the work is ubiquitous, but is provocation enough? British art critic Matthew Collings wrote in the *Evening Standard* that the “Arsenale -where the Biennale takes place- is a symbol of militarism, colonialism, and looting. And isn’t the Biennale itself a symbol of all these characters, since it was paid through the richness of colonialism, 120 years ago?”. (Bromwich, 2019) Now the exhibition is a symbol of privileged fun, and Collings suggests that the boat reminds of all of those that have been always excluded from this privileged Western fun. Collings’ reading and critic takes Büchel side in the public opinion conflict about the quality of the artwork. However, for how much noble the artist’s will and the reading of the artwork by Collings seems to be, the result is more of *outrage* to death and respect.

This incredible caprice of Büchel recalls another resonant artistic work, the determination of Fitzcarraldo, the protagonist of the homonymous Warner Herzog movie. The movie talks about a colonialist Irishman’s (Fitzgerald, Fitzcarraldo for the locals) dream of building an

opera theatre on a boat, in the rainforest of Ecuador, so that he could have Enrico Caruso, the Italian tenor, to sing on it. The incredible feature of the movie that recalls what the *Barca Nostra* came out to be, is that the boat on which the Opera should have been set up was moved from one river to another of the Amazons. The whole movie does not use any special effect, so an actual 360-tons boat was driven through the Amazon river and was then hauled up a muddy 40-degree slope in the jungle to reach the other river.



A scene from the Movie Fitzcarraldo by Warner Herzog in which the boat, future opera house, is moved from one river to another by crossing the forest. W. Herzog, nd.

The director himself asked for a documentary [20] to be filmed in parallel to the making of the movie, because the hyper-realism that the scene needed could have been deadly for himself or for the crew members. The making of the movie, indeed, caused the death of three people, and the engineer that should have followed the carriage of the boat on the slope resigned, himself not believing that the mad idea of Herzog could be actuated. But besides the technicalities and the immensely similar images of Fitzcarraldo's and Büchel's missions, what happens to recall even more the madness of the movie in Büchel's oeuvre, is the depiction of death and the follies of the western privileges. In Herzog's movie, indigenous people appear while the boat is crossing the Amazon river, despite Fitzcarraldo's fear that the crew would have been attacked by them, the indigenous appear extremely friendly, almost venerable to him. The communication between the crew and the indigenous is made of looks, gestures.

Nonetheless, the indigenous will help to carry out the mission of Fitzcarraldo, and no one appears to know why.



Fitzcarraldo and the
indigenous people who helped
carrying the boat.
2019

The western caprice of a colonizer is made possible through the help of the colonized. Here, the link with *Barca Nostra* becomes clearer. The desire of an artist to make a destabilizing, provocative, gesture is possible only because of the tragedy that the object itself carries. The spectacle for the western world that drinks its espresso and takes selfies at the Arsenale is served in the shape of rusty, bloody derelict.

The position: the choices of the artist



Fitzcarraldo and the
indigenous people who helped
carrying the boat.
2019

Notwithstanding, Büchel has always forbidden the Biennale to put any sign or explanation to the boat. A spokeswoman for the artist said in a statement that “On-site explanatory text was never intended to be part of the ongoing Barca Nostra project’s presence at the Venice Biennale”. Continues saying “the fishing vessel is not the artwork; instead, the ongoing project and its journey are the artwork. Here, as with all his previous projects, public response – including press articles, critical essays, and social media posts – is integral to the overall concept. Büchel’s work comprises a process and unmediated interactions.



A picture of the Barca Nostra from the bar of the Biennale, right in front of it. Unknown, n.d.

Therefore, it has always been a strong position him to avoid physical signage and explanatory text at the Arsenale, not to disrupt the process by which questions are raised, assumptions are made, intentions are projected onto the project, and a meaningful debate ensues.” This aspect is particularly relevant to give additional background to the story; the problem of representation and interpretation appears to be fundamental. Büchel never wanted the boat to have an etiquette, making the vessel become the object of the perseverant indifference of the spectator. *Occhio non vede, cuore non duole*, [21] Italians would say. Isn’t *Our Boat* (Barca Nostra) the exact portrait of indifference that we needed? Is the freedom of interpretation and -above all- the freedom not to engage and interpret what makes the boat *Ours*?

The position: Büchel and Aldo Rossi

The Arsenale was the construction site of military boats before the industrial revolution, and it was a very crucial base in Europe; the Barca Nostra could have been easily mistaken for an old relic of the Arsenale golden years. The naval history of the site could have been an easy way to confuse the viewer, who is not informed about the deadly story behind the rust of the boat. Under the Venetian sun and right in front of the bar of the Biennale, the boat opens to the spectator total freedom of interpretation. However, a complete explanation of the work and its history is given in the Biennale Catalogue: whoever will buy the catalogue will know the truth about the relic, for all the others it is not given to be known.



The carriage of the Teatro del Mondo by Aldo Rossi through the Venetian canals.
Unknown, n.d.

The spectacle that the work creates, goes far beyond the story behind it. The scandal, the rumours, the theatrical side of this relic are the real protagonists. The provocations seem to have taken the scene over the social and political critique that the object wanted to rise -has this ever been the primary intention of Büchel? -. This scenographic and romantic image of the relic passing by Venice canals to reach the Arsenale, on the specific steel structure made for the transportation, recalls another image that made the history of the Biennale of Venice: Aldo

Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, built in 1979. Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo was an en-plain-air theatre, the spectacle stayed in the object itself, in its function, and in its never-seen-before carriage around the canals. The experience of the oeuvre included all these last-mentioned elements. A spectacular object made to host a spectacle and making a spectacle of its own existence. The carriage of the *Barca Nostra* visually recalls this spectacularization, but in this case, the show is not meant to exist. The *Barca Nostra* is born as an ideal provocation to the indifference of Europe with respect to the tragedies happening every day for twenty years, and more, in the Mediterranean, but ended up being the rape of a present tragedy that did not even have the chance to be remembered and become a memory. The enchantment linked to the exhibition of this object rose awareness on the artist and his personal scene, while the disenchantment of death was happening, despite the general mediatic silence, in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, can an object be a means of awareness at all?

[20] The documentary *Burden of dreams*, directed by Les Blank, was released the same year as Fitzcarraldo.

[21] Literally: Eyes do not see, the heart does not hurt.

Chapter III: Use and Abuse

The spectacle: on the notion of memory and spectacularization

The notion of spectacularization of memory has been studied by professor and sociologist Patrizia Violi, who believes that the new necessity to create a spectacle out of the traumatic experience is a fashion that has invested a lot of museum set-ups. (Violi, 2014) However, pushing the viewer to experience, imagine, and touch the trauma is not always respecting the traumatic event itself. The object of the trauma is not a way to let people know about the history behind it, but just a commodification, another way to create a wow-effect in the spectator. Spectacularization of the trauma seems to be the only way to attract the audience, however, the spectacle does not help the memory, the wonder of the viewer “[...] more than a true emotion it is a widespread and indefinite receptive state” (Violi, 2014). However, how can we classify a boat, so an object that does not have stability in space and time, in the different archetypes of spaces of memory? A concentration camp, a prison, detention centres, for example, architectural types conveying a specific function, have the power of making the spectator enter them, move in them, change environments, and maybe establish an emotional connection through empathetical processes linked to imagination. In the case of *Barca Nostra*, the trauma happens in the middle of the sea, in an object that may be defined as architectural because of its identification in the space but that cannot assume the connotation and identarian characters of a building. This limbo between space and non-space makes the classification of the trauma even more difficult for the viewer. To create this empathetic connection with the spectator, showcasing an object and giving a free interpretation to its presence, is not enough. The work of the artist becomes a social experiment involving the various reactions and non-reactions of whoever will enter the Arsenale, which has very little in common with the idea of awareness, tragedy, and trauma. Either way, what is also

relevant to address is the political role of this tragedy in the global scenario. As Violi mentions in her book *Passaggi della Memoria. Il Trauma, lo Spazio, la Storia*, the trauma is something that has been based, for decades, on the idea of state-nation. However, as the Holocaust is something

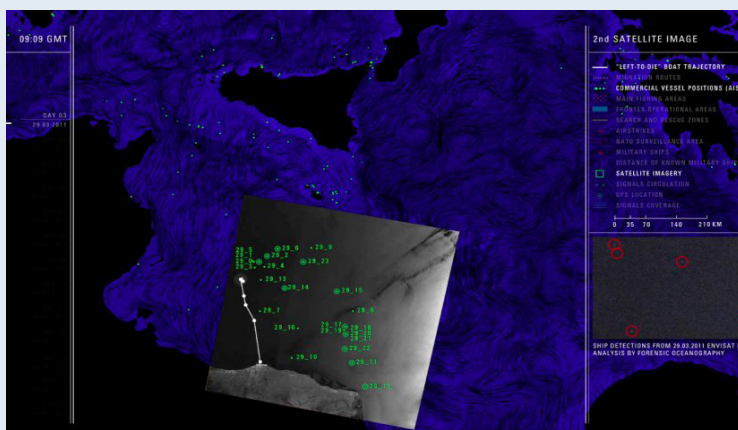
**Do we need
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**Which is the
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that does not interest a specific national identity, also the Migration Crisis has the same character. Nonetheless, while the Holocaust has its specific spaces of trauma, in specific geographic areas, and its specific mandators, the Migration Crisis does not. Who has the responsibility for this tragedy? The European Union, every single country, or NATO? The apparent impossibility to delineate the responsible agents, plus the missing *in-loco* character, makes this phenomenon to be very easy to become globalized and absorbed through the lenses of social media and television. A few years ago, contemporary to the wreckage of the *barca degli innocenti*, the picture of the dead body of a kid on the coasts of Bodrum, Turkey, became viral. The gooseflesh photograph could have provoked a reaction and an acknowledgement of the Migration Crisis in a lot of people; however, do we need this globalized, fetishization of death through media coverage and so-called provocative artworks to believe that there is a need to act? Which is the limit between documentation, art, and mediatic fame?

The actors: missed responsibilities and the migrations crises

Talking about responsibilities, in 2012, Forensic Architecture has documented in an extremely detailed and scientific way, the wreckage of a rubber boat on the coasts of Libya. The project, called *Left to die*, is a precise and meticulous recollection of different spatial analyses of data. To generate the analysis, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, both PhD students at the Centre for Research Architecture at the Goldsmiths University of London, included the use of Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) imagery, geospatial mapping, and drift modelling.



A screenshot from the video “Left to die” by L. Pezzani and C. Heller, showing the presence of different military and NATO ships while the migrant boat was seeking for help, without receiving any answer.

The result is a report about the fourteen days in which the ten-meters-long rubber boat lost almost all its passengers off the Libyan coast. It is relevant to contextualize the wreckage in a temporal frame; it is 2011 and Libya is going through the initial stages of internal political disorder. Taking the bounce of the Arabic Spring, an internal revolt started in February 2011 and ended up as a civil war between the forces of Ghaddafi, then Libyan President, and the rioters. However, as UNHCR states in its annual report, 2011 has been one of the deadliest years in the Mediterranean and the loss of lives occurred despite the significant naval and aerial presence in the area due to the military intervention in Libya launched by an international coalition of

states and NATO.

The responsibilities in this specific case are very clear, as a video made by Heller and Pezzani as part of the Left to die project shows, and the actors are many, from the Italian to the Maltese coastguard, to the NATO. However, this specific case should be a pioneer, a way to understand that there is a set of players and forgotten responsibilities behind all the wreckages happening in the Mediterranean.

The parallel: *Büchel and Ai Weiwei*

The role of artists and architects in raising awareness about the delicate thematic of the Migration Crisis has developed in many different directions. Worth of mention to build a parallel with Büchel's intervention in the context of the Biennale, is Ai Weiwei, Chinese dissident artist, art installation at the Konzerthaus of Berlin in 2016. The art installation included the exhibit of fourteen-thousand lifejackets used to save the refugees off the coast of Lesbos, Greece, wrapped around the six columns on the façade of the Berlin Concert Hall. The installation included also one of the rubber boats used to save the migrants.

The oeuvre, in this case, is not about highlighting the deaths, but making people understand



The installation of Ai Weiwei at the Berlin Konzerthaus.
C. Bilan, n.d.

how many lives have been changed, how much hope has been given to thousands of people in the last years.

The clearness in significance of the work, contrary to Büchel's, does not leave space for interpretation, nor experience. The installation, also, in this case, includes original objects that have been used by the migrants crossing the sea: each lifejacket was used by a man, a woman, or a kid whose life was saved. One of the boats originally used to save the migrants occupies the center of the composition on the façade of the Konzerthaus, *#SAFEPASSAGE* written on a white sheet hanging from the boat.



Zoom on Ai Weiwei's installation. *#SAFEPASSAGE* at the centre of the scene.
C. Bilan, n.d.

The work is together representation and expression, where the represented -the tragedy- needs the resonance of text to be emphasized. But is it a need or *redundancy*? While standing in front of an artwork, there should not be the need to explain the message. Does the socio-political critique behind the artwork need the help of verbal explanation?

Of course, the symbolism behind the artwork is unavoidable, but the work of Ai Weiwei included months of documentation on the Greek island of Lesbos, in which he had seen the tragedy of those who could not realize their dream and the hope of those who survived. Similarly,

to the case of *Barca Nostra*, the lifejacket installation does not have a strong spatial characteristic residing in the object itself, however, the choice of wrapping the objects to the monumental neo-classical columns of the Berlin Concert Hall, gives a stability and concreteness to these voluble objects. Nevertheless, why Ai Weiwei's work becomes a symbol of Migration Crisis critique in the art world, and Büchel's is just a portrait of egocentricity and narcissism? Is Arsenale's history as a military base what is making *Barca Nostra* be so vulnerable as a work of art? Would Ai Weiwei's work be as impressive without the help of the architecture holding the lifejackets? If the boat were exhibited inside a museum complex, or in front of a majestic building, or as a parasitic extension of a well-known building as the Konzerthaus, maybe no one would have questioned its existence and identity as a work of art.

Chapter IV: Present

From 2019 until now, *Barca Nostra* has been at the centre of a lawsuit between the artist, the Venice Biennale, and the company that carried the boat from Augusta to Venice. The boat was supposed to move from Venice to Augusta, the municipality owning the wreck, and where a memorial garden for the victims of the Migration Crisis in the Mediterranean is supposed to be set up, with the boat as its principal monument. Many hypotheses were made, like moving *Barca Nostra* in Piazza Duomo in Milan or in front of the European Parliament in Brussels; none of them have been successful. Would the showcase in a main public or politically symbolic space of a European city change the effect that *Barca Nostra* created? Putting the boat in a public space, as for Ai Weiwei's installation in Berlin, would have probably been much less criticized, everyone would have probably praised the artist for the powerful statement. But what about the effect of it? Would anyone even remember the relic?

The judicial dispute between Büchel and the company in charge of transport in Venice started because of a damage to the custom iron structure on which the boat rested. Büchel asked the Biennale to enforce the insurance, which normally covers the exhibited works, but the Biennale did not recognize the coverage. The Venice Biennale points out that *Barca Nostra* was one of the Special Projects of the Biennale Arte 2019 where Büchel was invited to participate by the Curator Ralph Rugoff; for all these projects the transport costs, including the lagoon ones, are in charge to the invited artist, in this case, Christoph Büchel of the Hauser&Wirth Gallery. (Simeone, 2020) The custom iron-made structure was damaged during the transfer of the wreck, at the expense of the artist and the transportation company commissioned by him. This *impasse* made Büchel be again at the centre of a mediatic judgment of intentions, where the *white male* artist was showing his carelessness towards the relic and highlighting how much he used the relic just for its benefits. However, media pillory is an effect that is impossible to ignore, and Büchel did not seem to care much about it. Is this process of carelessness, even after the end of

the Biennale, part of the provocative performance in the frame of his oeuvre? Why moving the relic and *formalize* it as monument in a specific place, set up for the exact *scope* of memory? Is the artist trying to resist to the formalization of the boat as a *monument*?

Is this process of carelessness, [...] part of the provocative performance in the frame of his oeuvre?

Is the artist trying to resist to the formalization of the boat as a monument?

Nonetheless, even the municipality of Augusta, the official owner of the boat, could not cover the financial expenses of the transfer. The 18th of April Committee and the municipality of Augusta never gave up in bringing the relic back to its place to make it officially become a monument. In April 2021, thanks to the collaboration between the Harbour office, the Authority of Harbour System of the Sea of Sicily, and the Navy, it has been possible to organize the return of *Barca Nostra* in the new dock of Augusta, where it will become to all effects a monument of a Garden of Memory dedicated to the victims of the Mediterranean.

However, the making of this so-craved Garden of Memory in Augusta is mentioned several times in different local and national articles, but there is no proof of its existence or design anywhere. The intention of the municipality of Augusta and the 18th of April Committee, as stated by a spokesman of the latter association, is now to realize both the “Garden of Memory” and the “Museum of Rights”, a “widespread” structure networking with other museums, social and cultural Mediterranean realities, as the interest of citizens, journalists, associations, and municipalities towards bringing awareness to the migration crises increased over time. “The wreck now disposes of its artistic function and fully summarizes that of goad of consciences, not anymore of mute

witness, but as a symbol of all the mournful tragedies of the people forced to cross deserts and seas to seek happiness. We will continue to work to make it the catalyst of initiatives”, Cettina Saraceno, spokeswoman of the 18th of April Committee said. The urgency and the need to have a place to mourn and remember looks like the only solution that all actors at play have taken into consideration.



Zoom on Ai Weiwei's
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Is the tremendous amount of money spent to recover the ship making everyone feel like there is a need to make the boat become something different from what it is i.e., a relic? All the financial adventures of the relic have influenced its destiny and its existence as a symbol of tragedy. After six years of struggles and relocations, the relic meets its ultimate faith and scope of becoming a monument. Do we need a Garden of Memory, to mourn all the human lives lost while following their dreams?

[22] Forensic Architecture is a multidisciplinary research group based at Goldsmith, University London, that uses architectural techniques and technologies to investigate cases of human rights violations in the world.

[23] <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat>

Conclusions

The case of *Barca Nostra* and the mediatic resonance it produced, opened to a discussion that went far beyond the importance of giving dignity to the victims of the Mediterranean and to stop being indifferent to the Migration Crisis -as supposedly seemed to be. The exhibition has been the perfect mean to disrupt the ridiculousness of Italian politics, the unreasonably slow bureaucratic process behind it, and the instrumentalization of a tragedy by politicians. Personally, I do not believe that any tragedy can ever move consciences through ephemeral acts and temporary showcases of *proofs*. I do not know if Büchel's intention was to demonstrate and dismantle the indifference and selfishness of us, spectators. Maybe it was. As stated by his spokesman, he wanted the relic to be the subject of articles, papers, and essays. Maybe all these reactions have always been calculated in his mind, or at least wished.

Who is *the winner*? For sure, not the 14-years-old boy who died with his school transcript sawed in his jacket; nor the mother of baby twins who started her journey with her children and got at the presumable destination holding just one dead body; nor all the other young women, men, and kids, who everyday escape from their homelands and die under the indifferent eyes of the old continent; nor all the ones who arrive in the old continent to realize that *indifference* is much more tangible than expected.

Putting the *Barca Nostra* in the Garden of Memory -if there will ever be one- is the perfect way to crown indifference. The Migration Crisis does not belong to the past, is an on-going tragedy; having a place to mourn, commemorate and cry over the idea of death and tragedy, is not a solution. If the scope is to bring awareness, making a memorial will just bury the trouble under a pile of mediatic moralism, where our consciences as Italians will be cleaned, because we would have a place to remember, so *we will care*.

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