

The White Readymade and the Black Mediterranean: Authoring “Barca Nostra”

By Eleanor Paynter, Nicole Miller

AT THE 58TH Venice Biennale, among the installations that appear in the naval Arsenale, something is hidden in plain sight. Near the water, alongside a hydraulic crane, industrial equipment, war relics, and working boats, the busted hull of a wooden boat is propped upright by metal stanchions. Apart from a cordon preventing visitors from touching the hull, the vessel is unmarked.

Few clues in the dockyards suggest that this object is contentious, but *Barca Nostra*, the project installed by Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel as “a collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration,” has received significant international attention for provocatively engaging issues of migrant precarity and related debates about European identities and borders. Once a Tunisian fishing boat, the vessel was transporting migrants from Libya toward Italy on April 18, 2015, when it rammed into a large container ship and capsized near the coast of Lampedusa. Only 28 of its estimated 700 to 1,100 passengers survived, in one of the deadliest known migrant shipwrecks. As the Italian government recovered the vessel from the ocean floor, the boat became the focus of debates about the obligation to rescue migrants in peril. The project claims to be an act of recovery and remembrance, but in and beyond the Biennale, it has been a subject of public dispute.

In light of the boat’s history and Europe’s ongoing migration debates, we could read *Barca Nostra* as a call to consider “our mutual responsibility representing the collective policies and politics that create such wrecks,” as the project’s press release invites us to do. Indeed, since the Biennale’s opening in late May, responses to *Barca Nostra* have considered it an installation that either succeeds or fails on ethical terms. While some have praised the boat’s inclusion at the Biennale as a call to attention or a moving memorial, others have objected to its lack of contextualizing information and its consequent failure to hold accountable the institutions responsible for this wreck.

This summer, while *Barca Nostra* stood quietly at the edge of the lagoon, migrants crossing the Mediterranean faced the highest rates of death in recent history, and the few rescue crews active at sea confronted Italy’s criminalization of rescue. As the Biennale enters its final weeks, Italy’s Democratic Party has returned to power, while the EU parliament now includes a commissioner charged with “protecting our European way of life.” In this changing biopolitical context, public conversation about *Barca Nostra* — and the Biennale — has waned, leaving its impact on the conversation about border regimes in doubt.

In a statement provided to *The Art Newspaper* by the *Barca Nostra* team, Büchel professes an interest in the work’s circulation and reception: “Public response — including press articles, critical essays, and social media posts — is integral to the overall concept.” The statement calls for “unmediated interactions” and a participatory process whereby “questions are raised, assumptions are made, intentions are projected onto the project, and a meaningful debate ensues. Again, the fishing vessel is not the artwork; instead, the ongoing project and its journey are the artwork.” This statement is rooted in a paradigm of “contemporary art as laboratory,” which was promoted in the early aughts by curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nicolas Bourriaud, who proposed the term “relational aesthetics” to describe practices that rely on open-ended, participatory exchange.

Büchel’s emphasis on collaboration, however, does not square with the experience of standing before the boat unequipped to understand one’s own role in his ongoing project. Initially, we responded to the project as a readymade gesture that enacts a colonialist logic, as *Barca Nostra* positions a boat inscribed by the lives and deaths of black subjects for a largely European audience. Yet if the artwork is to be found not in the object, but in the process of reception, then the labor of artistic production is performed both by an audience responding to the project in situ and by those who encounter the boat on Instagram and YouTube.

Barca Nostra seems to pose questions not about precarious migration, but about how one recognizes or fails to recognize a work of art. Installed in the Venice dockyards, the boat appears to some visitors we met as part of the Arsenale. Circulating as an image online, its corroded hull staged dramatically against the historic waterfront, *Barca Nostra* might be just another Instagram-ready glimpse of the post-industrial sublime. The boat's journey is shaped, however, by the systemic violences that have long linked Europe and Africa in the Black Mediterranean. Citing the violent histories and cultural exchanges that undergird the Black Mediterranean in a 2018 article for the *Middle East Report*, SA Smythe underscores this concept's "demand to acknowledge the connection between the present and the past — including the history of colonialism, emigration and intranational migration." *Barca Nostra*, cut loose from its social and spatial histories, appears to follow the path of an imperialist imaginary. As the boat's staging in the Arsenale erases the history of the object, it also obscures the processes by which this vessel, in which hundreds drowned, became the Biennale's *Barca Nostra: our boat*.

What institutional transactions authorized the boat's appearance at the Venice Biennale? The boat appears as an assemblage of authorizations, pre-steeped in the social and political structures the artist means to engage. Within this series of relays, the boat reflects the struggles facing migrants and changing border politics.

In the early hours of April 18, 2015, the boat was anchored near Misrata on the Libyan coast. As hundreds of people from some 20 countries across sub-Saharan Africa — and as far as Bangladesh — boarded the 90-foot fishing vessel, the *peschereccio* became a migrants' boat and crossed the Mediterranean Sea toward Italy. Once in international waters, the captain phoned the Italian Coast Guard in Rome and asked for rescue.

The moment the migrants' boat became a vessel in distress, the Law of the Sea took effect; any vessel in its vicinity was obligated to come to its aid. Alerted by the Italian Coast Guard, a large Portuguese container ship, the *King Jacob*, approached the smaller boat to carry out a rescue operation.

Here, the problem of visibility or recognition proves decisive. According to the captain of the *King Jacob*, as reported by the U.K.-based research team Forensic Oceanography, the migrants' boat initially appeared only by radar, a mere trace within maritime systems of recognition. When it finally entered the *King Jacob's* field of vision, it began to maneuver erratically, as if attempting to follow the movements of the rescue vessel. When the migrants' boat struck the left side of the cargo ship, it capsized and sank within five minutes.

Critical in this story — and in accounts of precarious migration more broadly — is how the men, women, and children trapped in the boat navigated the borders of invisibility. The boat is a material trace of the limbo migrants negotiate as they flee violence, persecution, and poverty to seek protection. As a nexus of shifting transfers that alter its status across a series of geopolitical and cultural borders, the boat enjoys forms of recognition and mobility denied to its passengers.

Resting on the seafloor 370 meters down, the migrants' boat became a shipwreck and decomposing evidence of the more than 5,000 people who died or went missing along the Libya-Italy passage during the 14 months the vessel remained underwater. More than merely a spectacle of black death, these lost lives and the state's abandonment of migrants at sea are a consequence of what Achille Mbembe terms the "necropolitics" of border regimes; they mark border control in Europe as anti-black, anti-immigrant violence.

As Europe's refugee crisis was reaching its peak, with a record 2.6 million arrivals in 2015 and 2016, rescuing migrants still seemed to hold political promise for left-center leaders. In the days following the accident, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi repeatedly proclaimed that Italy would "fish the boat out" to turn Europe's attention to Mediterranean migration, even suggesting it be placed before EU officials in Brussels "so that no one will be able to afford to close their eyes to this historic-level tragedy."

Officials overseeing the criminal investigation against the two survivors eventually convicted of trafficking quickly declared the boat “of no use to the investigation.” Stripped of judicial value, the boat’s resurrection was, from the beginning, a political project that used humanitarian discourse to move debate about Italy’s role in Mediterranean migration. In April 2015, Renzi declared it critical to “stop thinking of the dead as numbers. People died.” In fact, the Renzi administration had recently ended Mare Nostrum, the 2013–2014 Italian-led rescue and anti-trafficking operation. By the end of his term, Renzi would pave the way for EU-funded collaboration between Italy and Libya, by which migrants are returned to Libyan prisons, despite the country’s ongoing civil conflict. As the vessel’s value emerged not in its cargo or forensic data, but in its service to political discourses, its recovery recalls the extractive processes historically driving displacement in the Mediterranean, the subjection of black subjects, and the extraction of their labor.

Renzi’s ambitious promise took months to realize. In September 2015, the Italian Navy, with Impresub Diving and Marine Contractor, began designing underwater machinery to capture and lift the estimated 160-ton vessel to the surface in tempestuous marine conditions. On June 30, 2016, the wreck arrived at the Port of Augusta, Sicily, a main point of European entry for Mediterranean migrants.

Twenty-four bodies recovered immediately following the accident were laid to rest in Malta. An additional 215 bodies were retrieved during recovery operations; the remains of these and other victims, retrieved over a period of months by firefighters and forensic specialists, are buried in Sicily.

While the boat’s recovery served leaders’ political aims, pathologists and forensic experts working to identify the victims confronted their potential erasure from public records or memory. Led by Cristina Cattaneo of the Milan-based lab Labanof, a team of 50 investigators labored to match bones, clothing, and personal items found in the boat with those who might have been on board. In Eritrea, Mali, Sudan, and other likely countries of origin, they collaborated with embassies, the Red Cross, and NGOs to reach out to locals. “Might a relative of yours have been on board this boat? If so, call this number.” They asked for a toothbrush, photo, or dental X-ray for a possible DNA match, and they used Facebook to trace the stories of young men who might have been on board, a method popularized by Siracusa-based investigator Angelo Milazzo.

By late 2018, however, only three to five people had been identified.

Anger ensued over funding dedicated to the boat’s recovery and preservation. Politicians on the right denounced recovery costs — a reported 9.5 million euros — as a waste of resources. The left was divided between funding efforts to identify victims, or redirecting recovery funds for rescue efforts. Instead of taking the boat to Brussels — or destroying or repurposing it, as Italian anti-trafficking regulations required — authorities left it in dry dock for over two years at NATO-operated Melilli naval base outside Augusta. Meanwhile, groups in Milan, Augusta, and Palermo sought to mobilise the boat’s potential as a symbol of migrant concerns.

Locals in Augusta formed the 18 April Committee, which lobbied to install the boat in a memorial garden. According to founding member Enzo Parisi, the boat would be a reminder of the “climate of welcoming and solidarity” Augusta has fostered, with the garden as part of an effort to maintain those practices in an increasingly challenging political climate. Meanwhile, the Gentiloni administration, which succeeded Renzi, designated 500,000 euros for moving the boat to Milan, where university affiliates including Cattaneo planned to place it within a new Museum of Rights.

While the boat’s ultimate destination remained uncertain, right-wing, anti-immigrant parties, including Matteo Salvini’s La Lega (the League), garnered vocal support. In spring 2018, a coalition government formed by La Lega and Five-Star Movement parties won national elections, handing Salvini the role of Interior Minister. Upon taking office, Salvini began a “close the ports” campaign, and other European countries followed suit, refusing to allow NGO-operated rescue ships to dock in their harbors, effectively criminalizing rescue.

As Salvini took office, Milan's municipal leadership determined not to install the boat there. Our sources attribute this decision, variously, to persuasive conversations between Milan Mayor Beppe Sala and Augusta Mayor Maria Concetta Di Pietro or to the reluctance of Milan's leaders to host a potentially pro-migrant symbol.

That summer, images of the boat appeared during the art exhibition Manifesta 12 in Palermo, on flyers for "Barca Nostra." This "migrant initiative" sought public support for a "freedom movement" that would march the boat from Palermo to Brussels, where it would become "the monument to the European Union." This initiative recalls Renzi's initial suggestion to set the wreck before the EU government. But the call to action was now issued by an artist, with support from local activists and migrants, rather than by the state.

In the migrant rights scene of Palermo are traces of Büchel's initial interest in moving the boat. Büchel does not give interviews, but several sources confirmed his activities in Palermo. For Fausto Melluso, representative of the Palermo-based organization Porco Rosso, a hub for migrants and antiracist activists and allies, the Brussels idea was a way to reclaim a vessel that had been abandoned by the government: "The Italian government recovered the boat only to do nothing with it," he told us. "Because in the meantime the world changed [...] [The boat] became a symbol no one wanted to go near." While migrants were involved in the initial plans, they apparently withdrew because of more immediate legal or social concerns and the risks of public or political exposure.

It's likely that Porco Rosso activities and Manifesta 12 brought Büchel into conversation with curator Maria Chiara di Trapani, who served as the exhibition's curatorial and film programme coordinator and is named as *Barca Nostra's* coordinator. Di Trapani likely played a critical role in realizing the project as it transformed from a procession to Brussels to (for now) an installation in Venice. We learned from Enzo Parisi that Di Trapani worked closely with the committee and relevant institutions to secure the boat's release from Melilli. These efforts constitute a significant intervention in state processes, which had first used the spectacle of suffering to reinforce state power, then removed evidence of suffering from public view.

The boat's release from Italian state custody resulted from several authorizations in spring 2019, shortly before the boat's transport up the coast from the NATO base to the Biennale. This latest move is the most difficult to trace. The press release states:

The ongoing BARCA NOSTRA project facilitates a symbolic transfer of the status of the shipwreck that changes its legal status from a former object of court evidence to an artefact, considered "a special vessel to be disposed of" by ministerial decree, to a "bene culturale," a significant symbol of our "interesting times" and collective complicity and memory, resulting in its first public exhibition at the Arsenale in Venice.

Exactly when the boat was meant "to be disposed of," or at what point it became a "bene culturale" is unclear. One agent involved in the boat's initial recovery suggested that we "would have to call the prime minister" to get clarity on the matter.

In the hazy terrain between destruction and cultural good, we pick up the narrative on April 23, 2019, when Augusta municipal records document the boat's transfer from the Italian Navy to the city of Augusta, in collaboration with the 18 April Committee and organisations including local branches of environmental organisation Legambiente and labor union CGIL. The following day, according to the paper trail, the Commune of Augusta signed the object over to Christoph Jules Büchel for use in the *Barca Nostra* project, at his own expense, for 12 months.

Following the blueprint of many social art practices, the press release stresses the collaborative nature of the work, rather than Büchel's authorship. Büchel's refusal to speak on behalf of the project is consistent with his approach in previous works carried out by nonprofit organizations initiated by the artist, such as his 2011 Piccadilly Community Centre, discretely hosted by

international gallery Hauser & Wirth, and his 2018 proposal to preserve Trump's border wall prototypes, which appeared under the aegis of a group called MAGA.

The tendency to blur or efface individual authorship reflects an impulse not simply to catalyze audience agency, but to collapse the distinction between aesthetic and social spaces. This move is subtle: unlike the provocations of historical avant-gardes, agitating against the social or political status quo, Büchel's antagonisms, within blockbuster exhibitions and the global, corporate patronage system of galleries such as Hauser & Wirth, seem to exploit social or political tension to serve the aims of contemporary art. But the migrants' boat — like the border wall prototypes — is already embedded in the social sphere. And Büchel, with his signature dated April 24, 2019, is not only writing the story of the boat, but also participating in writing the story of precarious migration into public memory.

At the same time, the boat's recovery from the base at Melilli may nonetheless undermine the violence manifest in the state's decision to leave the boat to rot in the sun out of public view. Some of Büchel's collaborators in Sicily have praised the artist's commitment to migration issues and to the future of the boat beyond the Biennale. *Barca Nostra*, coordinated by Di Trapani, "unlocked the situation" for Augusta, Parisi told us, both legally and financially; transferring custody of the boat to Augusta via Büchel made it available as a medium of commemoration, resistance, or debate.

Rather than assess *Barca Nostra*'s success or failure within the context of the Biennale, we recognise the Biennale as a critical authorising institution in its own right. The project's press release declares that:

BARCA NOSTRA is an inversion of a Trojan Horse in the ongoing battle of contemporary political strategies wherein the vessel of those who were literally imprisoned inside it as human cargo becomes pars pro toto for the continuing migration crisis and the political and cultural shipwreck of which we are all part.

Perhaps the global art exhibition — not the boat — is the Trojan horse: a vehicle that carries some hidden purpose across restricted borders.

As critic Claire Bishop has observed, the turn toward relational art practices was partly enabled by the rapid global expansion of the biennale, a format that allows for collaborative participation and expanded models of consumption in the commercial art world. As the platform that authorizes *Barca Nostra*, the Venice Biennale, with its tantalizing premise of institutional freedom, ambitious investigations, and prestige, joins other institutions in shaping the migrant boat's trajectory and the way we perceive it.

There's an unresolvable tension here, as the Biennale plays a strategic role in recovering the boat from the national government for an international public sphere and simultaneously erases traces of its prior social and political entanglements. Roaming unmoored as an image online, the boat's potential significance as art dominates discussion — and *Barca Nostra* slyly obscures the historical and corporeal proximities of the Black Mediterranean.

So what aesthetic proposition is Büchel making? In the absence of a clear question posed by the work, the ensuing debate risks alienating audiences from the boat's material history, obscuring the gravity of current migration issues. We could also ask who is excluded from the conversation, given the price of entry to the Biennale and the lack of access for many migrants or other marginalized groups to the spaces of art tourism.

The Biennale's opening in May coincided with the seasonal increase in attempted departures from Libya toward Europe's southern shores. But Europe is no longer in a climate of rescue. As journalist Annalisa Camilli has documented, the criminalisation of NGO interventions regularly leaves migrants stranded at sea — as we saw this summer during standoffs between European nations and volunteer-run NGO-operated rescue vessels — or sends them back to horrific Libyan

detention centers. What role does an object of violence, such as this boat, potentially play in events still unfolding? What kind of memorialisation does *Barca Nostra* claim, and whose voices might it incorporate?

These questions are rooted in a temporal and spatial matrix that the *Barca Nostra* project neglects. Relational exchange isn't mediated by dialogue only, but also by what American artist Torkwase Dyson has termed "visceral interstitial space." In her abstract paintings, performances, and video installations, Dyson attends to the spatial histories of global trade, colonisation, and extraction; she joins US artists such as Cameron Rowland in making visible active sites of displacement and exchange — including land, water, currency, and the museum itself. Their Mediterranean contemporaries, such as artist Ibrahim Mahama and filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer, position audiences to question and respond to the spatial and historical contiguities of precarious migration by foregrounding the relationship between extraction economies and black spatial histories. This relationship is crucial for understanding Europe's move to **criminalize** rescue and humanitarian aid as part of a long history of imperialism. By assigning its border control to Libya or Niger, Europe excludes and controls bodies through the same racist machinery by which European nations first justified colonial campaigns.

The boat's detection, recovery, judicial rejection, and subsequent abandonment at Melilli carry the story of the vessel and its passengers through a political climate increasingly hostile to migrants and to the very idea of rescue. As the wreck continues to be seen as "the most tragic event in the Mediterranean in recent history," according to the Italian Navy, these institutional uses or rejections of the boat also shape public understandings of precarious migration to Europe. *Barca Nostra* joins these transactions; moving the boat again into public view — though not, perhaps, collective recognition.

□

Eleanor Paynter studies borders, migration, and asylum, focusing in particular on the Mediterranean. Her work on precarious mobilities has appeared in venues including Contexts, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, The Conversation, and The Brooklyn Rail. She is completing a PhD in Comparative Studies at Ohio State University.

Nicole Miller's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in Guernica, Fence, Hyperallergic, Catapult, Art in America, The Brooklyn Rail, Frieze, and elsewhere. She is co-editor of Underwater New York.

(3,740 words)

