

# The Role of Art in Subverting the “Ungrievability” of Migrant Lives

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a critical reading of necropolitical strategies put in place in relation to unauthorised sea crossings in the Mediterranean. The loss of lives of people on the move and the management of those deaths in European territories testifies to the indifference towards migrant bodies, which are by definition “ungrievable”. From the perspective of this article, we need to make an effort to identify alternative narratives that can promote what Iain Chambers has called a “critical mourning”, with the potential to develop a new understanding that, as outlined by Ida Danewid, acknowledges the “connected histories” that place the current Mediterranean passages within a continuum of anti-blackness and racism. The article suggests that art has this potential, by opening up new visibilities and subverting the current necropolitical discourse. The analysis focuses on two artworks which revolve specifically on issues of recovering, identification and grievability of migrants’ bodies, Maya Ramsay’s *Countless* and Max Hirzel’s *Migrant Bodies*.

## **Ungrievable and Untraceable Bodies**

For at least the past three decades, migrants crossing the sea via unauthorised routes have been victims of shipwrecks in one of the most recent human relocations, where Europe is the desired destination. Today, people watching news reporting on migrant deaths at sea have become desensitised towards what should be an avoidable daily human loss. The increasing enforcement of EU borders has seen member countries making agreements with third countries, such as Libya and Turkey, to handle what, from the perspective of Europe, is an “unmanageable” mass migration and refugee “crisis”. These drastic measures, carried out without first assessing the human rights standards in those places, have inevitably intensified the risk of death and have certainly not prevented the loss at sea. No policies or agreements will inhibit people from migrating in order to save their lives, or more simply to improve their lives’ conditions, and the harsh resistance displayed by European countries to the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers in the past decades suggests that migrants’ deaths at European borders are not meant to be put on hold anytime soon.

To add to this already dreadful situation, the lack of regulations related to the recovering and, consequently, identification of migrant corpses, has turned the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas into graveyards for thousands

of nameless and unclaimed “bodies of water”.<sup>[1]</sup> Data on the victims of the illegalised journeys available to the general public is largely sourced from news media, which raises doubt about reliability, while there are no official death tolls. Within this frame of vulnerability, victims of shipwrecks of unauthorised journeys can be said to fall under the category of “ungrievable lives”—to use Judith Butler’s term—which refers to lives “that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed.”<sup>[2]</sup> To fully understand this point, we need to expand on Butler’s take on the ontological condition of precariousness. As Butler observes “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology.”<sup>[3]</sup> This social crafting, Butler argues, is produced according to a set of norms that qualify that body as a life. An important and problematic aspect of this normative production of ontology is, however, the recognisability of these lives, “the point will be to ask how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as ‘recognizable’ persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize.”<sup>[4]</sup> As a consequence, some lives are constructed as grievable, because they are perceived as lives, while others, even if apparently living, “fail to assume perceptual form as such”.<sup>[5]</sup> Butler hopes for a more egalitarian distribution of precariousness: “I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status.”<sup>[6]</sup> When it comes to deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, however, the incessant acts of illegalisation of movement of mainly “black” people, have proved that we are far from Butler’s egalitarian model, and that corporeal vulnerability is not universally extended. The current laws regulating migration demean the value of those lives as well as their destruction and loss.

Even the strategies of the burial of recovered bodies, adopted in places that receive the corpses of shipwrecked victims, corroborate the fact that grieving the migrant lost lives is not a recognised and respected practice. As observed by Arianna Jacqmin, “the corpses of dead migrants are primarily ‘objects of evidence,’ rather than ‘objects of mourning.’”<sup>[7]</sup> Rarely are these corpses allowed a coffin, and if they are, it is often in response to strategies of spectacularisation revolving around events that require an opportunistic humanitarian response from institutions. This was the case, for instance, with the 3 October 2013 shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa, which caused the death of at least 368 Eritreans. On that occasion, a state funeral, to which survivors were not admitted, was arranged on the island in order to allow for a parade of governmental representatives. In such cases, the dead are instrumentalised for political purposes, to justify policies of repression and border militarisation, which are sold as humanitarian missions.<sup>[8]</sup> On the occasion of the 3 October shipwreck, all the recovered corpses—several more are still resting at the bottom of the sea—were allocated an individual coffin and buried in different cemeteries, based on space availability. The state funeral and the yearly commemorations that followed are an exception within the politics of burial and grieving for victims of migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. Bodies of water, in fact, do not usually end up in coffins, and are certainly not offered state funerals. Plastic bags are the most common destinations of these ungrievable and untraceable bodies, while numbers are used to identify them, when they are interred in unmarked mass graves.<sup>[9]</sup> Those who are never recovered are left to decompose at the bottom of the sea.

While the response to migrant deaths should be similar to that for deaths in “commercial air crashes, shipwrecks or humanitarian disasters, where immediate steps are taken to count the dead, record the missing, identify the victims, interview survivors and preserve evidence”, as lawyer Stephanie Grant observes, this does not happen in the case of victims of unauthorised journeys, where the dead are considered responsible for their own destiny.<sup>[10]</sup> For the dead of the Mediterranean, there are no systematic methods in place for the identification of corpses (which could include obtaining DNA samples), nor are the families of the deceased involved in the identification processes or funerals and mourning rites of those identified. The technologies for identification

exist, of course, but no EU government is willing to support their implementation for what are clearly considered second-class and “racial bodies”<sup>[11]</sup>.

## Necropolitics and Aesthetics of Subversion

The way migrant loss at sea is managed by the violent European border regime, responds to what Achille Mbembe has defined as a “necropolitical” condition and the “subjugation of [migrant] life to the power of death”<sup>[12]</sup>. In other words, sovereignty is perceived as a way to exercise the right to kill, which must be considered as part of the strategy of subjugation resulting from more than five hundred years of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery. As Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods observe, what we are facing today is “a new declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project and modernity itself: the ‘Black Mediterranean’ is a constituent unit of analysis for understanding contemporary forms of policing Europe’s borders.”<sup>[13]</sup>

The necropolitical approach is generally supported and justified by the reiteration of the above mentioned patterns of political and juridical discourse fueled by the mainstream media that participate to the enticing fabrication of the “Border Spectacle”, as defined by Nicholas De Genova, where migrant bodies are de-individualised as human beings and treated as a threat.<sup>[14]</sup> As part of this strategy of communication, unfounded statistics, for instance, are often used to fuel “moral panic”<sup>[15]</sup>. The politics of mainstream representation around migration in the Mediterranean relies heavily on the constant use of suffering migrants whose death is depicted as frequent and ordinary, with the effect of desensitising the audience. Death is, in fact, presented as a regular treat of illegalised migration, a “naturalised” phenomenon that has become acceptable and bearable because portrayed as an ineluctable consequence of the impossibility of coping with an unmanageable “crisis”.

Given the reiteration of the above strategies that is causing the deaths of many, it is crucial to find alternative ways to look at and talk about the current phenomenon of human relocation; ways that acknowledge the “connected histories” that place the current Mediterranean passages within a continuum of anti-blackness and racism.<sup>[16]</sup> This approach rejects a policy of pity and calls for a reconsideration of Western positionality that “instead of demanding justice... recognize[s] (or at least consider[s]) that the very notion of justice produces and requires Black exclusion and death as normative.”<sup>[17]</sup>

In this article we will look at how artistic expressions embedded in social discourse in particular have attempted to convey this alternative way of looking. I will in particular analyse two works which have been recently displayed at the London exhibition, *Sink Without Trace* (13 June– 13 July 2019), that has brought together artists with different backgrounds and with a shared interest of responding to and problematising the pressing issue of migrant deaths at sea. Artistic responses to migrant deaths at sea can produce an important and radical alternative to the necropolitical condition by engaging in acts of contestation of those practices that conceal the violence of borders. The idea here is that some forms of artistic expression have a potential “to open up the possible *visibility* of situations, issues, events and people and [to] leave it to its viewers or readers to enact that visibility” unavailable to governmental or mass-media discourse, which is to answer that call by *seeing*.<sup>[18]</sup> The very act of seeing and participating in these practices can encourage a “critical mourning”, to use Iain Chamber’s expression, which acknowledges the continuous resonance between the past and the present.<sup>[19]</sup> Most importantly, the artistic expressions I consider are not meant to trigger what Lauren Berlant has defined as a “national sentimentality” to talk about the limit of multicultural discourses of inclusion:

*I mean to challenge a powerful popular belief in the positive workings of something I call national*

*sentimentality, a rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy. Sentimental politics generally promotes and maintains the hegemony of the national identity form [...]*<sup>[20]</sup>

Migrant deaths at sea can be addressed within a politics of dissensus and subversion that goes beyond compassion and fetishisation of the other, and where affective identification is not necessarily the desired response. A starting point for the following discussion is the conviction that artistic engagements are, in fact, increasingly developing spaces for subversive practices that may help us rethink the Mediterranean “in terms of complexity and variability within an emerging critical connectivity”, with the potential of breaking up “the discomforting continuity between the violence of past and present colonialisms”.<sup>[21]</sup> On these grounds, art can produce a new perception of the world, and ultimately encourage to commit to its transformation. Jacques Rancière suggests that this process of revelation follows three clear steps: first, the production of a sensory form of strangeness; second, the development of an awareness of the reason for that strangeness and third, a mobilisation of individuals as a result of that awareness.<sup>[22]</sup> The two artworks from *Sink Without Trace* that I will analyse, are a particularly strong example of dissensus and subversion in art as explored in the context of this study. More explicitly than other artworks on display, Maya Ramsay’s *Countless* and Max Hirzel’s *Migrant Bodies*, address the practices of recovering and identification of bodies and the consequent burial and grievability, or lack of, that can make viewers more aware and as a result more prone to engage in a critical reading of both acts of criminalisation of migration and of sentimental politics.

## Sink Without Trace: An Exhibition on Migrant Death at Sea

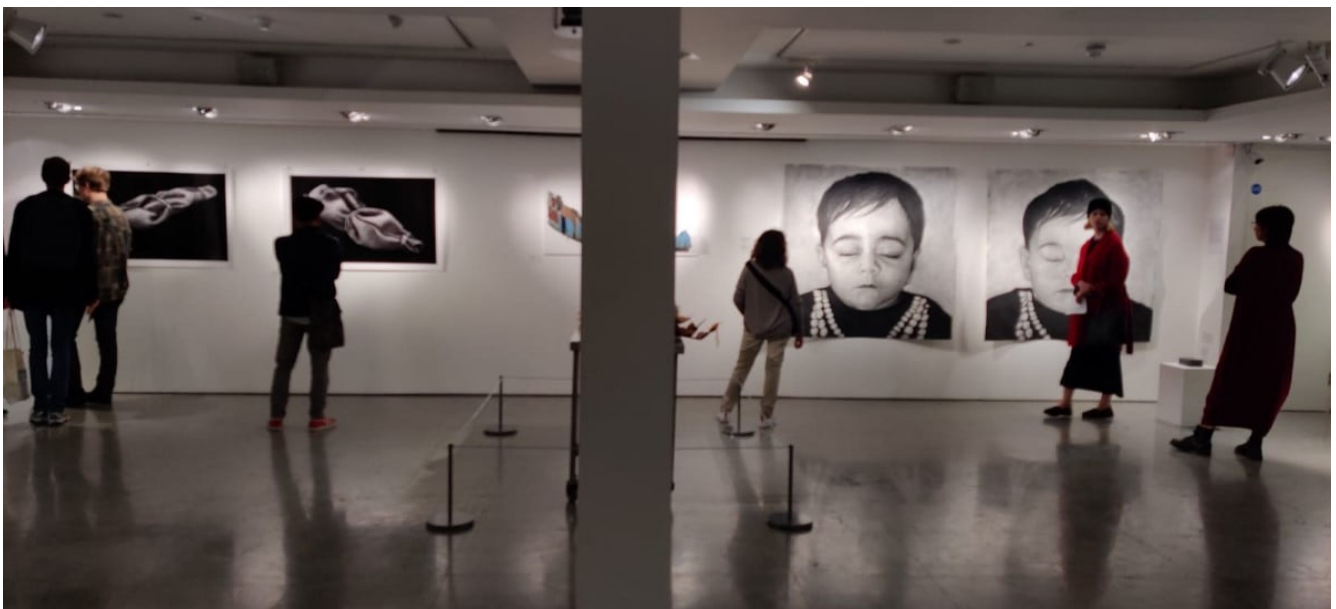


Figure 1: Sink Without Trace Exhibition, P21 Gallery, London King’s Cross [detail]

The exhibition *Sink Without Trace* (SWT), curated by British artist Maya Ramsay and myself, took place between 13 June and 13 July at the P21 Gallery, King’s Cross London. The exhibition presented work by eighteen artists from ten countries—including Denmark, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Israel, Iraqi Kurdistan, Italy, Slovakia, South Africa, South Sudan and the UK. The artists are currently residing in France, Germany, Italy and the UK, seven of them personally experienced the unauthorised sea journey. Through drawing, painting, photography, printmaking,

sculpture and video works, *SWT* offered an insightful and critical approach to the loss of migrant lives around European shores.

The exhibition was the result of five years of research. One of the main outcomes related to it was a monograph, titled *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion*, that sets the theoretical framework. In the book, I explore how activist art forms have become a platform for subverting the dominant narrative of migration, thereby generating a vital mode of political dissent by revealing the contradictions and paradoxes of the securitarian regime that regulates immigration into Europe. Many of the works analysed in the book were part of the exhibition. Alongside the theoretical approach, Maya Ramsay conducted fieldwork in Sicily for her art project *Countless*, which includes a series of thirty graphite rubbings from the graves of thirty migrants who died at sea while trying to reach Europe and are now buried in random Sicilian cemeteries. The combination of these two approaches led us to explore the possibility of developing a public initiative that could trigger a different narrative around the topic of migrant deaths at sea. This is how the idea of *SWT* took root. The decision to focus on this topic came as a realisation that even if migration has become a highly popularised subject in the arts in recent years, there has been a lack of engagement with the necropolitical aspects of it. Galleries and museums have largely focused on other, less harrowing, aspects of migration.<sup>[23]</sup>

As mentioned earlier, I will make reference to two specific artworks of this exhibition. The first one is the already mentioned project *Countless* (2016–2018) by Ramsay. *Countless* is a two-part project: the first part comprises thirty graphite rubbings from the graves of unnamed migrants who lost their lives in the Sicilian channel, highlighting the fact that it was thirty years since the first recorded migrant shipwreck in European waters. The second part includes rubbings of the names painted on the sides of migrant boats abandoned in Portopalo, Sicily, before eventually being destroyed by the authorities. The grave rubbings are on tissue paper framed in Perspex, as if to emulate a dignified marble headstone that sadly so few of them have. Out of the two hundred migrant graves that Maya visited only two had been identified and less than ten had a headstone. The rubbings are exhibited alongside photographic images and video footage of the graves, boats and further information on the subject.<sup>[24]</sup> The *Countless* project continues with a study of objects collected from the boatyard in Portopalo, including the remains of a burnt migrant boat that Ramsay called *Leave or Remain / Taraka aw Baqqa / — — — — —*.

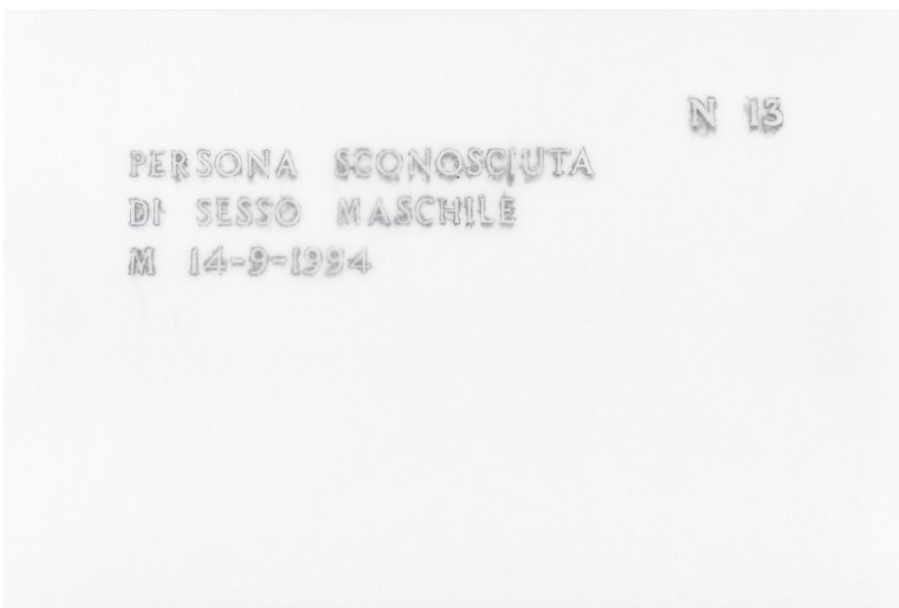


Figure 2: Maya Ramsay, *Persona sconosciuta di sesso maschile* (part of *Countless*) (2016). Reproduced with permission from the artist

For the past ten years, Ramsay has been producing a body of works made by lifting surfaces from historically and politically important sites, particularly sites that have a relationship to armed conflict, capturing visual histories that would otherwise be lost or unseen. In *Countless*, Ramsay applies a similar strategy of memorialisation, this time in a migratory context. Once again, the necropolitical space targeted in this work is Sicily and its cemeteries, where most of the corpses, recovered from shipwrecks that happened close to Lampedusa, are buried. As noted above, within the context of the recent migratory crossings, the sea victims—if recovered—become victims yet again, this time of the negligent system that is supposed to manage the identification and burial of their bodies. In Sicily, there is no norm or law that regulates the identification and burial of victims of the sea: the local municipalities are left in charge, while the Prefettura, the office of the local representative of the Ministry of the Interior, rarely intervenes to regulate the aftermath of shipwrecks. As observed by Georgia Mirto, Amelie Tapella and Tamara Last, in Sicily in particular, “bodies of deceased migrants are not buried where they are found but spread out across the region, creating a crisis of traceability”, and they are also moved from cemetery to cemetery depending on space, so the numbers given to the bodies are often altered.<sup>[25]</sup>

To complicate the traceability of the bodies even further, no official registry is kept on the island to record the death and personal details of the victims. The system of recording that is in place is random and lacks standardisation. As a result, the data inscribed on graves is, at best, vague:

*Unidentified cadavers are usually registered according to the label they are given in the documents by police, coroners or the civil servants of the stato civile: e.g. “Unknown number 1” or “Immigrant who died in Lampedusa”. But sometimes the police and coroner give different labels to the bodies, and the cemeteries may also have their own system for recording the unidentified migrants buried there. Moreover, it is worth noting that some of the guardians of Sicilian cemeteries [...] are illiterate, meaning that they were unable themselves to trace the documentation in their possession to particular deceased individuals.*<sup>[26]</sup>

This is exactly what Ramsay experienced in her search for migrants’ graves in the cemeteries of Palermo (Rotoli), Agrigento (Piano Gatta), Porto Empedocle and Siculiana, in the Summer of 2016, where, sometimes with significant difficulty, she located the barely marked areas that host the forgotten victims of the sea. However, in some cases, the local municipality has made an effort to secure a dignified burial for these unknown dead. This is obvious in the case of Siculiana, where a local religious association (Confraternita della Misericordia) got the locals involved and, through private donations, has been able to provide proper tombstones, where they could inscribe as much information as they had available.

These spontaneous acts of memorialising—from which the families of identified victims are usually excluded, because they are not permitted to travel from the home countries of the deceased—try to compensate for the inefficacy of the system. These practices of marking spontaneous mourning are indeed aimed at counterbalancing the necropolitical strategies of the deletion of migrant life and death, adopted by the governments, through what Maurice Stierl has defined as “grief activism”:

*Grief-activism constitutes a transformative political practice that can foster relationalities and communities in opposition to a politics of division, abandonment and necropolitical violence on which*

*Europe's border regime thrives. By enacting different communal possibilities, such as activism questions, interrupts and displaces sovereign citizenship as a foundational and identitarian arrangement of community and engenders alternative imaginaries of ways of being-with one another.*<sup>[27]</sup>

However, they also risk to fetishise the unknown migrant bodies endorsing “their status as mute objects servicing wealthy European consumer or humanitarian desires.”<sup>[28]</sup>

The rubbings of the graves made by Ramsay are meant to critically address the approximation of data used to identify the victims, which is ultimately a proof that vulnerability is differently distributed, and migrant lives are not recognised as precarious like those with the (political) right to live and die are. In the Palermo cemetery, Ramsay struggled at first to locate the migrants' graves, which are marked by small metal crosses—in some cases the arms of the crosses have been bent backwards out of respect for Muslim religious affiliation—and by worn paper signs that include an “empty” number. More information is sometimes added, including the date of the shipwreck, the nearest location and the name of the rescue services that found them. The graves are placed very close to each other, suggesting that the bodies may have belonged to children. While most of the sixty-four burials are marked by a small cross, only two of the bodies have been identified, and the name of the victims have been inscribed on their marble tombstones, in their native language Arabic.

In Agrigento, more formal graves are used to bury the migrants, as documented in Ramsay's photographs. However, in this cemetery graves are often stacked on top of each other in walls to try to save space, and migrants' graves are almost always placed at the top of these high walls, “the plots”, Ramsay observes, “that no one else wants, as visitors will have to climb tall ladders to clean the graves or to place flowers.”<sup>[29]</sup> Electric cables hang down the front of some of the graves, designed for small lamps that are positioned on the front of the normal graves, but on the migrant's the cables hang like nooses instead. Once again, numbers, sometimes just scratched into the walls or on laminated post-cards with a space for a photo that is rarely added, identify the migrants, many of which were victims of the 3 October Lampedusa shipwreck.

Tombstones commonly “make it possible for the living to anchor their memories and stabilise them for private sentimental needs or public ritual practices.”<sup>[30]</sup> This practice of memorial anchoring is challenged by the ungrievability of migrants, which is exposed in a subtle way in Ramsay's rubbings. She explains:

*The preservation and respect with which we regard even ancient graves in the UK sharply contrasts with the lack of respect shown for migrant deaths and their graves. Although I had seen many images online of migrant's graves, I was shocked by the state of the graves in reality, some of which were mass graves and many of them were so badly buried that they still smelled of death.*<sup>[31]</sup>

The difficulty of even reaching some of the graves, due to their elevated location, excludes the prospect of performing any act of grieving, making clear that dead migrants remain at the margins. Ramsay's approach to memorialisation intends to subvert that marginality, by using a strategy of remembrance that provocatively recalls the one practised around war memorials, such as the US Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where visitors copy, by rubbing, the name of a family member or friend who died during the Vietnam War. Such rubbings also function as personal souvenirs commemorating a visit. Ramsay's rubbings respond to a long artistic history of making rubbings or “frottage”, as Max Ernst and the Surrealists called it.<sup>[32]</sup> Ramsay explains that the point of the work “is to try to bring the migrants' graves closer to people, who will not ever see them, to bring the subject

closer, to make it more tangible—rather than it being just about abstract numbers.”<sup>[33]</sup> The artist opted for the graphite rubbings technique as the least invasive and most respectful way of making a work about the subject.

Against the background of unworkable registers, missing regulations and un-systematic approaches to cases of illegalised migrations and deaths, Ramsay’s rubbings work as forensic evidence and political “impressions” for future understanding of the EU’s unwillingness to come to terms to yet another outcome of connected histories. The rubbings trace a crime committed not by the sea but by those inhibiting its legal crossing, and they are a call for the recognition of this judicial and political failure. In *Countless*, numbers lose their statistical function and acquire a much more powerful meaning. They become a means to expose the uncanny necropolitical management of migrant deaths at sea, while also pointing at the clear unbalanced distribution of precariousness that characterises migrant lives.

Ramsay’s rubbings become protectors of an uncomfortable memory for those in a hegemonic position of power. *Countless* breaches a representational order that prioritises the anonymity and invisibility of migrants. The rubbings of the few graves that were identified do not provide any names or add details that would make the identities of the victims visible. What does, however, become visible, in Ramsay’s act of political memorialisation, is the subversion of the incontestable narrative of the policy, with everlasting “impressions” of a colonial margin that is otherwise designated to be forgotten; a margin inevitably inhabited by migrants living or dead. Experiencing Ramsay’s rubbings in the context of the exhibition *SWT* allowed the viewer to take part in an act of “critical mourning”, by acknowledging a politics of division, abandonment and continuous necropolitical violence.

The second work this article will analyse addresses similar aspects of migrant deaths at sea unveiled by Ramsay in *Countless*. I am here referring to the photographic series by Italian photo journalist Max Hirzel called *Migrant Bodies* (Sicily/Senegal, 2015/2017), documenting the management of migrants’ corpses in Sicily. The idea for the series originated in 2011 when Hirzel met Alpha, a young Cameroonian man in Mali, who told him: “In the desert I saw a grave, they told me it was of a girl from Douala, and I wondered if her parents knew that their baby was there.”<sup>[34]</sup> Hirzel began exploring the cemeteries of Sicily, where many migrants are buried. He wanted to know where and how they are buried and how many of them had been identified.

The *Migrant Bodies* series focuses on one of the very rare forensic cases carried out on corpses from the so-called “boat of innocents” shipwreck of 18 April 2015, between Libya and the Sicilian city of Augusta, caused by a collusion with a Portuguese freighter that was actually coming to the fishing boat’s rescue. The shipwreck caused between 700 and 1100 deaths, while only 28 people survived. The wreckage of the boat was recovered on 30 June 2016 by the Italian Coast Guard near the Libyan coast, with 450 bodies still inside. The boat was then taken to the Sicilian NATO naval base of Melilli, where the bodies still trapped in the boat’s hull were removed. Due to the unprecedented numbers of deaths involved in the shipwreck and the consequent publicity, the Italian authorities decided to carry out forensics on all of the 450 bodies that were recovered. Hirzel was there to document this unprecedented operation. *Migrant Bodies*, however, goes beyond the simple documentation of the forensics: the project also uncovers the stories of some of those involved, including Mohamed Matok, a Syrian lawyer who travelled from Damascus to collect the belongings of his brother and to visit his grave once the body had been identified, and the family of Mamadou in South Senegal, an alleged victim of the 2015 shipwreck, whose body has never been recovered. Hirzel travelled to Senegal to meet the family of Mamadou in person. He was keen to express the need of victims’ families to grieve their beloved. As Hirzel stated in an interview with *The Guardian* given on the occasion of the *SWT* exhibition: “Mamadou’s family had been looking for him, in their own way: his brothers visited holy men in Gambia and Senegal to find out what had happened to him. Everybody is waiting.”<sup>[35]</sup> Red Cross psychologist Miriam Orteiza explained to Hirzel that it is really hard for



families to face their grief without a body, without certainty. This is why he decides to include in his reportage “the yearning of family members to get back their kin, to be able to bury bones, to have a place to go to, to say prayers at a gravesite, to obtain certainty about someone’s place and status, to finally have proof again that a child or parent, sibling or cousin, existed.”<sup>[36]</sup> In other words, Hirzel wants to acknowledge the right of the dead’s family to mourn, and to recognise the precariousness of migrants’ lives.



Figure 3: Max Hirzel, The wreck of the 'boat of innocents' at the Nato base in Melilli, Sicily. The boat capsized off the coast of Libya on 18 April 2015. Reproduced with permission from the artist

Hirzel’s project also has another function, which is to show the many similarities between the reception of migrants arriving on boats and the management of their corpses—both surrounded by codes, lines, numbers, suits and masks. Hirzel’s project shows how the management of migrant death that has generated a dynamic business—people building anonymous metallic coffins, people driving refrigerator trucks, people piling up wooden coffins and numbering them, etc.—has been normalised, and should be seen as yet another expression of the uncontested history of asymmetrical relations of power. Hirzel interrogates “the normative frames that cast some lives as waste, bogus, and non-human.”<sup>[37]</sup>

The presence of *Migrant Bodies* within the context of the exhibition was particularly significant because it coincided with the controversial display of the very 2015 shipwrecked boat at the 58th Venice Biennale, as part of the project *Barca Nostra* (Our Boat) masterminded by the Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel, which received lots of criticism, and rightly so. One of the most problematic aspects of this “installation” was that the artist did not accompany the “boat of innocents” with any information that would allow it to be contextualised by the viewer. This proved to be highly paradoxical, as the boat could easily be mistaken as just another boat in a city of boats, especially considering that it was displayed in Venice’s Arsenale, a former shipyard. The location was also problematic because it was near to a rest area of the Biennale, just opposite a coffee and snack bar and outdoor seating space, as well as the Biennale’s press room—which is a rare WiFi point—and a group of portable toilets. It was not easy, in fact, to recognise the boat as part of the art exhibition. The press release informed that this work should be seen as a “a relic of a human tragedy but also a monument to contemporary migration, engaging real and symbolic borders and the (im)possibility of freedom of movement of information and people” that underlines “our mutual responsibility representing the collective policies and politics that create such wrecks.”<sup>[38]</sup> Büchel was undoubtedly well-intended, however, *Barca Nostra* failed, I think, to subvert the

narrative of ungrivable lives, limiting itself to act as a commemorative mausoleum (given especially its scale), that fetishised the death of strangers in order to generate a sentimental politics that confirms an asymmetrical relation of power, rather than promoting a quest for justice. *Barca Nostra* limited itself to contributing to the spectacularisation of migrant death, embodied by the many visitors taking selfies next to it while smiling. The artist refused to give any interviews on the project, making it even more difficult to unpack this controversial project.

Conversely, Ramsay and Hirzel's contribution to the complex issue of migrant deaths at sea is grounded on research, field work and it is not informed by ideas of sensationalism or fetishism as showed above. Rather, they provide an opportunity for the viewers to question migrant deaths at sea, in a way that Iain Chambers explains well in the essay he wrote for the catalogue of the exhibition *Sink Without Trace*, where these two works were displayed:

*Clearly the works on display register the under-discussed closing down of Europe as the waves of its colonial histories roll back to its shores, carrying the bodies of those that Occidental power and knowledge had previously reduced to objects of its design [...] Removing the Mediterranean from a single register, respecting the complexity of its historical and cultural formation, means not simply reintroducing denied stories and voices, or opting for the other shore and pretending to be able to see the world from the subaltern perspective. It means dismantling the assumptions of the knowledge and languages that have brought us here; not to delete them, but to expose them in another, unauthorized, configuration and perhaps there to acquire a critical apprenticeship in speaking in its proximity. I believe that Sink Without Trace necessarily draws us in this direction.*<sup>[39]</sup>

Chambers calls attention to an important aspect of the work in the exhibition, which is its ability to go beyond a sentimental politics and a call for compassion. Ramsay and Hirzel's work in particular clearly expose the undignifying strategies of governmental mismanagement of the death of those at the margin of precariousness. By allowing the viewer to explore migrant deaths at sea from perspectives which are concealed in the public discourse, the artists encourage a critical mourning that acknowledges the problematic position of the West in the connected histories of the Black Mediterranean.

## Footnotes

1. Pugliese, Joseph. "Bodies of Water". *HEAT*. Vol. 12. 2006. pp. 13-20.
2. Butler, Judith. *Frames of War, When is Life Grievable?* New York, NY: Verso. 2010, p. xix
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Jacqmin, Arianna. "Voyages after Death. Identifying Bodies from the Mediterranean Sea". In *Deadly Voyages. Migrant Journeys Across the Globe*. Eds. Veronica Fynn Bruey and Stehen W. Bender.

- Lanham: Lexington Book. 2020. p. 109.
8. See for instance the Italian Navy mission, *Mare Nostrum* (2013) and Frontex mission, *Triton* (2014), which were implemented as an “emotional” response to that tragic, and yet avoidable, loss at sea.
  9. As Jacqmin informs, “All documents [...] concerning the deceased are scattered among different offices [...] and locations. Information is not centralised, even in cemeteries, and migrants who died at sea can be identified in many ways, from ‘Unknown number 1’, to ‘Immigrant who died in Lampedusa’, to a cross with a number.” Jacqmin, “Voyages after Death”, p. 112.
  10. Grant, Stephanie. “Migrant Deaths at Sea: Addressing the Information Deficit”. *Migration Policy Practice: A Bimonthly Journal for and by Policymakers Worldwide*. Vol. 5. No 1. 2015. p. 13.
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