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A Tale of Two Biennales: How Contemporary Art in Italy Reflects Current European Politics

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Spring 2021

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Introduction and Political Background

To effectively analyze political artworks shown in contemporary art exhibitions, knowledge about the political themes on which they comment is necessary. It is also important for reflecting more broadly about issues surrounding political art including its purpose, its relationship with the artist, and how accessible it is. Because both of the biennale exhibitions discussed, the 2019 Venice Biennale and the 2018 Manifesta biennale, took place in Italy, the following political background will focus specifically on the Italian context. Providing background on Italian politics will also provide insight into the major political themes in the entire European continent and Mediterranean basin. This is both because Italy is an important player in European and Mediterranean politics, and because Italy exemplifies these politics as a whole.

The major political themes and the ones most relevant to the artworks later discussed are populist political parties and migration, especially that from North Africa and the Middle East. These themes also cannot be discussed completely separate from each other because of the effects they have on each other. Simply put, populist political parties in contemporary Europe respond to citizens' wariness towards African and Middle Eastern migrants by adopting anti-immigration platforms. Citizens help elect these parties into governments because they agree with these platforms. Once they are in power, populists enact policies that attempt to curb the spread of migrants into their country. This contributes to the physical, mental and emotional trauma experienced by these migrants, who are often refugees fleeing extreme danger and oppression. By being exposed to the negative rhetoric about migrants by populist governments and policies, citizens of European countries grow more wary of the migrants, and thus the cycle continues.

Discussing populist politics in Italy naturally brings us to the 2018 national elections, which resulted in a coalition between two populist parties: Lega Nord (LN) and Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), or Northern League and Five Star Movement in English. Italian political science scholar Roberto D'Alimonte described both of these parties as unique from other European populist parties (D'Alimonte 2019). He says that LN is unique because of its regionalist origins (D'Alimonte 2019). To provide a brief history, LN was founded by Umberto Bossi with a platform that advocated for more autonomy for Northern Italy, which could have been achieved in many ways, the most extreme being outright secession from the rest of the country (Albertazzi, et al. 2018). Within the last decade, Matteo Salvini, the party's leader redefined LN as a nationalist party that was Eurosceptic and against immigration (Albertazzi, et al. 2018). Salvini became Italy's Minister of the Interior when LN and M5S were in power, leading him to enact multiple policies on immigration that were heavily criticized by Human Rights Watch and others for violating principles of human rights (*Human Rights Watch* 2020).

Meanwhile, D'Alimonte says that M5S is unique because of its extensive use of the Internet (D'Alimonte 2019). M5S was founded by comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009 as a "revolutionary movement," rather than a traditional political party, against the Italian and European establishments (Caruso 2017, 594; Anselmi & De Nardis 2018). Grillo's blog, beppegrillo.it, became the movement's main headquarters and a forum where its members could participate in direct democracy (Caruso 2017). A more recent forum for direct democracy is M5S's "Rousseau" platform, named for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a political theorist who wrote extensively on the merits of direct democracy (Movarelli 2016). This allows members to have direct influence on M5S's policies and candidates (Movarelli 2016). Being such a new party, it is remarkable how much electoral popularity this party gained when, according to *Time* foreign

affairs columnist Ian Bremmer, it “was little more than a protest vote” a decade ago (Bremmer 2018).

LN and M5S, while both are populist and anti-establishment, are different in many ways beyond just their origins. LN today is a textbook far-right political party, while M5S seems to defy the left-right dichotomy (Caruso 2017). For example, it has aligned with LN on anti-immigration policies, typical of the right, but also subscribes to ideas more associated with the left, such as sustainable development (Caruso 2017; D’Alimonte 2019). These differences were illustrated by their negotiations to form a coalition government as the two most popular parties (Garzia 2019). For example, one conflict they had was that M5S wanted to combat unemployment through a universal basic income, but LN argued that it “constitute[d] a handout” (Bremmer 2018). This conflict represents a common debate between the right and the left sides of the political spectrum. Despite their differences, they were able to come together because the most important issues for M5S were anti-establishment politics and Euroscepticism, which aligned well with LN’s platform (Bremmer 2018).

These populist parties exemplify European populism well because they follow the traits typical of European populists put forth by international relations scholar Sertan Akbaba. These traits include Euroscepticism, anti-immigration, and nationalism (Akbaba 2018). Also typical of European populists is framing immigration issues as issues of security and morality (Akbaba 2018), based on their typical rhetoric that immigrants, predominantly those that are North African or Middle Eastern, are dangerous and immoral. Although there is a different coalition in power today that no longer includes LN (*Human Rights Watch* 2020), the impact of the coalition between M5S and LN, as well as the factors that led to their election such as anti-immigration rhetoric, remain. In addition, this was the coalition that was in power most of the time in which

both the 2019 Venice Biennale and the 2018 Manifesta biennale took place, so it is the most relevant for understanding the exhibitions' relationships to politics.

Many of the migration issues on which the forthcoming artworks comment are related to the anti-immigration rhetoric that put LN and M5S into power, but the plight of migrants in Italy is not new. Somewhat surprisingly, the right to asylum is inscribed in the Italian Constitution, but the legislation suggested by the Constitution was never implemented (Fullerton 2016). Italy's contemporary immigration system is characterized by bureaucratic barriers, confusing systems of shelters that are often low-quality and/or overcrowded, and the lack of social support, which can lead to homelessness, even for those granted protection (Fullerton 2016). Italy is important to the discussion on migration to Europe from the Mediterranean as a whole. Its coastline, location in the center of the Mediterranean, and its proximity to North Africa and the Middle East has made it a common entry point for migrants travelling to Europe (Fullerton 2016).

In terms of the coalition government between LN and M5S, Minister Salvini enacted "anti-asylum and anti-rescue" policies, as well as the so-called "Salvini decree," which aimed to send thousands of undocumented migrants back to their countries of origin (*Human Rights Watch* 2020; Brenner & Forin 2019). Not only was this decree impossible to actually achieve due to the lack of repatriation agreements with the countries of origin (Brenner & Forin), it also completely ignored that it would be sending the migrants back to situations that were often rife with life-threatening dangers and oppression.

Beyond the politics of migration, the experiences of migrants that travel to Italy across the Mediterranean are extremely fraught. These experiences include expulsions from refugee reception centers, depression, suicide, poverty, food-insecurity, homelessness, substance addiction, forced involvement in organized crime, violent racism and xenophobia, and no

guaranteed citizenship for their children born in Italy (Tondo 2019; Tory-Murphy 2018; Wallis 2020; Perrone 2018). Even before they arrive in Italy, migrants, while they make the journey to Europe from their country of origin, experience sex trafficking, mistreatment, overcrowded ships, illness, medical emergencies such as hypothermia, and travelling alone as a minor (Pianigiani, et al. 2018; Tory-Murphy 2018). When considering migration, it is important to remember the human experience, rather than just seeing it as an abstract political debate. In fact, many of the artworks that will be analyzed specifically comment on the difficult experiences of migrants such as these listed above.

European politics, especially that of migration, will continue to be discussed beyond this background in the context of the exhibitions and their artworks that directly reference and comment on these issues. With this political background, the remaining sections of this paper will shift to specifically discussing political art. Next, we will analyze the two biennale exhibitions in terms of the broader history of the Venice Biennale and Manifesta organizations, their specific themes, and their relationships to the cities in which they take place. Then, we will analyze specific case studies chosen from both of these exhibitions. Finally, we will conclude with an overall reflection on political art, answering questions that these analyses will bring up.

Background on the Exhibitions

The 58th Venice Biennale: *May You Live in Interesting Times* (2019)

Examining the history of the Venice Biennale reveals that its engagement with politics is not a new phenomenon. In fact, arts journalist Erica X. Eisen writes that the Biennale's founding in 1895 was an attempt to create a more solidified sense of Italy's national identity, given that its unification was very recent at this time (Eisen 2019). The exhibition's long history means that it

has also been shaped by the major international events. Art critic Andrew Russeth explains that World Wars I and II prevented some editions of the Biennale from happening as scheduled (Russeth 2019). We continue to see this in the present day as the Art Biennale was postponed from 2021 to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Farago 2020).

The format of the Biennale including both an international exhibition and national pavilions further connects it to politics. For the national pavilions, the individual countries have total control over which artists they exhibit and which artwork they show (Russeth 2019). Farah Nayeri, a culture writer for *The New York Times*, writes that both government and private funds finance the national pavilions (Nayeri 2015). The role that both the public and private sectors of the participating nations play in the Biennale means that the pavilions are representative of both the domestic politics within the countries and the relationships between them. In addition, the national pavilions are a way to include diverse points of view because of all of the people in charge of them, as opposed to the single artistic director who chooses all of the works that go in the central exhibition. This allows the countries to exert influence and soft power, while also benefiting the organizers of the Biennale as a whole because the national pavilions greatly add to the volume of artwork shown at the event without adding to the organizers' workload.

Who is actually responsible for curating the national pavilions varies from country to country. *The Art Newspaper* contributing editor Gareth Harris and co-authors write that the decision-makers include non-governmental bodies, individual curators, museum directors, and committees such as the US's Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions organized by the National Endowment for the Arts in collaboration with the State Department (Harris, et al. 2017; Russeth 2019). The national pavilions are almost always organized and curated by decision-makers from their respective countries, but there are some exceptions. For example, the

Syrian pavilion has been organized by Italians, which reflects the monopolization of the arts by Syria's authoritarian government, as well as "the major shortage of Syrian curators, critics, publications, and institutions" that would be able to help with the national pavilion (Harris, et al. 2017).

Ralph Rugoff, the curator of the international exhibition in 2019, describes the format as a balance between "utopianism" and "nationalist manifestations" (Rugoff 2019, 25). In other words, the international exhibition paints the world as a global community wherein all countries come together as one, while the national pavilions emphasize the physical, cultural, and political borders that still deeply divide the world. This is especially relevant today because globalization has made these borders less prominent to an extent, but many national governments are re-emphasizing their physical borders especially as a reaction against immigration.

We can further understand the Biennale's format by looking at how people have defined it. International relations scholar Julia Bethwaite says that many define the Biennale as the "Olympic Games of the art world," while art historian Vittoria Martini says that it has been referred to as the "UN of the arts" (Bethwaite 2017; Martini 2020, 545). Both of these ring true in different ways. Like the Olympics, individual artists in the international exhibition and the participating countries with national pavilions both compete for the Golden Lion prize in their respective categories. Like the UN, the world's countries come together in cooperation in the international exhibition, but still express their national interests in their own pavilions. Both of these definitions emphasize the international character of the exhibition. Also similar to both the Olympics and the UN, the Biennale is essentially an institution, with routinized procedures and relationships.

The title for the 2019 exhibition, *May You Live in Interesting Times*, responds to today's politics on multiple levels. The *Interesting Times* to which the title refers reflects that most, if not all, of the works in both the international exhibition and the national pavilions comment on contemporary issues that shape our world, including migration, conflict, poverty, climate change, prejudice, and technological development. This focus on *Interesting Times* is further reflected by Rugoff's decision to only include living artists, who are actually experiencing these *Interesting Times*, in his curation of the international exhibition (Rugoff 2019). Also, a majority of the works in the international exhibition were created in the last decade (2009-2019), which means that their artists directly commented on these *Interesting Times*. In fact, only two of the cases (one from the international exhibition and one from Kosovo's national pavilion) on my shortlist of more than twenty possible case studies were not created within this timeline. These works were likely chosen by Rugoff and by Kosovo (respectively) because they continue to be relevant in these *Interesting Times* and perhaps gain new meaning if viewed in today's context.

When explaining the title for the exhibition, Rugoff says that the artworks in this edition of the Biennale can serve as "a guide for how to live and think" in these *Interesting Times* (Rugoff 2019, 23). This suggests that the purpose he wanted the art in the exhibition to serve was to raise awareness and to provide different perspectives on the issues on which they comment, rather than attempting to prompt change. Of course, it is left up to interpretation whether the exhibition taught its visitors something new, or simply affirmed their existing beliefs. Beyond the meaning of the words themselves, the context of the phrase also responds to today's politics.

Rugoff gives an extensive history of the phrase's origins in the Biennale's catalog. In short, British Member of Parliament Austen Chamberlain first used the phrase in a 1936 speech, saying that it was an "ancient Chinese curse" that a British diplomat had taught him (Rugoff

2019, 22). However, a curse of living in *Interesting Times* never existed in China, and was likely made up by the diplomat (Rugoff 2019). Rugoff frames the context of the phrase as a response to the popularity of “fake news” and “alternative facts” (Rugoff 2019, 23), particularly in the United States, which in turn influences the rest of the world. Art pieces, except those that veer into documentary territory, act as a counterpoint to this idea because the very meaning of each work is subjective. This implies that art cannot put forth an seemingly objective truth (whether actually true or not) or tell viewers exactly what to think. Rugoff also frames the phrase’s false attribution to an “ancient Chinese curse” as “another ‘Orientalism’ fashioned in the Occident” (Rugoff 2019, 22-23), which reflects the lack of knowledge Chamberlain had about the reality in China. In the context of the exhibition, this connects to the debate about whether artists commenting on issues that they have not personally experienced, such as forced migration or homelessness, reflect the reality and the unique perspectives of those that have actually experienced these.

The Biennale’s relationship with its host city, Venice, is also important to discuss, especially in terms of the benefits and shortcomings of the exhibition and its artworks. In a special edition of *OnCurating* Journal focusing on contemporary art biennales, both Italian art scholar Marco Baravalle and Martini stress the “social impoverishment” in the city of Venice due to the mass exodus of locals out of the city as its tourism industry grew (Baravalle 2020, 536; Martini 2020). The relative lack of permanent residents in Venice means that it is more difficult for the Biennale to work together with the city and to forge truly local connections. In fact, apart from the iconic main exhibition spaces of the Arsenale and the Giardini, the Venice Biennale seems like it could take place in any cosmopolitan city, especially due to its international nature.

The one area in which the Biennale and the city of Venice collaborate indirectly is the tourism industry because visitors to the Biennale also become tourists in Venice. Thus, it could seem like the Biennale is contributing to overtourism in Venice by drawing people in that would otherwise not choose to go to Venice. This means that the Biennale may be causing more difficulty as the city tries to grapple with its overtourism problem. The Biennale's presence on Venice's central islands means that it mainly forges temporary and ephemeral connections with visitors rather than deep connections with local people. In response to this, Baravalle suggests that the Biennale could expand its presence onto the Venetian mainland in areas such as Mestre and Marghera (Baravalle 2020).

This proposal could have both benefits and shortcomings. As of 2018, according to *All About Venice*, Venice's historical center and its islands had a population of 80,726, while Mestre and Marghera had a population of 179,794, which has steadily increased since 1871 (*All About Venice* 2018). Thus, expanding into Mestre and Marghera would give the Venice Biennale more opportunities to engage with the local community, but we cannot tell whether they would actually take that opportunity. There are also more people living there that would have the opportunity to go to parts of the Biennale without having to travel to the lagoon, but, again, it is unknown how they would respond to that opportunity. There is also a possibility that the parts of the Biennale in Mestre and Marghera would be less frequented by visitors who also want to see other sites in Venice's center geared towards tourists while visiting the exhibition. However, on the flip side, the Biennale could bring a greater influx of visitors to Mestre and Marghera, which could both stimulate its tourism industry or threaten to push more permanent residents out of the Venice area. This analysis of Baravalle's idea has revealed overall that the context in which the Venice Biennale is unique and should be treated as such.

Since many of the works in *May You Live In Interesting Times* comment on migration, the relationship between the city of Venice and migration provides further context. Anthropology scholar Filippo Furri writes about how Venice had been more welcoming to migrants prior to the last decade, but, in 2015, its mayor aimed to “put a stop to migration” (Furri 2017). He also described tragedies that had happened to migrants due to drowning in the canals or poor living conditions in migration centers near Venice (Furri 2017). This is a harrowing backdrop to the exhibited works commenting on today’s migration crisis in Europe, especially those that emphasize the tragedy and trauma that the migrants commonly experience. It also stands in striking contrast to the elite atmosphere of the Venice Biennale, and should serve as a reminder of the reality of the migration crisis, which artworks can abstract or simplify.

Manifesta 12: *The Planetary Garden: Calculating Coexistence* (Palermo, 2018)

Much like in the Venice Biennale, politics has played a prominent role in the creation and format of Manifesta, but in a very different way. One of the most obvious differences is that each edition of Manifesta is held in a different European city, prompting the biennale to be often described as “nomadic” (*Palermo Atlas* 2019). This means that the theme of each edition is heavily shaped by its host city. Dutch art historian and curator Nathalie Zonnenberg, in a special edition of *OnCurating* Journal titled “Contemporary Art Biennials - Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency,” explains the selection process for host cities. “European cit[ies], city conglomerate[s], or region[s]” apply to host the biennale, then the Manifesta Foundation makes its selections based on the location’s artistic, intellectual, infrastructural, institutional, sociopolitical, and financial context (Zonnenberg 2020, 374). In the case of Palermo, its mayor, Leoluca Orlando, spearheaded the initiative to bring Manifesta to the city (Zonnenberg 2020).

The Venice Biennale has been a factor in shaping contemporary Venice, but for Manifesta, this is the opposite because each edition is heavily shaped by its host city.

Manifesta was also created for political reasons, but in a very different way than the Venice Biennale due to their foundings being nearly a century apart. Maria Chiara di Trapani, Manifesta's curatorial and film program coordinator, explains that it was created after the fall of the Berlin Wall to respond to the great changes in Europe at this time (Hucal 2018). While the Venice Biennale was created to foster a national identity for Italy, Manifesta was created to foster a broader, pan-European identity. Curator and researcher Miriam La Rosa, in "Contemporary Art Biennales - Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency," also cites the formation of the EU after the Cold War as influencing Manifesta's founding (La Rosa 2020). A biennale travelling around Europe reflects European citizens' ability to travel freely in between states in the Schengen Area without the passport controls on other borders. Between the Venice Biennale's founding and Manifesta's founding, international institutions and multilateralism flourished across Europe and the world, further creating the conditions for creating a nomadic biennale. The founding of Manifesta also represents the European unity that occurred for perhaps the first time ever after centuries of continental war that ended with the Cold War.

Manifesta moving to a different host city every two years has both benefits and shortcomings. Each edition being so heavily influenced by its host city means that there are many opportunities to engage and collaborate with the local community in the development of the biennale itself and of life in the host city. They in fact take advantage of this in multiple ways. In the case of Palermo, art writer Arabella Hutter von Arx in the cultural magazine *Riot Material* explains that Manifesta worked with people of all different backgrounds in the city, including but not limited to art connoisseurs, migrants, and laypeople (Hutter von Arx 2018).

Manifesta also exhibited art in unlikely locations in the local community such as housing complexes, refugee centers, parks, and abandoned buildings (Hutter von Arx 2018). Overall, the goal of the biennale was to prompt Palermo's residents to work together in improving their city (Hutter von Arx 2018), which is a very ambitious goal.

While there are many ways Manifesta integrates into local communities, some complain that time constraints make it more difficult to leave an impact on these communities (Zonnenberg 2020). However, despite these time constraints, Manifesta has made many efforts to be informed about each host city. One example of this from 2018 is *Palermo Atlas*, by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture and commissioned by Manifesta as an "urban investigation" into the city (*Office of Metropolitan Architecture* 2018). The book includes extensive information about Palermo's geography, migration patterns, multicultural identities, architectural development, and history. It also details the experiences of Manifesta staff during tours all over the city given by locals a year before the opening of the 2018 edition (*Palermo Atlas* 2018). Exhibiting in a different host city every two years also means that Manifesta is constantly forced to reinvent and reimagine their approach to the biennale, so they have many natural opportunities to improve how they engage with local communities. It is much easier for practices and traditions to become institutionalized and difficult to change in a biennale that stays in one place, like the Venice Biennale, even if they are no longer effective. Manifesta developed a theme for their 2018 exhibition after gaining a deeper understanding of Palermo.

The exhibition, titled *The Planetary Garden: Cultivating Coexistence* reflects Manifesta's efforts to engage with the diverse backgrounds in the city. As written in *Palermo Atlas* by plant sciences professor at the University of Palermo, Giuseppe Barbera, the title refers to the myth of the "Mediterranean garden" created by Grand Tour travelers (Barbera 2018). This myth

described the biodiversity that flourished in the Mediterranean basin as a result of constant cultural exchange over centuries (Barbera 2018). The addition of *Planetary* to *Garden* reflects the interconnectedness of the entire world today. The *Cultivating Coexistence* part of the title reflected Manifesta's hope of prompting Palermo's residents to come together in fostering lasting change in their city (Hutter von Arx 2018), or of *Cultivating the Coexistence* between Palermo's diverse populations in the interest of positive change. Much like the first part of the title, the word *Cultivating* also references botanical themes since it is often connotated with plants and gardens, even if it takes on a different meaning in the second part of the title.

Mirjam Varadinis, one of the creative mediators of this edition of Manifesta explains that plants are used as a metaphor for climate change and migration in an interview with *Inferno*, a contemporary art magazine (El Fani 2018). The use of plants as a metaphor for migration is especially salient in Palermo due to its extreme biodiversity, which includes plants from all continents except for Antarctica (*Palermo Atlas* 2018). The exhibit itself even becomes a literal garden because one of the spaces Manifesta used was the botanical garden, as explained by Kimberly Bradley, a culture writer for *The New York Times* (Bradley 2018). By exhibiting in non-traditional spaces, Manifesta also treated Palermo as a giant garden, the artworks scattered much like the city's plants themselves.

We cannot discuss this edition's theme without talking about the context that the city of Palermo provides. Migration and climate change, major issues in Europe and the wider world, are clearly represented in Palermo (*Palermo Atlas* 2018). In that sense, the city of Palermo acted as a microcosm of the entire world. The diversity of peoples that comes from Palermo's long history of migration furthers this idea. Throughout history and into today, Palermo remains a

popular spot for migration because of its central location in the Mediterranean between Europe, Africa, and Asia (*Palermo Atlas* 2018).

The exhibition being so heavily shaped by Palermo also means that many of the individual artworks reflect contemporary events in Palermo, especially in terms of migration. They reflect the conflict between Italy's far-right, anti-immigration government at the time and Mayor Orlando, who believed that all migrants should be able to build a life in Palermo (Zonnenberg 2020). This conflict came to a head during the 2018 exhibition, as detailed by *Hyperallergic* art critic Dorian Batycka, when the national government prevented a ship of migrants from docking in Palermo or anywhere else in Italy (Batycka 2018). The artworks also reflect the many difficulties experienced by migrants travelling to Italy by sea, including being forced to take jobs in poor conditions for little pay, facing xenophobia and racism, and the dangers associated with travelling, often in overcrowded, decaying boats, across the Mediterranean. This analysis of Manifesta's twelfth edition in Palermo reveals the interconnectedness of the exhibition's theme, urban context, and artworks in that we cannot discuss one without the others.

Selected Case Studies

I have chosen six cases from Venice and Palermo that I will analyze in the following sections. Many different elements factored into how I made my selections. While there were certainly many works with political undertones in both biennales, the small sample of works that I chose to analyze explicitly commented on the most prominent political themes in contemporary Europe. I also decided to choose works that were created in the last decade, with the artists directly referencing contemporary events. There was a smaller number of older works, especially

from the 1990s and the 2000s, in both exhibitions, which gain new meaning when viewed in today's context. However, the political change that happened over the last decade means that these works commented on a very different environment.

Another consideration I had when selecting the following case studies was the variety of perspectives among their artists. All of the following artists comment on politics, but they vary in terms of how they are personally impacted by the subject matters on which they comment. The artists' personal connections (or lack thereof) to their subject matters add further meaning to their works beyond their pure intentions. Another consideration I took into account were the different ways in which the works were received by critics, journalists, and curators. This is because the actual impact of the works adds as much meaning to them as the artists' intentions, especially since they are explicitly political.

Once I chose the case studies, I divided these artworks into those that respond to the land and those that respond to the sea. I chose these thematic categories after I had already decided on my case studies, which illustrates the natural importance of the land and the sea in contemporary European politics. Due to populist governments and the impact of migration in Europe, both the land and the sea have become politicized. As a result, political art responds to these politicized identities.

Art on Land

The cases in this section respond to the concept of the land by commenting on the notion of who belongs and who does not belong within the borders of European countries. This has manifested in Europe in many ways over the last decade. Liz Fekete in her book *Europe's Fault Lines: Racism and the Rise of the Right* writes in depth on this topic. One element she focuses on

are the verbal and physical attacks rooted in racism and xenophobia that migrants are subjected to across the continent. These attacks come from a variety of sources: ordinary people, the police, and border agents (Fekete 2018). She also emphasizes that the intersection of racism and the far right is throughout Europe, not just in the countries most known for this. For example, Hungary is well known for attempting to build a border wall to keep out predominantly Muslim refugees, but countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the UK have also tried using physical barriers to seal off their territory (Fekete 2018).

Many other authors have also written extensively on this topic. Law scholar Maryellen Fullerton in her article “Asylum Crisis Italian Style: The Dublin Regulation Collides with European Human Rights Law” writes about how the EU’s Dublin Regulation further politicizes the land. A main part of this regulation is that EU states are supposed to shoulder some responsibility for asylum seekers in Europe, but some countries have become more reluctant over time about actually shouldering this responsibility to accept asylum seekers into their territory (Fullerton 2016). They often try to expel the migrants back to the country that they first entered when they arrived in Europe, Italy being a common country of first entrance due to its location in the Mediterranean. These examples clearly illustrate that the notion of belonging or not belonging in European countries’ territories is very complex and leaves much for artists to discuss.

This first case, *Theater of the Sun*, by the Los Angeles-based artist duo, named Fallen Fruit, consisting of David Burns and Austin Young is part of the “Garden of Flows” section of Manifesta. These artists commented on the idea of belonging in Palermo specifically by connecting contemporary migration with the city’s long history of migration. Due to this history, Palermo has fruits of many origins, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which can

represent the city's multicultural identities today. This work illustrates belonging that a diverse array of peoples have found in Palermo.



I. Fallen Fruit, *Theater of the Sun*, mixed media, 2018, installation view (Young & Burns 2018)

The “Garden of Flows” section of the exhibition depicts plants as a metaphor for historical migration patterns in the Mediterranean basin (Batycka 2018). More specifically, this work is an installation set inside a typical Italian *palazzo*. Brightly colored wallpaper covers all of the walls in the exhibition space, illustrating the variety of fruit trees seen in Palermo (*Manifesta 12* 2018). The walls of this 17th-century *palazzo* (Zara 2018) being completely covered by these bright colors is particularly striking because the wallpaper contrasts heavily with the faded door frames and trompe l'oeil ceiling that define the space.

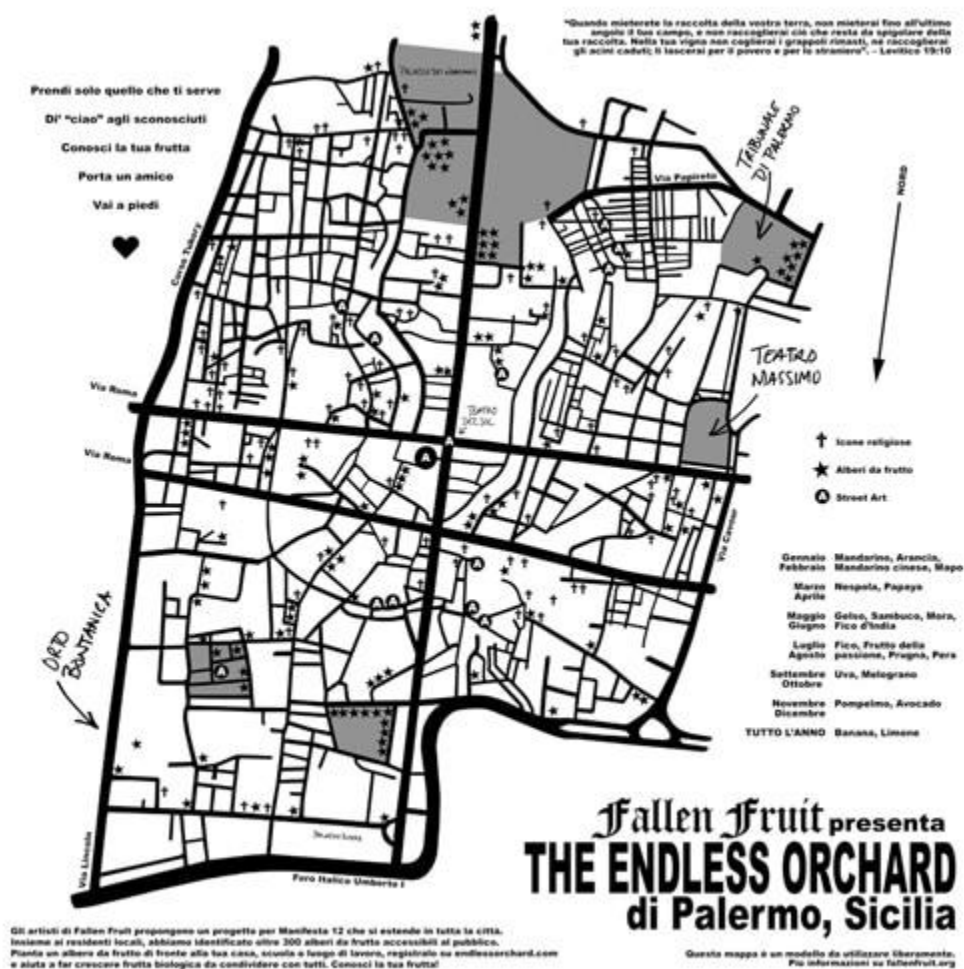
The work also includes the “Public Fruit Map of Palermo,” that indicates both public and private places throughout the city where one can find one of the fruit trees seen in the wallpaper

(*Manifesta 12* 2018), as well as the time of year that the fruit is in season. Fallen Fruit, the artist duo that made this work, has made similar maps in other cities, all of which can be found on their website (Fallen Fruit). The map of Palermo and its accompanying installation is especially compelling because it does not only show the viewer where they can find the fruit, but it also serves as a sort of history of Palermo because of the vast geographic origins of the fruit. Among the fruits in Palermo are prickly pears originating from Mexico, citrus fruits from the Middle East (Zara 2018), and kumquats from China. The map even indicates the origin of some of these fruits (ex. *mandarino cinese*).

Especially noteworthy are the citrus fruits because they are now so associated with Italian, particularly Sicilian, food and culture. For example, “Sicilian lemons” imply origins in Sicily and erase their Arabic origins. This is also noteworthy because a fruit thought to be quintessentially Italian actually has origins connected to the Middle East, from which many contemporary migrants come to Italy and Europe. In *Palermo Atlas*, Manifesta Director Hedwig Fijen says that these migrants often face xenophobia and racism, and are seen as intrinsically “other,” yet they are tied to Italian culture as well through the history of Arabic sovereignty in Sicily (Fijen 2018). This is further expressed by the installation’s placement in the “Garden of Flows” section of the exhibition, “garden” referencing the biodiversity in Sicily as a result of migration, and “flows” referencing that migration.

Another interesting point to consider about the “Public Fruit Map of Palermo” is what purpose and degree of accessibility it has. The map primarily seems to provide information on where one can find different fruit trees in Palermo, promoting them as a free and shared resource (*Manifesta 12* 2018; Zara 2018). This connects back to the exhibition’s theme of cross-cultural communication because it frames the fruit as “shared,” similar to how different cultures that

settled in Sicily “shared” elements of their unique culture still very much visible today. In fact, history shows that Christians and Muslims, speakers of Romance languages and speakers of Arabic, constantly interacted and exchanged with each other when more than one culture was occupying Sicily (Akbari 2013; Mallette 2013). This challenges the separation we often perceive between peoples of these different religions and languages, especially in the case of Christians and Muslims.



II. Fallen Fruit, “Public Fruit Map of Palermo,” 2018 (Fallen Fruit 2018)

Promoting the fruit trees as a free and shared resource also connects to another phenomenon to which Manifesta 12 attempts to respond: present-day migration. People from North Africa and the Middle East who migrate across the Mediterranean very often leave their home countries due to dangerous conflict or intense economic struggles, often as a “last resort.” The nature of why they travel to Europe means that the migrants are subjected to poor reception centers and often have to take up *lavoro nero* - jobs that pay “under the table” (*Palermo Atlas* 2018; Batycka 2018). Agricultural work can fall under the *lavoro nero* category (*Palermo Atlas* 2018), creating another connection between the themes of fruit, and more generally, botanical life, and migration. Without a stable form of income, they often are food-insecure, meaning that a free resource for food, especially fresh fruit, could be very valuable to them.

While Palermo has a large migrant population both due to its location in the middle of the Mediterranean and due to its history of hospitality, there is no way of knowing if people from that population use the fruit trees as a resource. The nature of a public resource is that anyone can take advantage of it, regardless of whether they could afford to pay for the fruit. On the “FAQ” section of *Endless Orchard*, Fallen Fruit’s international fruit tree mapping project of which the “Public Fruit Map of Palermo” is part, says that language encouraging sharing the resource with others will be posted at the sites, and the *Endless Orchard* community generally promotes the spirit of generosity (*Endless Orchard*). Thus, we can expect that individuals from various walks of life will take advantage of this resource, especially if they happen to be in the area already.

The maps are meant to be accessible to all because they are distributed digitally for free, often reprinted in the media, and shown in museums and galleries (Fallen Fruit). However, the duo’s website offers this warning: “These maps are for entertainment purposes only. Never

trespass or take fruit from private property. Only pick fruit that is clearly in public space - for example hanging over the sidewalk or in the parkway. If you are not sure, ask” (Fallen Fruit). Describing the maps as “for entertainment purposes only” is slightly surprising because it appears at first glance to be for the practical purpose of getting fresh fruit for free. The note about fruit on private versus public properties, since the maps include both, seems to mean that picking fruit in public places is fair game. So, we are left wondering what the true purpose of the map is, due to these mixed messages. Denoting the public fruit maps as for “entertainment” makes sense on some level because Fallen Fruit is a duo of artists, after all. Thus, these maps seem to blur the lines between artwork and a practical resource.

Similar to *Theater of the Sun*, this next case study also from Manifesta, *Square* by Giuseppe Lana, illustrates the idea that a sense of belonging in Palermo is extended to a diverse group of peoples. The artist, known for connecting “politically charged” topics with history (Daniel Benjamin Gallery), exhibited four yellow billboards in Manifesta’s collateral event titled “The Politics of Dissonance.” According to a description of the event found in the art-focused *Cura Magazine*, the 4-day long event was defined as “a performative investigation into the discord that defines our times” (*Cura Magazine* 2018). This connects to the theme of cross-cultural communication that is seen throughout the main exhibition, but this collateral event specifically focuses on the difficulties that come with that. It acknowledges that, even though many see cross-cultural communication as wholly beneficial, there will always be people and wider systems challenging this idea.

In the context of Palermo in 2018, this idea could be seen through people in power, such as Matteo Salvini and the Lega party in general, fighting against refugees and non-citizens who had migrated to Italy (La Rosa 2020). Specifically in Palermo, a ship carrying hundreds of

migrants was stranded near the city's port, leading to a "standoff" between Mayor Leoluca Orlando, who was open to welcoming these migrants to Palermo, and Salvini, who forbade the ship from docking anywhere in Italy (Batycka 2018; Moffitt 2018). This incident is an example of how the concept of belonging on Italy's land is so politicized, with Salvini wanting to narrow the idea of who belongs and Orlando wanting to widen it. This happened at the same time as the biennale, so visitors and locals alike were able to see this "dissonance" in action.

To speak about the billboards that reflected this context, they featured black text that translated a quote by Benito Mussolini into four languages - Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, Greek - spoken in the Mediterranean area that are connected to Sicily's history (Batycka 2018; Lana 2018). In the quote, Mussolini describes Italy as "a nation of poets, of artists, of heroes, of saints, of thinkers, of scientists, of navigators, of migrants" (Batycka 2018). This quote is also the source for the artwork's title of *Square*, because it is inscribed on the roof of the fascist-era Square Colosseum in Rome (La Rosa 2020; Lana 2018). The quote, when originally spoken by Mussolini, was meant to promote Italian nationalism (La Rosa 2020) by listing the great achievements, in fields such as art and science, that had been made in Italy. It also emphasizes Italy's colonial efforts (La Rosa 2020) during the fascist era through the inclusion of "navigators" and "migrants."

In today's context, seeing "migrants" included in this nationalist statement may be surprising, but it is most likely that Mussolini was speaking of Italians who migrated to other countries for the sake of colonialism. Today, the word "migrant" is much more associated with people that migrate into Italy and other European countries, often fleeing conflict or floundering economies in Middle Eastern and North African countries in the hopes of a better life. Instead of being exclusive and colonial, the use of "migrants" in this quote can be reframed as inclusive and

accepting. Lana further reframes this quote through his translations of it into languages that are widely spoken but lesser known (Batycka 2018) in the Mediterranean area, which includes people who are often excluded from discussions about Mediterranean culture. In turn, those who do not understand the languages are excluded (La Rosa 2020), when they are usually included in this discussion due to knowing Italian or other more common languages.



III. Giuseppe Lana, *Square*, 4 billboards, 2018, Arabic (Lana 2018)

The billboards were set up along roads throughout Palermo with no background on their context, so those who did not know of their connection to the biennale and did not speak these languages would not understand them at all. The billboards' minimalist and brightly colored design made them more likely to grab the attention of passersby. In addition, the billboards were very different in appearance and language than the usual advertisements in Italian that hold those

spaces along the roads, which further increases the likelihood of grabbing people's attention. This element may even elicit surprise, confusion, or wonder in the average Italian viewing them with no context. This could mirror the experiences of migrants that have little understanding of the language or customs of Italy, but experience these feelings much more often than the locals.

The languages, especially Turkish, Arabic, and Hebrew, are more associated with the Middle East and Northern Africa, regions from which many people migrate to Europe. People often define "Mediterranean culture" as "Southern European culture," but Lana's use of these languages reminds us that the Middle East and North Africa contribute to "Mediterranean culture" as well. Associating the Mediterranean with Southern Europe also erases the many exchanges between different cultures throughout history and into the present bordering the Mediterranean that Manifesta 12 wanted to highlight.

In terms of how this work connects to politics, Lana is primarily critiquing the populist anti-immigrant government, mainly made up of Lega and the Five Star Movement, that was in power at the time of the biennale. The artist was born in Catania, Sicily (Lana), a city with less evidence of a history of cross-cultural communication than Palermo. Though, he was likely to have seen some evidence of this because the entire island of Sicily has this history to some extent. Throughout his life, Lana has also seen modern-day migration to Sicily develop over time. The artist's Sicilian background influenced this project because its theme of inclusion of people who speak these less common languages in the wider "Italian" community aligns with the island's history.



IV. Giuseppe Lana, *Square*, 4 billboards, 2018, Turkish (Lana 2018)

Lana has not experienced modern migration to Sicily first-hand. According to his website, he sees today's migrants "as among the most fragile and oppressed of contemporary society," but he also highlighted their strengths and belonging in Italy's "shared history" (Lana 2018). However, simply focusing on the hardships of a particular group of people can contribute to a white savior dynamic and condescension towards that group that ultimately undermines any empowering intention. So, it is important that Lana's project highlighted their strength and potential to contribute meaningfully to Italian society. He achieved this through the reclamation of Mussolini's quote, as well as making the billboards accessible in terms of public location and language. Native speakers of these four languages may not know the original context of the

quote, but still “find a positive form of identification with it” (La Rosa 2020, 362). Reframing the quote in the context of its fascist and exclusionary history certainly gives it power, but even reading the quote in their own language without its historical context could be a source of strength for migrants that view it.

This next case, made up of a series of untitled sculptures by Andreas Lolis from the Venice Biennale, focuses on a different aspect related to the idea of belonging on European land than the previous two cases. Specifically, it comments on homelessness and the experiences of homeless individuals, who are often treated as a nuisance, their sense of belonging entirely rejected. The artist of this work brings an interesting perspective to the conversation on European politics that contemporary art has had over the past decade. The subject matter Lolis focuses on comes from him witnessing the rampant homelessness in Athens, Greece (Scott 2019), according to the Biennale’s catalog in a section written by writer and critic Izabella Scott.

Greece, along with Italy, is an important location in terms of European politics and the migration crisis. International law scholar John Theodore, in his book titled *Survival of the European (Dis) Union: Responses to Populism, Nativism, and Globalization*, writes that Greece and Italy’s locations in relation to the Mediterranean Sea make them the most common destinations for migrants traveling from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe (Theodore 2019). Greece and Italy, according to EU asylum rules, were obligated to process all of the incoming migrants’ asylum claims even if the migrants intended to ultimately settle in another country (Theodore 2019). Intersecting with this, the homelessness problem in Greece was also affected by the EU’s economic austerity measures that hit Southern European countries the most (Theodore 2019). The migration and austerity policies of the EU essentially created a “perfect storm” in Greece in terms of the proliferation of homelessness.

The intersection of migration policies and homelessness in Greece is illustrated by journalist Daniel Trilling in his book *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe*, which is a product of the author connecting personally with and talking to refugees across Europe. One chapter focuses on Athens, detailing the “overcrowding and slum conditions” that forced some migrants to sleep in squatted buildings, city squares, and parks (Trilling 2018, 179). He learned about this by speaking with Afghan refugees over several years, who also had to face attacks by the neo-fascist Golden Dawn political party and the fear that they would be taken from their homes to detention centers for not having documentation (Trilling 2018). The anecdotes that Trilling writes about the refugee community in Athens illustrate how the issue of homelessness cannot be separated from the migration crisis and the rise of the radical right in Greece. As a result, while commenting on the homelessness in Greece is powerful on its own, Lolis is also commenting on the Greek and EU-wide politics that led to these conditions.

In an interview with Scott, the artist expanded on his idea to make art about the rampant homelessness in Greece, saying that homelessness becomes “invisible” over time as passersby ignore the victims of it and that he hopes his artwork will prompt people to “look again” (Scott 2018). In terms of the actual artwork, Lolis has worked in marble over his entire career. But, he uses it to sculpt objects that are “invisible” to passersby in a similar way that homeless people are, rather than the grandeur that marble often depicts. Common objects that he depicts include trash bags, cardboard, and wooden crates (Scott 2019). His showing at the Biennale also included a sculpture of a bench with a blanket and pillow on it, “appearing soft and dented, as if it bears the imprint of a sleeping body” (Scott 2019, 286), thus directly referencing the homelessness crisis.



V. Andreas Lolis, *Untitled*, 2018, garbage (Haupt & Binder 2019)

In terms of formal artistic elements alone, Lolis's sculptures are remarkable because they create a trompe l'oeil effect in which they seem to be the actual objects he depicts until the viewer looks carefully at them. The placement of the sculptures when they are exhibited enhance this trompe l'oeil effect because Lolis wanted them to blend into their environment (Scott 2018). In the case of the Biennale, the sculptures of trash bags, cardboard, and wooden crates were placed against the wall of the Giardini's Central Pavilion (Scott 2019), a place where one could realistically find real garbage. The bench was also placed in the Giardini to resemble a park bench. In addition, the sculptures do not have plinths (Scott 2018) like many other sculptures, so they can further blend into the environment. All of these elements of the sculptures' placement

make them appear less and less as “sculptures,” at least in terms of what the average viewer would expect.



VI. Andreas Lolis, *Untitled*, marble, 2018, bench (Rondinella 2019)

Lolis was also mindful of the type of marble he used to carve each object, making them as realistic as possible. For example, he chose a black marble with light veins for the trash bags, so the veins resembled the stretches and bumps that real trash bags show when they are full (Scott 2018). The use of marble also adds more meaning to the objects the artist depicted. Subject matters of marble sculptures are usually epic or heroic (Scott 2019), but representing objects that are literally discarded challenges this assumption. This reflects a common understanding that people have of marble, especially in Greece, where it was often used to depict deities in ancient times, and many of these sculptures are still very well known today. Using

marble to create discarded objects elevates both the objects themselves and the homeless population they represent. Conversely, this choice also demotes the material of marble to a “lower” level because of the differences in how people perceive marble versus discarded objects.

Returning to Lolis’s background as it relates to the sculptures’ subject matter, we are now prompted to think about whether he did the subject matter justice. The artist has not personally experienced homelessness, and depicting art about something one has not personally experienced can sometimes go awry. This can be especially problematic if a white person is commenting on an issue disproportionately affecting people of color because it can lead to a white savior dynamic. In addition, with experiences that are potentially physically and emotionally traumatizing, such as homelessness, those who have not faced them firsthand will be unable to understand them fully. Despite these possible pitfalls, Lolis commenting on the homelessness crisis in Greece is powerful because of how the crisis slowly becomes invisible and is taken as a given in cities. Because of this, the crisis is publicized a lot less than other issues such as the refugee crisis, which has become a popular subject matter for artists over the last decade. This work may actually challenge people’s tendencies to treat the homeless as invisible and remind them of the magnitude of the problem.

Conversely, the publicity towards the refugee crisis and it being a divisive issue in national and international politics means that people viewing art on the subject often already have strong opinions on the issue. As a result, these works may not change opinions or raise awareness of the refugee crisis, but a work on homelessness may due to it being a much less visible issue. None of this is to say that art about the refugee crisis is not important or that it cannot be powerful, but that subject matters such as homelessness may be more likely to teach people something new or challenge their current perceptions. Similar to the refugee crisis and

other political subject matters, however, the issue of homelessness can lead to a broader discussion about how it intersects with other issues.

Art at Sea

The artworks in this section reflect how the Mediterranean Sea has become highly politicized due to the migrants that cross over it every year and the governments throughout Europe that resist their arrival. They specifically communicate that the Mediterranean has become a site of physical, mental, and emotional trauma because of this. This trauma has been highly publicized by the photographs of refugees travelling on boats that are often small, unsafe, and overcrowded that appear in the news. Applied linguistics scholar Rania Magdi Fawzy, from the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Egypt, argues that these photographs often aestheticize their subjects' suffering (Fawzy 2019).

This publicization also means that there have been myriad articles written about the topic of trauma at sea. For example, Human Rights Watch says that Italy “legalize[d] a practice of delaying or refusing disembarkation of people rescued at sea,” which violates international human rights norms (*Human Rights Watch* 2020). As a result, there have been many news stories of Italy rejecting rescue ships full of migrants despite great domestic and international criticism, including the aforementioned incident of Salvini preventing a ship from docking in Palermo. Policies and attitudes in Europe such as those from Italy have greatly contributed to the trauma of migrants on the Mediterranean.

This first case, *The Soul of Salt* by Patricia Kaersenhout from Manifesta, specifically references trauma on the Atlantic Ocean as a result of the colonial powers' slave trade, rather than directly commenting on the trauma experienced on the Mediterranean. However, this work

being shown in Palermo means that the work can be easily thematically connected to the trauma of the Mediterranean Sea and paints a broader picture of trauma at sea by emphasizing its role in history as well as the present day. Kaersenhout's background has an interesting relationship with the exhibition's framing of Palermo as a cultural crossroads as well as an area of tension because her background also has these elements. It also shows how the trauma on the Atlantic as a result of the slave trade has influenced her practice.

According to her website, Kaersenhout was born and raised in the Netherlands to Black parents from Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America (Kaersenhout). Her background is connected to migration, but different from that of the Mediterranean, because of the Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade to the Caribbean and South America (Egherman 2018). In an interview, Kaersenhout describes how the Netherlands erase the role they played in the transport of enslaved people and the racism that continues in the country in the modern day - she says at one point "the Dutch don't do race" (Egherman 2018). She compares American racism and Dutch racism by saying that "it's out in the open" in the US, while people of color in the Netherlands constantly question whether they are actually experiencing racism, since it is more "under the skin" (Egherman 2018).

This work was in the "Out of Control Room" section of the exhibition, which serves as a compliment and a foil to the "Garden of Flows" section that included *Theater of the Sun*. As explained by *Frieze Magazine* senior editor Evan Moffitt, this section highlights the geopolitical conflict that surrounds Palermo (Moffitt 2018). While "Garden of Flows" is a celebration of intercultural communication and migration, "Out of Control Room" highlights the difficulties that can come from that. Many works from this section are located in Palazzo Forcella de Seta, and it being a former city fortification is apt for the themes of migration and borders found often

in this section (IvyCottageIndustries 2019; Hucal 2018). The sea is also visible from inside the building (Van der Haak, et al. 2018), serving as a direct reminder of how Kaersenhout frames the sea as a site of trauma. In addition, the style of the building itself shows influence from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Hutter von Arx 2018). This highlights the importance of Palermo's identity of a historically multicultural city central to the exhibition's theme. It also connects to the contemporary patterns of migration, especially of those from Africa and the Middle East, into Palermo that many works in this section reference.

This piece is very well fit to this section for multiple reasons. Kaersenhout's cultural background and body of work involve the themes of colonialism and enslavement, both of which literally took away the control of some people, leading to horrifying consequences for them. The imagery of the pile of salt also connects to the loss of control because its unusually large quantity can be overwhelming to the viewer. The salt is in no way contained, and seems almost as if it could disintegrate completely under wind or heavy touch.

The overwhelming amount of salt combined with the work's subject matter related to the sea serves as a reminder of the trauma that can come from the sea. In the context of Palermo, we see this manifest in the many deaths of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean (Hutter von Arx 2018). The artist also personally connects with the trauma that the sea can bring because her parents' background as Black and Surinamese likely means that their ancestors were forcibly brought across the Atlantic. This also relates to the trauma that Kaersenhout has experienced in the Netherlands when they erase their role in the slave trade, and thus erase their essential weaponization of the sea. The salt furthers this connection to the slave trade because it references a Caribbean legend of enslaved people refraining from eating salt in the hopes that it would make them able to fly back to Africa (*Manifesta 12* 2018). Therefore, it also connects to the trauma of

leaving one's homeland that is very clear in both the horrific experiences of the slave trade and the experiences of contemporary migrants to Europe, especially those who had their homeland destroyed due to conflict and war.



VII. Patricia Kaersenhout, *The Soul of Salt*, performance with blessed salt, 2016-2018, installation view (Träger 2018)

Another important aspect of this work is that elements of performance were brought in along with the actual installation. According to Kaersenhout's website, women from refugee centers in Sicily sang an 18th-century song that originated from enslaved peoples (Kaersenhout 2018), who were seen as "shy" at first but hearing each other's voices and seeing the audience's reactions made them more confident (Hutter von Arx 2018). Meanwhile, a Black Surinamese man blessed the salt with a ritual. This performance gives the installation more context because a pile of salt is deceptively simple without knowing its background. The identities of the people

participating in the performance are important because they connect the trauma associated with the Mediterranean Sea with that associated with the Atlantic Ocean. This is especially true in the case of the refugees' performance. The inclusion of refugees in the performance gives this community a voice in a work partially about their experiences by an artist who has not experienced their unique challenges, even if she can connect with it on some level due to her background.

The references to enslavement in both the installation and the performances point to a narrative of migration that is broader than in many of the other works that understandably focus specifically on migration to Palermo. This is likely empowering for Kaersenhout because she has seen the erasure of racism within European countries, but exhibiting this work that many Europeans would have seen is an attempt to change this narrative she has faced her whole life. It was also likely empowering for the refugee performers because while the refugee crisis is more "out in the open" in Europe, they still experience discrimination and are often silenced from sharing their perspectives.

Kaersenhout adds one more element to her installation through the idea of viewer participation. The artist invited them to take a handful of the salt with them and dissolve it into the sea "to complete the cycle of commemoration" (Hutter von Arx 2018) by using the provided shovels and paper bags. One role that this activity plays is providing a tangible representation of migration of people and goods, both important to how the exhibition frames Palermo and to the narrative Kaersenhout has developed. She says specifically: "Salt from Amsterdam is in Senegal and now I have salt from the Mediterranean in Amsterdam" (Egherman 2018), which shows the broad scale of this project. In addition, Manifesta's nature as a "nomadic biennial" most likely means that the salt viewers took with them may be all over the world at this point. The specific

act of dissolving the salt into water can be empowering, especially for those who personally connect to the trauma connected to the sea. Even seeing the pile of salt shrink over time from this activity could be empowering because the aforementioned overwhelming feeling that the physical installation can bring is diminished over time, which can also represent healing from the trauma the pile symbolizes.



VIII. Patricia Kaersenhout, *The Soul of Salt*, performance with blessed salt, 2016-2018, performance (Bellini 2018)

One question that this viewer participation raises is: who exactly participated? The installation being within a *palazzo* rather than a public space means that it is one of the less accessible parts of the exhibition. From that, we may infer that a greater number of privileged people who have no personal connection to the work's subject matter actually viewed it, but it is

still likely that some viewers did connect to the work, hopefully benefiting from the ways Kaersenhout designed this experience to be conducive to healing. The people invited to perform, all of whom have intimate connections with the work, perhaps participated in this aspect of experience as well. Conversely, the participation of viewers with no personal connection to the work may still be in the spirit of Kaersenhout's message, especially the part about the erasure of racism in Europe. This activity also allows participants to almost take the art with them, and once they dissolve it into the sea, they will be prompted to remember how the salt symbolizes the trauma of enslavement, colonization, and experiences of refugees. Some viewers may look at art with this subject matter and think about it in the moment, but forget about it afterwards, but this unique experience may have cemented it better in their memory. Even if this activity just resulted in more awareness about this subject, especially among Europeans, it is hopefully a small step in the right direction for European countries' recognition of the role they played and continue to play in these traumatic histories.

This next case, Christoph Büchel's *Barca Nostra* from the Venice Biennale, unlike Kaersenhout's work, directly addresses the trauma that migrants experience on the Mediterranean. This artwork was also the subject of great controversy. All artworks have a history of how they were planned and executed, but this piece has a much more geopolitical history than most. Its origins are that it was a fishing vessel transporting between 800 and 1,100 migrants across the Mediterranean Sea from Libya, that experienced a shipwreck killing most of the people on board (Magnúsdóttir 2019; Ruiz 2019). The exhibition catalog for *May You Live In Interesting Times* details the vessel's history after the shipwreck in a section written by Nina Magnúsdóttir, curator of the Icelandic national pavilion at this Biennale, characterized by further migration of the empty, now non-functional vessel. The Italian government retrieved the

shipwreck and brought it to Augusta, Sicily so that the bodies of those still left inside could be removed and identified by an operations of hundreds of people, including Navy personnel, the Red Cross, forensic pathologists, university personnel, and many other groups (Magnúsdóttir 2019). Despite this extensive operation, according to *Washington Post* foreign affairs journalist Siobhan O’Grady, many bodies were never recovered or identified (O’Grady 2019).

Other steps in the vessel’s journey include a proposal from then-Prime Minister of Italy to bring it to Brussels to highlight the EU’s negligence that played a role in this tragedy, and an initiative to turn it into a human rights museum in Milan (Magnúsdóttir 2019). Notably, there was also an initiative by migrants in Palermo that started a petition to reclaim the vessel “as an act of symbolic and political appropriation” (Magnúsdóttir 2019, 223). This mirrors the practice by systemically oppressed groups of reclaiming slurs that have historically been used against them, which is a means of empowerment. In a similar sense, this proposal for reclamation would allow the participating migrants to feel more empowered and take control of the narrative of the vessel, with which they personally connect on a deep level.

The vessel’s tragic history means that this work has an inherent connection to the sea. While we can argue about whether displaying the vessel without any changes to its form post-shipwreck can actually be constituted as an “artwork,” the visual quality of the boat can be interpreted by the viewer in a similar way to other “artworks.” Without even knowing its history, the viewer can tell that this boat has been through some kind of turmoil by seeing the heavy rusting throughout the exterior surface. The viewer can also tell that the vessel is unable to function because of the large holes on either side. Without any context however, the viewer is not able to tell how the vessel got into this state or why it is being displayed.

If the viewer knows the context, one significant observation they make may be related to the boat's size. Knowing that hundreds of migrants were once on board, the viewer is left thinking about how small the boat is for that number of people, and how the situation was already perilous just from overcrowding alone. This is confirmed by the Venice Biennale's catalog, which said that, on average, there were five people per square meter (Magnúsdóttir 2019), which is a square with sides a little over seven feet. Essentially, this means that the people on board had no personal space for the entirety of the journey. The viewer is also unable to tell what the interior structure of the boat was exactly like, so they are left guessing on how exactly this number of people was arranged. If the viewer knows the context of the vessel characterized by the deaths of hundreds of migrants at sea, the severe damage done to it can become a symbol of the danger that the sea can represent.

The ship eventually made its way to Venice for the 2019 Biennale, to be exhibited as a work by Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel (O'Grady 2019). The work was subsequently titled *Barca Nostra*, which means "our boat" in Italian. To further clarify this, the words themselves are Italian, but the arrangement of the words harks back to Latin. It mirrors the common Latin phrase *Mare Nostrum* (meaning "our sea"), which was a common way that the ancient Romans described the Mediterranean Sea (Hess 2015). This also connects back to present-day events on the Mediterranean, as shown by a history of the term by scholar Peter Hess. He writes that Italy established *Operation Mare Nostrum*, which was meant to rescue migrants in unsafe boats at sea while apprehending the traffickers that manned these boats (Hess 2015). The title reminds us both of the history of the Mediterranean as a shared resource and as a current staging ground of the migration crisis, of which this vessel was a part.

The vessel had a complex history before it was displayed at the Biennale, but it also had a complex story in terms of people’s reactions to the work. One article described it as one of the most “talked about” and “controversial” works in the 2019 Biennale (Eisen 2019). To expand more on Büchel’s intentions, an article by *BBC News* evaluating whether exhibiting the ship at the Biennale was “distasteful” quotes the artist as saying that *Barca Nostra* is dedicated to the victims of the shipwreck, the people involved in recovering the vessel, as well as “our mutual responsibility representing the collective policies and politics that create such wrecks” (*BBC News* 2019). This points to the intentions of the project being to raise awareness about the vessel’s history and the circumstances that could lead to such a tragedy. Similar to the artist, the exhibition’s catalog framed it as being “a collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration...dedicated to the victims and people involved in its recovery” (Magnúsdóttir 2019).



IX. Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra*, shipwreck from 18th April 2015, 2015-2018 (Büchel 2019)

From these descriptions, the intention of this work seems to be raising awareness about the perilous reality of today's migration crisis, as well as the individual history of the vessel. The idea of "mutual responsibility" seems to hold accountable anyone that is viewing the work for the systems that contributed to the shipwreck, possibly asking them to examine their role in these systems. The work being named *Barca Nostra* furthers this idea of holding people accountable for the systems that contributed to the tragedy in which they are involved or complicit. The name being in Italian specifically puts particular emphasis on the responsibility of Italy and its populist anti-immigrant government at the time.

There is evidence that other people in addition to Büchel were positive about exhibiting the vessel. The Chief of Staff of the Sicilian Cultural Heritage Department, Giovanni Angileri, said that Sebastiano Tusa, a marine archaeologist who had died in a plane crash shortly prior, was "passionate" about displaying it at the Biennale (O'Grady 2019). While this description is vague, it implies that Tusa had strong convictions as to why exhibiting the vessel at the Biennale was important. His background in marine archaeology points to his likely comprehensive knowledge of the extent and nature of migration-related tragedies in the Mediterranean, showing that he fully understood the context surrounding the shipwreck.

The controversy surrounding this work is heavily connected to the context of how the vessel was actually exhibited at the Biennale. One of the most important elements of the display was that there was no display, in a sense: there were no labels along with the boat explaining its history or context (*BBC News* 2019). Furthermore, this lack of a display was requested by Büchel, the exact reasoning unknown from the artist's lack of interviews on the project (Eisen 2019; Ruiz 2019). The idea that the artist "does not do interviews," as said by *The Art Newspaper* editor Cristina Ruiz, was a way in which he could remove himself from the work,

along with the lack of labels attributing the project to him. This is a strange and surprising choice, because for a work Büchel himself said was about “our mutual responsibility” (*BBC News* 2019), he seemed to remove his own responsibility both in the systems that led to the shipwreck in the first place and the art piece itself. The lack of labels contrasts with the other works exhibited at the Biennale, most of which were paired with labels informing viewers of the artist, title, year, medium, and, most importantly, the meaning behind the work.

The vessel was placed outside in the water on a floating dock, near a cafe associated with the Biennale (Eisen 2019). The outcome of this placement was described as such: it is “at best a solemn backdrop to overpriced lunches and at worst a selfie op” (Eisen 2019). Art critic Adrian Searle also mentioned the idea of people taking selfies with the vessel (*BBC News* 2019). According to Eisen, even the “best-case scenario” for this placement was poor because its placement near the cafe meant that the “overpriced lunches” were the primary interest of many people who bore witness to the vessel, rather than the ostensible “memorial” or “dedication.” The “worst-case scenario” of the vessel turning into a “selfie op” reflects the decision not to include any labels for the work that would let the viewer know that it was a site of hundreds of migrants’ deaths.

It also reflects a flaw on the part of the viewers who took selfies in front of the vessel, even if they did not know the ship’s tragic context. Its place near a Biennale cafe and the fact that they took selfies with it means that they at least saw it as an artwork that was part of the exhibition. But, they took selfies with the artwork without knowing what it meant, raising a question that asks why they would take a selfie with an artwork they knew nothing about besides its appearance. This is an example of a practice in which people who visit art exhibitions in our contemporary era take pictures of the work but spend very little time actually looking at and

learning about the work before moving on to the next piece they want to photograph. This trades a true appreciation for art with a mostly empty gesture with a “collect-them-all” mentality. This supports the argument by art critic Stephen Pritchard that the way the vessel was exhibited was an act of commodification (*BBC News* 2019). This practice also reflects that many exhibition-goers do not read the labels of the artwork, even if they are provided, so perhaps those that took selfies with the vessel would not have read the label anyways.



X. Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra*, shipwreck from 18th April 2015, 2015-2018, with visitors (Padovani 2019)

Besides the lack of labels, another criticism of the artwork that people had was that it did not acknowledge the role of the migrants in the shipwreck enough and that it left them out of the narrative. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a journalist who focuses on issues of immigration and

diversity, said: “the dead souls are not there, not even as black silhouettes” (Alibhai-Brown 2019). From this, she inferred that the migrants were “unimportant” to Büchel (Alibhai-Brown 2019). Pritchard said that the work “totally exploit[ed]” the lives of the migrants as well as the issue of migration itself (*BBC News* 2019). Büchel may have wanted to capitalize on making an artwork about the perils of migration, especially that of refugees, since this was clearly a very popular subject matter in the 2019 Biennale, almost taking advantage of the victims so that he could be “on trend.” Related to this, a spokesperson for the UN Refugee Agency who actually met the few survivors of the shipwreck, Carlotta Sami, said that she had “mixed feelings” about the work (O’Grady 2019). She also said that the memory of meeting the survivors “will always be with” her (O’Grady 2019), meaning that she may have felt the absence of the victims in the piece’s narrative stronger than others commenting on it.

This absence connects back to the initiative by migrants in Palermo that started a petition for them to reclaim the ship symbolically and politically (Magnúsdóttir 2019). Instead, the ship was claimed by Büchel, who perhaps could have executed the project better by consulting migrants or the survivors in some way, or including the stories of the victims. Even with this though, there is no guarantee that the project would have been executed without exploitation because the artist cannot know what it is actually like to experience life as a refugee migrating to Europe. We do not know what the migrants or the survivors think about this project described as exploitative by many journalists and art critics, both because they do not have the monetary or travel capacities to actually see the work in person, and that they are a part of a group that is usually left out of the conversation. The exploitation of the vessel may still continue today. According to *The Art Newspaper* editors Ruiz and Hannah McGivern, it was intended to be

moved back to Augusta for long-term display in a memorial garden, but it remained in Venice until April 2021 due to difficulties Büchel had in transporting it (Ruiz 2020; McGivern 2021).

This case, *Written by Water* by Marco Godinho, also directly commented on the migrants' trauma on the Mediterranean, but in a very different and less controversial way than Büchel's work. Unlike the other case studies from Venice, this work is in a national pavilion rather than the central exhibition. In terms of this national pavilion specifically, we can analyze *Written by Water* within the context of the artist's background and the country of Luxembourg. To analyze this, it is important to understand the art piece itself. It is an installation of hundreds of notebooks placed on a wedge within the building that housed the pavilion. In a video trailer for Godinho's work on the Luxembourg Pavilion's website, <https://www.luxembourgpavilion.lu/>, the artist compares the wedge to a wave breaking at sea (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019). The wedge at its highest point towers over the viewer and is more than double their height, which reflects the overwhelm that the sea can bring, both in terms of its beauty and in terms of its danger.

With the notebooks, as explained both in the trailer and in the catalog for the exhibition, Godinho submerged them temporarily in different parts of the Mediterranean, turning their pages while they were in the water so that they would become completely "imbibed" with the water (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019; La Biennale di Venezia 2019). His motivation for this project comes from both history and the present day as it relates to the sea. He thought about Homer's *Odyssey*, a story of migration in which the sea plays a starring role, while also thinking about contemporary migration in the Mediterranean basin, especially the cases in which migrants died or disappeared at sea (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019).



XI. Marco Godinho, *Written by Water*, notebooks dipped into water at different locations in the Mediterranean Sea, 2013-ongoing, with the artist (Godinho 2019)

After submerging the notebooks, Godinho would let them dry and record each of them (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019) in a way reminiscent of cataloguing library books. It is also reminiscent of statistical work done to track the numbers and different types of migrants in nations, regions, and the world done by organizations like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In this sense, the notebooks are representative of the migrants transformed, albeit in a different way, by the Mediterranean. Each notebook is unique and tells a different story, pages bent and warped by the sea. Closeup views of the notebooks in the trailer reveal other “inscriptions” made by the sea, such as grains of sand strewn across the page or a piece of

seaweed stuck to a page, reminiscent of a pressed flower. The way the sea changes the notebooks also represents the personal, mental, emotional, and sometimes physical transformations of migrants travelling on the Mediterranean. Both the wedge and the notebooks that make up the installation express how the sea can overpower people, especially in dangerous and traumatizing ways.

Also notable is how the notebooks contain no actual writing and all the pages are left blank except for any marks the sea makes on them. Godinho emphasizes the experiences of the migrants who disappeared at sea in the video (*Luxembourg Pavilion 2019*), and the blank pages can represent the stories that will never be told as a result. The pages can also represent the general idea that migrants, especially refugees and those seeking asylum, are often silenced and disenfranchised. This connects to the artist's practice of letting migrants inspect and interact with the notebooks once he returned to Luxembourg (*Luxembourg Pavilion 2019*), allowing them to reflect on their own relationships to the Mediterranean. Another group that inspected and interacted with the notebooks was blind people (*Luxembourg Pavilion 2019*), who were able to "read" the notebooks using touch, significant since they usually do not have access to stories if they are told through traditional paper books. The pages being blank added to the idea that these notebooks were telling a story in a different way.

Godinho's background gives us further insight on this work. He originally comes from Portugal (*La Biennale di Venezia 2019*), which is interesting because its location in Southern Europe, with coastlines facing Morocco and the Atlantic Ocean, means that he was likely exposed to cross-cultural exchange and communication. The artist's overall practice "revolves around travel, nomadism, and displacement" (*La Biennale di Venezia 2019*, 112), which could have also been influenced by his exposure to the sea in Portugal. The sea and humanity's diverse

relationships to it also appears to be a major theme of Godinho's practice since all of his work in the Luxembourgish pavilion, not just *Written by Water*, revolves around this theme. A press release for *Written by Water* describes him as a "nomadic explorer" (*La Biennale di Venezia*, et al. 2019, 1), suggesting that he has firsthand experience with at least the themes of travel and nomadism on which his work often comments. This is apt because, according to a dossier from Godinho's website, the artist splits his time between Paris and Luxembourg, and studied in France, Germany, and Switzerland (*Marco Godinho*). In addition, he has also been in many solo and group exhibitions across Europe and the Americas (*Marco Godinho*).



XII. Marco Godinho, *Written by Water*, notebooks dipped into water at different locations in the Mediterranean Sea, 2013-ongoing, close-up (@GDjaai 2019)

From his project in which he dipped notebooks into all different parts of the Mediterranean sea, we can see that he does extensive travel beyond those listed in the dossier. Traveling throughout the Mediterranean basin for *Written by Water* likely helped Godinho to better understand the experiences of those that travel on the Mediterranean Sea, such as the migrants. This is important because much of his firsthand experience with travel seems to be within Europe, rather than on the Mediterranean, so this gave him more experience actually travelling on the sea.

For this project, he also specifically travelled to places that have been marked by contemporary migration to Europe from Africa and the Middle East, meaning that he was also able to learn about the experiences of the migrants he intended to represent with his notebooks. These places included Greece, the south of France, the strait of Gibraltar, and Lampedusa, Italy (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019). In the trailer for his work, Godinho described these visits as “rituals” and “a gesture of collecting the invisible memories of the sea” (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019). These characterizations suggest a degree of thoughtfulness greater than if the artist was simply visiting these places to, essentially, check all the boxes. Godinho’s notion of collecting memories also suggests that this project was not simply so he could create the actual artwork, but also so that he could genuinely learn about how people experienced the Mediterranean.

Since the national pavilions at the Biennale are meant to represent their countries in some way, we can analyze what it means that specifically the country of Luxembourg presented this work. Luxembourg is a small, land-locked country tucked between France, Germany, and Belgium. Because of its location and size, we can guess that it is not among the major states known for incoming refugees and migration, even though *Written by Water* focuses so heavily on these topics. However, Godinho sheds some more light on Luxembourg’s reality as someone

who lives there part-time. In the video trailer, he credits the country's historical development to migration, describing it today as "diverse" and "cosmopolitan" (*Luxembourg Pavilion* 2019). In terms of refugees and migration specifically, the UNHCR's "Refugee Data Finder" (<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>) recorded 2,548 refugees and 1,785 asylum seekers in Luxembourg in 2019 (*UNHCR* 2019). To compare, Italy had 207,602 refugees and 47,030 asylum seekers recorded in 2019 (*UNHCR* 2019). With these statistics, it is important to note that they are likely not completely accurate, especially because of the migrants' tendency to move between European states.

Nonetheless, these statistics show that Luxembourg has in fact been impacted by the migration crisis. One possible reason that refugees and asylum seekers ended up in Luxembourg is its location between many bigger European countries, meaning that migrants may stay in the country for a period of time in the hopes of eventually moving to one of those countries. This is especially true for those that already have family or friends who have settled in Europe. But Godinho says that "he feels good living there" and overall paints Luxembourg in a positive light, so it is certainly possible that some migrants desired to start a new life there. Its identity as a landlocked country also shows that migrants did not just end up there by default on the basis of it being the first European country in which they arrived from the sea. Some may even prefer a country that is less known for migration due to the backlash African and Middle Eastern migrants have received in the more popular countries in which to settle.

If Luxembourg had not been impacted, using this project to represent the nation would come across as disingenuous and as an attempt to capitalize on a subject matter that is very popular in contemporary art. But these statistics show that this is in fact not the case, and this project is a true reflection of Luxembourg's national identity. Choosing this project to represent

Luxembourg may have also been to show that all European countries are impacted by the migration crisis, not just the ones, such as Italy and Greece, that receive the most publicity on this issue. Many viewers of this work may not have thought that Luxembourg has been significantly affected by migration, so using this project as a means to raise awareness of this would be effective in that it would not just be telling people what they already knew or thought about the migration crisis. In reality, all European countries have been impacted by this crisis. Even Monaco, a city-state within France with the lowest recorded cases of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, had 22 refugees and 0 asylum seekers recorded in 2019 (*UNHCR 2019*). Thus, this project being viewed in the context of the Luxembourgish national pavilion could have prompted visitors to challenge their assumptions about the migration crisis in Europe.

From both the analyses of these case studies and the analyses of the broader contexts of their exhibitions, we can reflect on many questions about political art in contemporary art biennales. Some of these questions have to do with what the purpose of making political art is, especially for artists with less of a personal connection to their chosen subject matter. Do they create political art to prompt change or to raise awareness? Is it simply an example of virtue signaling? Is showing these works in contemporary art biennales effective in serving these purposes? Other questions specifically have to do with the relationship between the artist and their chosen subject matter, especially the ethics behind it. Should artists with less of a personal connection to a political subject matter actually make work about it? Is there a more ethical way these artists can do this? Accessibility, especially in terms of the ability to actually attend these biennale exhibitions, also raises many questions. Who actually gets to go? How are they impacted by their visit? Who does not get to go?

Concluding Reflections

Each of the case studies analyzed above directly referenced issues related to migration. The one artwork that is less obviously connected to migration is Lolis's sculptures commenting on homelessness in Greece, but as we determined, these issues often go hand in hand with and exacerbate one another. In addition, those who designed the themes for and curated the two biennale exhibitions had today's migration crisis in Europe in mind. This leads us to question what the purpose of making and exhibiting art about migration is. We can use the categories of political art put forth by Irish artist and scholar Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin when thinking about possible purposes.

Three of the artists analyzed above focus specifically on the traumas related to migration: Lolis, Büchel, and Godinho. The type of political art that they created falls under Ó Croidheáin's category of portrayal because their works mainly depict what is happening (Ó Croidheáin 2010). He says that political perspective is "implicit" in these works, but also "free-floating" (Ó Croidheáin 2010), meaning that they do not express an explicit point of view. For example, Lolis depicted the homelessness crisis in his work, with the implicit point of view that homeless people should no longer be ignored by the society at large. Meanwhile, the other three artists, Fallen Fruit, Lana, and Kaersenhout, focus on elevating the identities of migrants and expressing their importance in the fabric of Italy, and especially Palermo. Ó Croidheáin calls this type of political art promotion, which is defined by presenting resolutions to a problem experienced by people who are struggling to solve the problem themselves (Ó Croidheáin 2010). Thus, these works express a more explicit point of view. For example, Fallen Fruit's work expresses the importance of migrants to Italian society, culture, and history, by referencing the international origins of fruits in Palermo.

Two of the main possibilities for what the purposes of these works were are raising awareness and prompting change, which align with Ó Croidheáin's portrayal and promotion categories, respectively. Assuming that Lolis, Büchel, and Godinho wanted to raise awareness of the specific issues on which their art commented on, it is important to see if this was actually successful. Lolis's sculptures comment homelessness, an issue that is often ignored and taken for granted, so this work may have actually made viewers think about changing the way they treat homeless people. However, it is also easy for viewers to think about this issue when they are actually looking at these works, but quickly forgetting about it as they move on with their day.

The other two artists focused more obviously on migration, especially travelling on the Mediterranean Sea. This issue has been much more publicized, as illustrated by Fawzy's research demonstrating the high circulation of the photographs of refugees travelling on boats. Since these artworks focus on a much more publicized issue, their possible purpose of raising awareness may be less effective at actually prompting viewers to rethink or learn about the issue. This is especially true since people that are privileged enough to visit art biennales are also privileged enough to be informed on the topic of migration to an extent that they are already aware of the traumatic experiences that the migrants can face.

In terms of the works by Fallen Fruit, Lana, and Kaersenhout that seem to elevate the identities of migrants, they are more likely to intend to actually change how viewers see migrants. Assuming that they are already aware of the migration crisis, viewers may be prompted to see migrants as strong rather than simply tragic figures. If the viewers interact with migrants, a more complex view of them could prompt them to treat them as full human beings rather than targets for their pity or condescension. However, again, it would be easy for viewers to think about this in the moment of actually observing the artwork, but forget about it once they move on

with their day. In addition, it is impossible to measure whether political art prompts any change. This discussion about the purpose of political art has revealed that it is difficult to actually see whether these works are successful in raising awareness or creating change.

Beyond these purposes, these artists may also simply be engaging in virtue signaling by attempting to express that they care about the issues of migration and homelessness when they have no real personal connection to these. Even if they were intending to raise awareness or to create change, if their art was not effective at achieving these, their actual impact may still be seen as simply virtue signaling. Just as “criticism of the state increases its symbolic capital” (Bethwaite & Kangas 2020, 497) in art biennales, artists can capitalize on making art about polarizing political issues such as migration.

This discussion naturally brings us to how the relationship between the artists and their chosen subject matters can affect the ethics behind them creating this work. To analyze this, we can look at two of the artists in particular. Kaersenhout is the artist most connected to her chosen subject matter because she references the trauma that her ancestors experienced when they were forced to migrate across the Atlantic as part of the slave trade. As a Black woman living in the Netherlands, she can also relate to the migrants from North Africa and the Middle East even if their background is different, because they share the common experience of racism in Europe. When indirectly commenting on the European migration crisis by exhibiting *The Soul of Salt* in Palermo, Kaersenhout bridged the gap between her and migrants from North Africa and the Middle East by featuring a performance by local refugees. Overall, Kaersenhout was able to reference her own personal experiences while also uplifting other voices that had overlapping but diverse experiences. Perhaps her own experience feeling disenfranchised as a Black woman in

Europe influenced her to make sure that other groups of people such as the migrants did not experience a similar disenfranchisement by directly including them in her artwork.

The remaining five artists are much less personally connected to their chosen subject matters, but we can specifically look at Büchel as a contrast to Kaersenhout. By exhibiting a shipwreck that had contained hundreds of refugees travelling across the Mediterranean as an artwork, he explicitly commented on the migration crisis. However, his identity as Swiss and Icelandic (O'Grady 2019) means that he has minimal personal connection to his chosen subject matter. His project, *Barca Nostra*, received much critical controversy claiming that the artist saw the victims of the shipwreck as “unimportant” and that the lack of labels left viewers with no knowledge of the work’s tragic context (Alibhai-Brown 2019; *BBC News* 2019; Eisen 2019; Ruiz 2019). In other words, he did not uplift the voices of migrants who have personally experienced the trauma of travelling to Europe from North Africa or the Middle East on the Mediterranean, despite having no firsthand experience with it.

Kaersenhout, by comparison, could personally connect to the migrants’ experiences of racism in Europe, but she still included people who had completed the journey across the Mediterranean themselves in her work. Thus, if artists with less of a personal connection to a political subject matter such as migration want to comment more ethically on it, they should follow Kaersenhout’s model of letting people much more connected to the subject matter influence their artwork. However, there is no guarantee that artists with little personal experience with a subject matter would effectively achieve this or even understand how it could benefit their work. Büchel, a relatively privileged white man, likely has little experience feeling disenfranchised and is accustomed to having a say on all topics, even those that have little to do with him. Thus, he may not understand how people might feel disenfranchised by having no

influence over his art, even if they are much more familiar with the subject than him. This discussion circles back to the purpose of political art, which risks being little more than virtue signaling if it is made by an artist with no connection to a given political subject matter.

Furthermore, this leads us to question whether people with personal, firsthand connections to political subject matters such as migration that both exhibitions feature so heavily can actually attend the biennales. Not only could they be silenced from contributing to the artwork, they may also be unable to offer their opinions on art that comments on their own experiences. Because of this, the accessibility of art biennales such as the Venice Biennale and Manifesta is important to discuss. One possible barrier to these exhibitions is the money needed to attend them as visitors have to pay for entrance tickets, as well as transportation to and accommodation at the location. Some of the outlying pavilions at the Venice Biennale and some of the individual exhibits at Manifesta in Palermo were unticketed and in public places (Eisen 2019; Hutter von Arx 2015), which can eliminate some, but not all, of the costs of entry. In addition, Ó Croidheáin says that art in public spaces means that more people can influence the narrative told about the art, especially if the art comments on a political subject matter (Ó Croidheáin 2017).

However, there are still a lot of other costs associated with attending an art biennale. As a result, much of the audience for the Venice Biennale and Manifesta are in the middle and upper classes. There are also other costs to attending these biennale exhibitions that not everyone is able to incur. Some people cannot take the time needed to attend because they are too busy with work, family, or other obligations. These costs represent major barriers to entry for migrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers. Meanwhile, they represent minimal barriers for other, more privileged populations such as middle- to upper-class Europeans and Americans.

Another barrier to entry for less privileged populations, especially those in the lower class and/or people of color, is that they do not feel welcome in arts institutions such as museums, galleries, and biennales. Even if they can pass through the other barriers to entry, they may be discouraged from actually taking that opportunity. International relations scholars Bethwaite and Anni Kangas say that the Venice Biennale and other biennales often aim to “give voice to underrepresented cultures, histories, and politics,” but they usually still subscribe to Western ideas that contradict this goal (Bethwaite & Kangas 2018). One way in which this is reflected is that the “underrepresented” (Bethwaite & Kangas 2018) are often depicted by artists that have much less personal knowledge of their unique experiences.

Despite these barriers to accessibility, there has been some limited progress made on this matter. For example, the Venice Biennale has digitized much of its Archive over the recent years, but access to it is still limited (Baravalle 2020). One way in which even those who cannot attend the biennale could still have access to it is if the Archive was made open to the public. Speaking of the virtual world, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with new options to make biennales and other art exhibitions more accessible to those who cannot attend in person. In fact, the 13th edition of Manifesta in Marseille, France opened to local residents in 2020, but when it was forced to close early due to lockdown restrictions, they provided people with a way in which they could view the exhibition virtually (*Manifesta 13* 2020; Brown 2020; Durand 2020). Even after the pandemic, we can still provide virtual experiences of art biennales, as well as other ideas such as having some events, such as conferences, on Zoom when appropriate, to enhance accessibility to them. Continuing to offer virtual or online components of art biennales also means that more diverse voices would be able to contribute to the discussion, even if they cannot attend in person due to a variety of possible reasons.

The Venice Biennale and Manifesta have also made some progress in making more diverse populations feel welcome. One way in which they have done this is diversifying their exhibited artists, curators, and other types of people involved in making these biennales happen. For example, Okwui Enwezor, whose exhibition theme also referenced political themes, was the first and only curator of the Venice Biennale from Africa (Smith 2015; Russeth 2019). The exhibition he curated also included more female and non-Western artists than previous editions of the Venice Biennale (Smith 2015), which suggests that more diversity in one area of the biennale is likely to spread to other areas.

Another way in which more diverse audiences can feel represented and welcome is through the exhibited artists. For example, in the next edition of the Venice Biennale, which was postponed from 2021 to 2022 due to the pandemic (Farago 2020), will include Simone Leigh, who focuses on the Black female experience in her art and will be the first Black woman to represent the US at its national pavilion (Harris 2020). Because of the timing of this decision, it is likely that the movement towards anti-racism in the US that occurred after the murder of George Floyd influenced this choice. While the US was in charge of this decision instead of the biennale itself, this hopefully represents a wider trend towards anti-racist ideas having a greater impact on the representation of diverse backgrounds in art biennales, especially since the anti-racist movement in the US influenced similar movements across the world.

While some progress has been made in terms of making the Venice Biennale and Manifesta more accessible and welcoming, especially to diverse audiences, much more should still be done. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, participation in cultural life and enjoying the arts are human rights to which everyone should have access (UN 1948).

Making art biennales more accessible and welcoming to all will contribute to ensuring this important human right is attainable by anyone regardless of their background.

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