

# ART FOR COEXISTENCE

Unlearning the Way We See Migration

Christine Ross





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UNLEARNING THE WAY WE SEE MIGRATION

CHRISTINE ROSS

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# PREFACE

I started writing my manuscript just after March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. The coronavirus crisis became the persistent background of my evolving research. Although not addressed in this book, it troublingly disclosed several realities that likewise define twenty-first-century migration. Here, I briefly discuss four of them, all of which are investigated further in the book's chapters.

First: *the vulnerability of the art world in moments of planetary crises*. During the pandemic, the sphere of art and culture was significantly impoverished: galleries and museums were temporarily closed in most European and North American countries at one time or another, leading to significant staff cuts and a substantial decline in public attendance; art exhibitions were suspended, sometimes transformed into virtual art shows; art projects became invisible or were simply canceled and left unpaid. This impoverishment was a significant outcome of the coronavirus crisis. However, as the artist and cultural organizer Ramaya Tegegne explained in a statement published in *Texte zur Kunst* in the spring of 2020, the pandemic weakened a milieu that was already fragile, especially for artists: "What I would like to share with you today is an account of litigation that is resonating with what artists and art workers are going through right now, and that too many of us had actually been going through even before this crisis."<sup>1</sup> The closing of art institutions was a sanitary decision. But it was also a governmental, political, and administrative decision to uniformize the management of sanitary measures in public buildings: museums, in particular, *did not have to be closed down* since they had already been transformed into some of the safest indoor spaces available to large publics. That decision intensified the economic instability of artists and art workers; it also devalued art's capacity to respond to the major predicaments of the historical present. Among this book's main motivations is the wish to counter this depreciation, to sustain art's critical capacity to respond and to declare it as an "essential service."

Second: *the persistent evolution of migration (as a constellation of migration, immigration, asylum, and border crises) during the pandemic*. The media coverage of migrating people leaving parts of Africa, Asia, and Central America for Europe or

the United States (the book's main focus) significantly diminished during the pandemic, but when news started to reemerge, the continual deterioration of the conditions surrounding the migration process—what I later call the necropolitics of twenty-first-century migration—became outright manifest. Here are some pivotal moments, which I summarize using media “migrant” terminology to better transmit the journalistic and statistical dimensions of these findings. Between January and mid-September 2020, 8,581 people were intercepted as they attempted to reach Europe by sea from the Tunisian coastal zone;<sup>2</sup> since the beginning of 2020, the violation of nonrefoulement—the principle that states should not send back refugees and asylum seekers to unsafe countries—became common practice in Greece during the COVID-19 crisis;<sup>3</sup> the agreement between the European Union (EU) and Turkey continued to be effective, which means that Turkey acted “as border cop on Europe’s behalf,” preventing migrants from crossing to Greece or admitting them when deported from Greece before they apply for asylum “in return for financial aid and other diplomatic concessions”;<sup>4</sup> the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration stated that at least 45 refugees died at the end of August “in the worst shipwreck reported so far this year off Libya’s coast”;<sup>5</sup> in September 2020, the UNHCR stated that the coronavirus pandemic had left countries (notably Tunisia) facing severe economic difficulties and unemployment and others (in particular Libya) trapped in civil war, so sea arrivals in 2020 in the EU (mainly Italy and Malt) significantly increased—Italy, for example, recorded 16,942 sea arrivals in 2020 up to September, compared to 11,471 in 2019;<sup>6</sup> the overcrowded Moria Refugee Camp in Lesbos was completely destroyed by fire in September 2020, temporarily leaving 13,000 refugees without a shelter—the camp was definitively closed down;<sup>7</sup> the International Organization for Migration reported on September 25 that three migrants had died and 13 were feared to have drowned after a boat transporting refugees capsized off Libya’s coast—the survivors (from Egypt, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Niger, Somalia, Syria, and Ghana) “were rescued by fishing vessels in coordination with the Libyan coastguard and later transferred to the Zliten detention centre”;<sup>8</sup> on September 29, 2020, the French refugee camp in Calais, housing residents predominantly from Sudan, Iran, Erythrina, and Ethiopia, was redismantled—this was the second largest dismantling of the camp after the evacuation of the “Jungle” in 2016—but immediately following the demolition of the Calais infrastructure, refugees and asylum seekers came back to start new camps;<sup>9</sup> in October 2020, the US Department of State reduced to 15,000 the number of admissible refugees in the country, the lowest quota in recent American history;<sup>10</sup>

the new quota was introduced while 3,000 migrants from Honduras initiated a collective walk to reach the American border;<sup>11</sup> in early October, Guatemala sent back approximately 3,500 Hondurans from the caravan heading to the United States “over concerns they might spread COVID-19”;<sup>12</sup> another caravan of at least 9,000 Hondurans was substantially blocked in Guatemala in January 2021;<sup>13</sup> on October 11, 2020, a refugee boat sank off the Tunisian coast, leaving at least 21 people (from Tunisia and various sub-Saharan African countries) dead;<sup>14</sup> on November 12, 2020, more than 74 migrants drowned in a shipwreck yet again off Libya’s coast—120 people were on board, 47 were rescued by fishermen and the Libyan coastguard;<sup>15</sup> on January 21 and 22, 2021, more than 370 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa were rescued by the *Ocean Viking* (operated by SOS Méditerranée), one of the last remaining nongovernmental organization (NGO) rescue boats operational in the Mediterranean Sea;<sup>16</sup> in March 2021, a few hours after having landed on the Greek island of Lesbos, Mustafa, his wife, and two young children were driven to the coast, beaten by masked men, brought out to sea, and abandoned there on a raft (“We were all forced on to the boat. If we looked up they shouted at us and hit us in the head. Then they stopped at a place in the sea where there were no other boats, they left us”);<sup>17</sup> in late April 2021, the *Ocean Viking* attempted to reach a rubber boat in distress in the midst of a storm near Libya, only to find an “open cemetery” of at least 130 lifeless bodies floating on the waters (there were no survivors), adding to the 17,664 people who have lost their lives crossing the central Mediterranean since 2014;<sup>18</sup> 178,000 migrants, a record high since 2006, were concurrently arrested at the Mexico-US border, 82 percent of them from the “Northern Triangle” of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) as well as Mexico;<sup>19</sup> during the same period, 17 people from sub-Saharan Africa were found dead on a boat off the Canary Islands;<sup>20</sup> on May 8 and 9, 2021, more than 1,400 migrants reached the Italian island of Lampedusa;<sup>21</sup> a few days later, on May 17, 2021, more than 8,000 people (a record high: a mass crossing that involved unaccompanied minors, young men, and families) swam from Morocco to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, using swimming rings and rubber dinghies—Spanish authorities replied by adding 200 border patrol agents to control the influx and by activating the agreement recently reached between Spain and Morocco that allowed the deportation of Moroccans swimming their way into Ceuta;<sup>22</sup> in the fall of 2021, attempts to cross the English Channel from the northern coast of France to the southern coast of England had doubled, even tripled, since 2020—between January and November 2021, 31,500 people attempted the crossing: 7,800 were rescued and more than 22,000 succeeded; on

November 24, an estimated number of 27 passengers—including 16 Iraqi Kurds, one Iranian Kurd, three Ethiopians, four Afghans, one Somalian, and one Egyptian—were reported dead as their boat (an inflatable dinghy) capsized off Calais, in what was the deadliest incident in the Channel since the beginning of the migration crisis in the area;<sup>23</sup> in November and December 2021, several thousand migrants—predominantly from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria—were stranded along the border between Poland and Belarus, lured to Minsk by Belarus authorities with the false promise of straightforward entry to the EU;<sup>24</sup> the lifeless bodies of more than 100 migrants, 62 migrants (the next day), and 28 migrants (a few days later) mainly from sub-Saharan Africa were found off Libya’s coast on December 17, December 18, and December 25, respectively, following the sinking of their boat: these new deaths brought the count to over 1,500 migrants drowned in the central Mediterranean route in 2021.<sup>25</sup>

Third: *Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter*. Though this reality is not directly related to the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic coincided with the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement and the flow of protests against police brutality not only in the United States but also in Europe and Canada—where the movement was further strengthened by Indigenous environmental protests and a series of demonstrations denouncing the systemic racism endured by Indigenous people. These events led to the dismissal, indictment, and/or conviction of some of the main perpetrators of brutality. They were triggered by (at least) two deaths in the United States: the killing of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, a 26-year-old Black emergency medical technician, riddled with eight bullets inside her home by the police in Louisville, Kentucky—the trial of police officer Brett Hankison, charged with three accounts of first-degree wanton endangerment, was scheduled to take place in February 1, 2022;<sup>26</sup> and the killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, by a police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020: witness and security camera videos showed Floyd lying face down on the ground and the police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck for several minutes, ignoring Floyd’s complaints about his difficulty to breathe and his fear of dying—Chauvin was sentenced on June 25, 2021, to 22.5 years for the murder of George Floyd.<sup>27</sup> In Quebec, Canada, Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year-old Atikamekw woman, died at the Centre hospitalier de Lanaudière on September 28, 2020, after video-recording herself live on Facebook crying out for help—stating that she was being overmedicated, while racist comments by health-care workers could be heard in the background; a nurse and a beneficiary attendant were dismissed; these dismissals were followed by an

inquest (led by coroner Géhane Kamel in May–June 2021) examining systemic racism in Quebec’s health-care system.<sup>28</sup> That brutality—what the Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe has come to call the “brutalism” of necropolitics<sup>29</sup>—similarly sustains migration management in Europe and North America. As this book will show, these brutalities are historically connected, and justice must be made to end such brutality.

Fourth: *interdependence*. In an interview published in *Le Monde* on March 24, 2020, the philosopher Claire Marin expressed in the following terms how the coronavirus crisis has raised public awareness of the interdependence of living organisms: “It is as though we are rediscovering that, as living beings, we are interdependent. By dint of considering ourselves as autonomous, separated individuals, distinct from one another, we have come to forget the extent to which we are caught in flows we do not merely coinhabit: we are bound to one another. We transmit to each other joy, fears but also viruses.”<sup>30</sup> In this passage, Marin defines interdependence not only as a biological reality but also as an affective reality that inexorably connects humans; her definition dismisses any notion of human beings as fully discrete entities. This heightened awareness of interdependence, she insists later on in the interview, underscores the requirement to care for each other. On the same day, *Le Monde* published another interview with another philosopher: Giorgio Agamben. Invited to analyze the ethical and political consequences of the security measures taken to counter the spread of COVID-19, Agamben argued that their application reinforced a permanent state of urgency. The “other,” he contended, is increasingly perceived as a threat; they become a possibility of contamination more than a possibility of mutually shared coexistence. As such, the management of health measures must be seen as an extension of the state of emergency implemented in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001: “The deceptive logic is always the same: facing terrorism, [state authorities] affirmed that freedom had to be suppressed to be preserved; similarly, we are told that life must be suspended to be protected. What the pandemic clearly shows is that the state of exception, to which governments have familiarized us for a long time, has become the normal condition. . . . Modern politics is from top to bottom a biopolitics, whose ultimate stake is biological life as such.”<sup>31</sup> These two philosophical responses may appear contradictory—Marin defends our renewed awareness of the interdependence of living beings on the grounds that it might teach us to take better care of one another, whereas Agamben maintains that the pandemic confirms societies as states of exception in which interdependence is in fact repudiated. Humanitarian care

on the one hand and biopolitics on the other. But these two positions are in fact complementary: together they posit coexistence—the deep interdependence of beings—as an indubitable yet mostly denied reality. Agamben’s perspective reminds us that coexistence is not de facto a mutually beneficial relation for parties involved. To this dark coexistence, Marin opposes a more reciprocal model of coexistence. The two facets of coexistence sustain, as I contend in this book, the evolution of twenty-first-century migration. The book also addresses what the two philosophers leave unaddressed: the importance of daily gestures (in this case, social distancing, wearing a mask) that help overcome crises; the responsibility each one of us has to counter the deterioration of a situation.

On April 30, 2020, the American philosopher Judith Butler was also invited to delineate her own understanding of coexistence. Explaining how the pandemic “exposes a global vulnerability” and how, in so doing, it “names the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives,” she moved away from Marin’s and Agamben’s more universal premises by maintaining that some human groups were more vulnerable than others:

The vulnerable include Black and Brown communities deprived of adequate health care throughout their lifetimes and the history of this nation. The vulnerable also include poor people, migrants, incarcerated people, people with disabilities, trans and queer people who struggle to achieve rights to health care, and all those with prior illnesses and enduring medical conditions. The pandemic exposes the heightened vulnerability to the illness of all those for whom health care is neither accessible nor affordable. Perhaps there are at least two lessons about vulnerability that follow: it describes a shared condition of social life, of interdependence, exposure and porosity; it names the greater likelihood of dying, understood as the fatal consequence of a pervasive social inequality.<sup>32</sup>

In short, coexistence never simply gets rid of inequalities. As the anthropologist Didier Fassin stated when interviewed in *Le Monde* on May 24, 2020, the eagerness to protect lives during the pandemic did not include the lives of prisoners, undocumented migrants, and asylum seekers, even though the risk of contagion was higher in overpopulated prisons and camps.<sup>33</sup> Coexistence, then, is a relationality that recurrently reinforces disparities between so-called migrants and so-called citizens. The disclosure of this state of affairs and the possibility to counter it progressively became the book’s main argument. That twofoldness constitutes contemporary art’s unlearning of migration.

# INTRODUCTION

Living with daily deaths. I think of the catastrophe of what living in a refugee camp must be, or being drowned at sea trying to make a better life somewhere else, or having your children taken from you and caged in the bosom of the heartland of democracy and wonder if we will have more compassion for those strangers who are now our kith and kin in catastrophe—and yet ours is still a far gentler catastrophe—to date, at least. There is toilet paper, after all. And running water. And health systems, albeit over-taxed.

The tears have now dried on my face, the paper lies open on the table before me: I think of the Covid-19 virus, invisible to the naked eye, which has wreaked such havoc in such an achingly short time and see the parallel with another virus, albeit metaphorical—the virus of greed that spawned that earlier global disruption and destruction of nations, peoples, cultures. Indeed, it uprooted the world as it was then. We can call it colonialism, imperialism, or whatever we care to, but like Covid it penetrated our lives and the lives of our ancestors and left in its wake a plethora of ills such as racism, sexism and classism, xenophobia—the bedrock of our catastrophic lives today.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Covidian Catastrophes: Resonances of Suffering”<sup>1</sup>

Might art afford new things to know and new ways to feel about matters that are so dismaying and depressing that they hobble the brain and lock down the heart? And might it do so without sacrificing the aesthetic and spiritual cultivation that is art's reason for being?

—Peter Schjeldahl, “The Art of War in ‘Theatre of Operations’”<sup>2</sup>

In December 2015, Banksy, an anonymous British street artist known for his anti-authoritarian urban interventions, visited the Jungle Refugee Camp in the locality of Calais, France. The camp was built in January 2015 on a former landfill site and dismantled in October 2016, a period coinciding with the peak of the so-called European refugee crisis. The Jungle's population reached an estimated 8,143 just before its demolition. Primarily from Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Darfur, and Iraq, most of the residents were trying to reach Great Britain via the Port of Calais or the Channel Tunnel. The artist painted a series of graffiti in Calais: a mural portraying the late Apple cofounder Steve Jobs carrying a bag of his belongings over his shoulder and an early Macintosh computer in his right hand; another mural by the beach representing a child, with a suitcase and a telescope holding up a vulture, looking toward the English coast; and a third mural on the wall of a building in Calais's downtown district, a stenciled and subtly altered version of Théodore Géricault's legendary painting *The Raft of the Medusa* from 1818–1819. Though all of the murals were referring to a same theme (contemporary migration), their temporalization of the theme was significantly and complementarily distinct: the Jobs graffiti portrayed one of the most famous successes of migration (the near past—about the work Banksy stated: “We’re often led to believe migration is a drain on the country’s resources but Steve Jobs was the son of a Syrian migrant. Apple . . . only exists because they allowed in a young man from Homs”<sup>3</sup>); the telescope graffiti depicted the combination of hope and looming danger currently shaping the lives of migrating children (the near future); while the Géricault remake alluded to the inauspicious present of migration (figure 0.1).

Banksy's adaptation of Géricault's painting is particularly insightful. The original *Raft of the Medusa* represents a group of survivors and corpses on a raft following the wreck of the French naval frigate *Méduse* off the coast of today's Mauritania on July 2, 1816; it shows the survivors hailing the *Argus*—the ship that ultimately rescued them. Banksy's black stencil, in contrast, features an imperiled group of people on a sinking raft, hailing an indifferent luxury yacht or ferryboat just on the horizon. The nineteenth-century painting's central figure is that of an African crew member, Jean Charles, agitatedly waving his shirt to draw the ship's attention. Géricault's decision to place him at the highpoint of the composition has been interpreted as expressing his abolitionist sympathies.<sup>4</sup> By appropriating the work, Banksy can be said to have historicized present-day migration within the deeper history of the antislavery movement initiated in the eighteenth century as a counterpart to the transatlantic slave trade and its increase with European colonial





expansion—the forced displacement of enslaved Africans to Europe since the fifteenth century and then mainly to the Caribbean and the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; the work ends up disclosing the persistence of European colonialism despite abolitionism. Notwithstanding its aesthetic and historical breadth, however, the mural was painted over by the owner of the building in September 2017 on the grounds that the wall needed to be renovated. The loss of the work ironically reveals a similitude between the vulnerable bodies of migrating beings and the vulnerability of street artworks—confirming the appropriateness of the latter to represent the former. They share the likelihood of negligence, eradication, and disappearance.

**FIGURE 0.1**

Banksy, *The Raft of the Medusa (remake)*, 2015. Mural, Calais, France. © Pest Control.



In August 2020, Banksy reconfirmed his sensitivity to the predicament of migration by exploring an unusual medium: a search-and-rescue boat—a former French patrol boat renamed *Louise Michel* after the nineteenth-century French feminist anarchist—acquired with proceeds from the sale of his work on the “migrant crisis.”<sup>5</sup> The boat was partly spray-painted in bright pink, including the word *RESCUE* on its hull, and a stenciled image (a girl in a life vest holding a heart-shaped safety buoy) was painted on one of the boat’s sides (figure 0.2). The boat is sponsored by Banksy but captained by the German biologist Pia Kemp and crewed by a team of activist rescuers: its main mission is to assist migrating travelers in distress who try

**FIGURE 0.2**

M. V. *Louise Michel*, 2020–. Rescue boat funded by Banksy. Operated by Captain Pia Klomp. Courtesy of Louise Michel Team.  
© M. V. Louise Michel. © Pest Control.

to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Reporting on the *Louise Michel*'s first undertaking, the journalists Lorenzo Tondo and Maurice Stierl stated that the rescue boat “set off in secrecy on 18 August from the Spanish seaport of Burriana, near Valencia, and is now in the central Mediterranean[,] where on Thursday it rescued 89 people in distress, including 14 women and four children. It is now looking for a safe seaport to disembark the passengers or to transfer them to a European coastguard vessel.”<sup>6</sup> Bringing the passengers to safety took several days; it required a series of distress messages sent by the captain to EU border patrol, reporting the deterioration of the situation in the overcrowded boat. As I write in July 2021, the boat is ongoingly financed by Banksy, but—like the majority of rescue boats in the Mediterranean area, which are currently blocked in various European ports due to administrative forfeitures and criminal proceedings—it is prevented from leaving port “due to EU restrictions.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Louise Michel* is unheard of: it stretches the definition of art by transforming it into a search-and-rescue endeavor, factually ending the famous saying that art cannot save the world. As the philosopher Santiago Zabala maintains, it might well be that “*only* art can save us.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, it rarely does, at least in the literal sense of the word. Asked “What is art for?,” the Moroccan French artist Bouchra Khalili, whose work is examined in chapter 8, states that “if [art] doesn’t change the world, at least it can help us to think about how we can make it better.”<sup>9</sup> As this book maintains, art responding to the contemporary conditions of migration is a *call* for change. Banksy’s version of *The Raft of the Medusa* is such a call. It is a call for historicization and responsibility. The mural displays the dark coexistence between the raft and the yacht, which secures the blooming of the latter by the neglect and vulnerabilization of the former; it awaits the interdependence between its image and the wall on which it was initially painted, anticipating the likelihood of its disappearance in a historical context marked by migrating bodies correspondingly disappearing at sea. In contrast, Banksy’s *Louise Michel* is a materialization of hope: the hope for a more reciprocal form of coexistence. That materialization, however, is a fragile one. In 2019, Italian state authorities had already accused Captain Pia Kemp of what is now informally termed the “crime of solidarity.”<sup>10</sup> But solidarity, increasingly criminalized when it involves a person or a vessel assisting or rescuing illegalized migrants as the *Louise Michel* is devised to do, might well be the coexistence required to end the brutalism sustaining twenty-first-century migration.

When we speak about a crisis, it is crucial to ask the following two questions: Whose crisis are we talking about? And why has a specific turmoil been designated as a “crisis”? This is especially true of the alleged refugee or migrant crisis. In the strictest sense, the term refers to the European refugee or migrant crisis—a state of emergency (2004–) describing Europe’s new and unanticipated challenge to manage and host the influx of people arriving in the EU overseas from across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through Southeast Europe. At the peak of the crisis in 2015, the UNHCR observed that the top three nationalities among the more than one million refugees arriving from the Mediterranean Sea were Syrian (46.7 percent), Afghan (20.9 percent), and Iraqi (9.4 percent). They also came and ongoingly come from other countries of mainland, West, Northeast, and East Africa (including Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Gambia, Burundi, and Mali), and South Asia (especially Pakistan), as well as from Myanmar and the western Balkans (Kosovo, Albania, Serbia).<sup>11</sup> Incoming people fled and continue to flee to escape war, structural violence, persecution (on the basis of religion, ethnicity, racialization, gender, sexual orientation, or political opinion), forced labor, natural disaster, and chronic poverty; in 2015, many were escaping the Syrian Civil War, the Iraq War, and the war in Afghanistan. The notion of “crisis,” however, does not refer primarily to the high number of beings seeking protection in Europe, which is in fact considerably low in comparison to the numbers experienced by other host countries in Africa and Asia. Rather, as observed by the anthropologist-geographer Nicholas De Genova, the European refugee crisis is fundamentally a “crisis of *control*—a crisis of the sovereign power of the European border regime” seeking to restabilize its migration and border regime to contain the increased flow of displaced people.<sup>12</sup> It names the Eurocentric sense of being invaded by “others” (perceived as such though they come mostly from former colonies), a “clash of civilizations” to which the EU member states progressively replied by remilitarizing their borders; corridorizing the movement of migrating travelers; decreasing the category of acceptable “refugees”; campicizing; prolonging detention; intensifying pushbacks, deportation, and risky repatriation—thus forcing people to take more dangerous routes to reach Europe and dying in that very process, even though most of them (85 percent at the end of 2018; 73 percent at the end of 2019) were and still are predominantly migrating not to Europe but to countries bordering their own.<sup>13</sup>

Put differently according to contemporary art’s unique insight, the so-called refugee or migrant crisis has been from the start a problem of coexistence—the EU’s attempt to contain and, more deeply, to deny the deep civilizational, social,

economic, and cultural interdependences of countries of origin and countries of destination; the EU's noncompliance with international laws that forbid states from returning people to countries where they risk facing human rights violations. The refugee or migrant crisis must therefore be extended to include the American immigration, asylum, and US-Mexico border crises, which also partake in a denial of coexistence and result from a combination of anti-(im)migrant measures and policies targeted mainly against Mexican and Central American citizens and including the restriction of legal means of immigration (despite the demand for migrant labor and despite the increase of undocumented migrant workers in the United States); the presence of overflowing communities next to the US-Mexico border, populated by people expelled from the United States and waiting for the processing of their asylum claims; the separation of families requesting asylum in the United States; the unstable management of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border; the increased detention of illegalized migrants; and the blocking of large Central American caravans coming from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These procedures ignore a past of high American military, political, and economic interventionism in these countries.<sup>14</sup> The so-called migrant crisis must likewise be extended to include the internal displacement of Indigenous people in North America, especially in Canada. Many other extensions could be considered here, but the book focuses mainly on Europe and North America.

The migrant crisis is thus best understood as migration tout court to avoid misconceptions about it being a crisis caused by the sudden and unexpected invasion of European territory by migrants from Africa and Asia or of the United States by migrants from Latin America. The term also has the merit of bringing to the fore the legacy of the internal displacement of Indigenous people. Twenty-first-century migration is more fundamentally an interdependence between movement and reception, between citizens-on-the-move escaping untenable life conditions (or compelled to leave tenable life conditions, as has been the case with Indigenous communities) in search for safety in Europe or North America and the latter's deployment of a series of measures to control that influx. To these counterforces should be added a variety of real yet largely unacknowledged crises experienced by migrating beings who make decisions as they move or are being moved, as they flee conflict, violence, persecution, and poverty, only to reach borders unexpectedly closing as well as the likelihood of detention and deportation, extortion, kidnapping, physical and sexual assault and human trafficking, crises of abandonment in refugee camps or settlements, injury and death.<sup>15</sup> Such is, persistently,

the autonomy of migration: the decision to move despite being forced to move, a crucial component of twenty-first-century migration as well. In short, migration today is a combination of misnamed and undervalued crises, whose European and North American modus operandi is the ever-escalating refusal to provide asylum to citizens-on-the-move who are escaping threatening life conditions in their country or are internally required to leave their land of origin behind. Migration, art claims, is a cluster of dark coexistences.

*Art for Coexistence: Unlearning the Way We See Migration* is a study of contemporary art's response to that specific escalation, considered as the ongoing interaction between two counterforces: the influx of displaced people and the increased refusal to host these displaced people in Europe and North America. The book asks: What is European and North American art's original contribution to the understanding of migration, and why is this contribution critical to the development of the twenty-first century? The answer to these two questions can be encapsulated in a single yet multilayered term: *coexistence*—the nondiscreteness of beings; the state, awareness, and practice of existing interdependently.

This book is a claim for coexistence; it is a claim for artistic practices whose main response to migration is to reveal, contest, rethink, “delink,”<sup>16</sup> and relink more reciprocally the dark and potentially more luminous interdependences shaping migration today—the interdependences between citizens-on-the-move of some of the poorest, most colonially damaged, and most politically unstable countries worldwide (parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America) and citizens of some of the wealthiest economies and democracies worldwide (Europe and North America), between these migrating beings seeking asylum and Europe's and North America's intensified unwillingness to grant them asylum. Art depicts the mechanisms of that refusal: the reinforcement of borders, campization, settlement, deterrence, detention, illegal pushbacks, and deportation—mechanisms that press deadly routes (e.g., the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the English Channel, the Sonoran Desert, the Białowieża Forest) on travelers to reach their destinations. These practices explore coexistence not as a living-together or a cohabitation but as a predominantly dark and forever-messy yet changeable relation, what the intellectual historian Mira Siegelberg designates as a “political organization of humanity,”<sup>17</sup> which turns exodus into a process of exclusion, marginalization, and latent elimination of one percent of humanity (1 in every 97 people worldwide).<sup>18</sup> Challenging that relation, art invents a set of interconnected calls for more mutual forms of coexistence: calls to historicize, to become responsible, to empathize, to story-tell.

In these calls, viewers (primarily though not exclusively or uniformly from Europe and North America), including myself as a French-speaking white Québécoise art historian, are interpellated as participating in the repressive forces of antimigration while being invited to question and counter these forces—to comake with citizens-on-the-move more just and equitable practices of migration.

These artistic practices include installations, performances, living rooms, video and virtual-reality works, webcasts, digital platforms, alarm phones, countermonuments, sculptures, graffiti, photographs and paintings, rescue boats, and forensic investigations. However diverse, they share the making of calls. Migration, they claim, is not about “citizens” over here and “migrants” over there but about coexisting citizens with and without rights. Migration in *not* a problem “from elsewhere,” one that landed unexpectedly in Europe or North America. As the journalist Daniel Trilling points out, the latter continents have “played a key role, historically, in the shaping of a world where power and wealth are unequally distributed,” and they “continue to pursue military and arms trading policies that have caused or contributed to the conflicts and instability from which people flee.”<sup>19</sup> The artistic calls ask viewers to reconsider migration as a coexistence in urgent need of repair and reimagining, one that must be fundamentally rethought in its relation to citizenship—or what the legal scholar Dimitry Kochenov designates as “citizenship’s inherent racism, its deep and chronic exclusion of women, and its upholding and reinforcing of class divisions between the haves and haves-not.”<sup>20</sup> Contemporary art, in short, is inviting us—again, citizens mainly but not exclusively or uniformly from Europe and North America—to unlearn our preconceptions and assumptions about the refugee or migrant “crisis.” Unlearning is about learning to see the crisis more critically and more disobediently as transformable. This is certainly the experience I had while writing this book.

These calls are performed in the most compelling artworks responding to migration today, including works by Banksy, Lyne Lapointe, Laura Waddington, Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, Binta Diaw, Richard Mosse, Florian Schneider, Forensic Oceanography, Teresa Margolles, Guillermo Galindo, Kader Attia, Candice Breitz, Ai Weiwei, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Tania Bruguera, Bouchra Khalili, Angela Melitopoulos, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Isuma, Olu Oguibe, Stan Douglas, Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, and Kent Monkman. The artists considered here work mainly in Europe and North America, the continents where their artworks predominantly circulate, but most of them are either former refugee(s), immigrants, or children of immigrants—some living between countries

or binationally, some in Mexico, Cuba, Vietnam, or South Africa while also in the United States or in Europe, some having left China but now living in exile in Europe, basically of Europe and North America but having established long-standing relationships with migrating beings—or Indigenous artists born in Canada and Black artists born in North America or in Europe, whose larger history has been significantly conditioned by the forced displacement of people structuring various colonial systems. Long-term encounters, interculturality, internationality, and (im) migration as well as deep history have made these artists particularly responsive to the prevalence of migratory injustices.

### **A FEW EXAMPLES BEFORE WE START: MIGRANTS—ART CLAIMS—ARE NOT SIMPLY A CATEGORY**

Let us look briefly at a few works to introduce the book more concretely. Consider Laura Waddington's *Border* (2004)—a low-tech video showing Afghan and Iraqi men just outside the Sangatte Red Cross Camp (1999–2002), a refugee camp located in the Pas-de-Calais department on the northern coast of France, as they attempt to cross the channel tunnel to England at night, narrated and filmed by the artist with the camera's shutter wide open to compensate for the lack of light, creating images on the edge of dissolution that materialize the precariousness yet autonomy of migration (figure 0.3); Bouchra Khalili's *The Mapping Project Journey* (2008–2011), a series of suspended screens projecting video images of standard geographical maps whose cartography is redrawn by migrating travelers, their faces remaining off-screen as they trace and relate their hazardous journeys throughout the Mediterranean Basin—stories perceptually interrelated by viewers as they circulate between the screens (figure 8.1); Forensic Oceanography's *Liquid Traces—the Left-to-Die Boat Case* (2014), a repurposing of border-surveillance technologies to reconstitute the event of European nonassistance in which 63 people died after having been left to drift on a rubber boat for 14 days in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Mediterranean maritime surveillance area (figure 4.1); Ai Weiwei's documentary film *Human Flow* (2017), showing the artist witnessing the global movement and blocking-of-movement of men, women, and families alongside the proliferation of borders (figure 7.3); Alejandro González Iñárritu's *CARNE y ARENA* (2017), a virtual-reality work inviting viewers into a desertic environment where virtual nonactors from Latin America risk their lives as they struggle but fail to cross the Mexico-US





**FIGURE 0.3**

Laura Waddington, *Border*, 2004 (still).  
Single-channel video, Digibeta PAL, color,  
stereo, 27 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

border (figure 7.8); Isuma's Venice Biennale video-and-webcasts, public-sphere intervention (2019) bridging two major predicaments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—the internal displacement of Inuit communities and the environmental degradation of the Arctic (figure 9.1); and Lyne Lapointe's multiple ink drawings of lifejackets on old paper and maps (2019)—gear recalling Joseph Beuys's famous vest but whose central zippers are transformed into spines and whose openings make room for nonhuman animals, all endangered species and materials in need of protection (figure 0.4).

However varied in their representation of twenty-first-century migration, these artworks complicate our understanding of the very notion of the “migrant.” That notion, when used in the context of the so-named migrant crisis, belongs to the category of what the social and political theorist W. B. Gallie has called “essentially contested concepts.”<sup>21</sup> That contestation is especially felt in works that uncover the vulnerability of the beings they ambition to represent. The disputed use of the term reinforces the treatment of refugees as “undesirables”: To be legitimate, protected, and have rights, should migrants include solely “refugees” strictly defined by the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, the document that defines refugees as persons who are unable to return to their country “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted” on the basis of race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or political opinion, or should it not include economic migrants as well?<sup>22</sup> As the anthropologist Michel Agier maintains, “Europe’s 2015 crisis . . . has made manifest the uncertainty of the institutional classifications used for the description and management of migratory flows. . . . Refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers, but also war refugees, economic migrants, clandestine migrants, are as many apparently descriptive terms, which nevertheless involve a whole epistemology and politics of institutional, media, popular or specialized classification.”<sup>23</sup> In the literature about them, “migrants” include a variety of beings moving in a variety of border areas. The “migrant” itself is an umbrella notion, not defined under international law, that refers to a person who has been forced to move away or has moved away from their home to find better living conditions. I use the term *migrant* throughout this book as including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, deported people, undocumented migrants, and so-called illegal or irregular migrants, while privileging, when possible, the use of the terms *migrating beings*, *citizens-on-the-move* (in contrast to *affirmed citizens*), and *citizens without rights* to remove them in part from a categorization that works to exclude them from renewed citizenship.<sup>24</sup> The term *migrant* is less reifying and less homogenizing than its sister terms because



**FIGURE 0.4**

Lyne Lapointe, *Veste de sauvetage pour dauphin* (Life vest for a dolphin), 2019.  
Ink on paper. 32¾ × 23½ in. (83 × 60 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist.

it is not a legal concept and because it names some of the fundamental rights of the living: the right to move and to build a new home. Though the term, as Trilling has keenly observed, “implies an endless present” (“they are migrants, they move, it’s what they do”) and as such fails to suggest that the people so designated have a history and a future, contemporary art, as some of the works mentioned earlier suggest, insists on the imperative to historicize migration—this is one of its most fundamental calls.<sup>25</sup>

*Migrant* comes from the Latin *migrantem* (nominative *migrans*), which is the present participle of *migrare*, “to remove, depart, to move from one place to another.” The notion of the migrant is tied to movement, and this is how migrating beings are depicted in the works. Coming from Africa, Asia, Central America, and the Arctic, they move or have moved from one country to the next, sometimes inside the same country, by sea, by land, or by ice, inside/outside camps, attempting to reach Europe, the United States, or their own land of origin. Movement is an action: though predominantly forced, it is a decision that migrating beings have in common, a decision that partakes of what the poet and cultural theorist Fred Moten terms “fugitivity,” “a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed, . . . a desire for the outside.”<sup>26</sup> There lies the autonomy of migration, what De Genova has called the autonomy of “the ‘incorrigible’ subject of virtually all contemporary border regimes,” mobilized by “their own aspirations, needs, and desires, which necessarily exceed any regime of immigration and citizenship, . . . [and performing] mobility projects [that] enact an elementary freedom of movement to which borders are intrinsically a response.”<sup>27</sup> The artworks never lose sight of that autonomy, of that subjectivity: migrating beings are telling stories, they struggle to reach a safer place to live, they mobilize their environmental concerns, they never simply make themselves fully visible. And yet in dissolving the fantasy of global mobility—the idea of an unconstrained circulation of goods, money, ideas, and people around the planet through the suspension of national barriers—the works disclose what another anthropologist, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, has designated the “frictions” of global encounters.<sup>28</sup> They deploy the freedom of movement gone wrong and bound to go wrong. Movement has been initiated to escape persecution, violence, poverty, and death. Movement has nevertheless been, is, or will be compromised. Some beings have been detained or have drowned in their attempt to move; others wait in borderzones or barely survive in camps; they have been displaced from their deep Arctic land and moved to settlements by government officials. To be more precise, then, the artworks are not so concerned

about showing citizens-on-the-move as about making perceivable the management of their movement, their overdetermined vulnerability and yet their resilient decision to move; they make visible what affirmed citizens of countries of destination are made not to see or prefer not to really see.

Let us push this overview a bit further. These works elaborate calls. They address viewers who more likely belong to the richest economies in the world, inviting them to engage perceptually, sensorially, sensibly, cognitively, corporeally with the distressful conditions of migration that they are suggested to be a part of. They are a call for historicization: they situate the forced displacements as a prolongation of colonialism. They are a call for responsibility: they seek migratory justice, wanting us to become aware of our role in the repressiveness of migration and wanting us to put an end to its violence (for example, Forensic Oceanography's reconstitution approach, elaborated to make the EU accountable for the nonassistance of people in distress at sea). They are a call for empathy: the artists are voicing or depicting their own empathy (Waddington, Lapointe, Ai, and Inárritu in particular); they want us to feel empathically the suffering of citizens-on-the-move. They are a call for storytelling: viewers are invited to participate in the unfolding stories by listening to the migrants' voices and performances. In short, the works mentioned here—like every single work examined in this book—express the challenge to better understand the destructive and potentially more life-enhancing interdependences between citizens dispossessed of mobility rights and citizens with mobility rights.

## THE BOOK: ITS ARGUMENT AND STRUCTURE

With these works and comments in mind, we can now specify this book's overall claim, project, and structure. For the sake of clarity, I summarize them in four points.

First, the main argument of the book is threefold: contemporary art from Europe and North America is critically responding to migration (it exercises what Forensic Oceanography calls a "disobedient gaze"<sup>29</sup> on the deceptive yet standardized representation of migration as illegal or as a problem "from elsewhere" that landed advertently in Europe and North America); its main response is to disclose migration as a dark coexistence between citizens-on-the move leaving the untenable living conditions of some of the poorest and most politically unstable countries worldwide *and* affirmed citizens of some of the wealthiest yet increasingly unhosting countries worldwide; and it sets into play a variety of calls inviting viewers to

reorient dark interdependence into a more mutually beneficial one. In short, we (the viewers) are invited to unlearn the way we see migration.

Second, this threefold argument supports art as a possible *redistribution* of the sensible, what the philosopher Jacques Rancière has designated the aesthetic *rearrangement* of a given society's "set of perception[s] between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not."<sup>30</sup> The political potential of art lies in its capacity to assemble these relationships anew. If indeed a migratory aesthetics does exist, as the cultural theorist Mieke Bal has convincingly contended,<sup>31</sup> the connection between migration and aesthetics should be understood as political. Migratory aesthetics is articulated not so much in the messages artworks convey about migration than in the works' devising of a sensorium that makes ways of coexisting perceptible and changeable. The artistic practices considered in this book—here I borrow and widen the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's clear-cut terminology—are politically time-specific. They are of the now, but they simultaneously make art "for the *not yet* and the *yet to come* . . . when politics and policies are taking shape," with the potential of "*generat[ing]* political situations."<sup>32</sup> Bluntly, they acknowledge present-day migration yet also aspire to change it by elaborating a series of calls.

Third, as the main argument suggests, the book maintains that a redistribution of the sensible requires a set of calls. What is a call? I see it as a vital and vibrant interpellation asking the viewer to meditate and rethink their assumptions, to perceive and transform coexistences. To paraphrase Paolo Baratta's introduction to the Biennale Architettura of 2021, an artwork, an exhibition, or architecture is "a call to become . . . attentive visitors, to become direct witnesses, . . . to be willing to broaden their gaze." "It's not enough to propagate knowledge," writes Baratta, "we must contribute to fostering awareness; it's not enough to reveal problems, we must nourish a desire for [art] through examples of proposals, projects, and achievements."<sup>33</sup> This book has identified four partly overlapping calls and so is structured in four parts, each part focusing on an interpellation that strives to transform—as much as it can—unequal coexistences into more equal relations: historicization, responsibility, empathy, and storytelling. These interpellations articulate a fundamental redefinition of what it means to historicize, to become responsible, to empathize, and to story-tell. Without these redefinitions, there is no *redistribution* of the sensible. *Historicization* becomes, for example, a nonlinear and "conversational" practice of montage combining archival images and new footage that define contemporary migration as an extension of the interrelated histories

of modernity, colonialism, transatlantic slavery, environmental deterioration, and capitalism. *Responsibility* becomes a meditation on accountability in matters of migration; in some artworks, it is rethought as a forward-looking practice of social connection and de-idealized care for the sake of migratory justice. *Empathy*, the artist's or viewer's capacity to feel and understand the mental states and emotions of beings in situations of migratory distress, unfolds as a necessary yet insufficient condition of possibility for prosociality. And *storytelling* becomes *storytell/ing*: it is explored disruptively to make migrant voices heard by viewers who are invited to listen more profoundly; its disrupting strategies include the right to opacity, ventriloquial speech acts, chaosmosis, deep listening, and weird looping. The book, therefore, should not be considered a survey of contemporary art that addresses present-day migration. Rather, it is a study of some of contemporary art's most vibrant calls to disclose and improve coexistence. Art reinvents itself in these calls.

Fourth and last, this book must be seen as a critical response to the legacy of imperialist museology, which tends to dissocialize, dehistoricize, and depoliticize art. Most museums in Europe and North America—the main institutions where spectators experience artworks addressing contemporary migration—fail to convey the richness of the exhibited works precisely because of the residual imperialism that tenaciously sustains these institutions. Particularly relevant to the present study, the political and visual culture theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay situates compulsory migration at the center of the history of European and North American museology. The museum, she maintains, is the very institution that continues, even today, to disconnect the forced migration of people and the forced migration of artifacts—artifacts that become collectible objects in that very process. It disconnects them despite their inseparability. This operation is produced by the “camera shutter” effect of Western museums: similar to the photographic device that quickly opens and closes to let light reach the film and then blocks it off to produce an image, extracting that image from the ongoing world it belonged to, the museum—whose imperial and colonial evolution is historically tied to photography—isolates its objects from the world they were a part of.<sup>34</sup> This separation is manifest mostly in the looting of artifacts from the colonies, the imperialist gesture par excellence, but is still predominantly upheld in contemporary museology. Azoulay's insight is worded in the following paragraph:

It is no secret that millions of objects, never destined in museal white walls, have been looted from all over the world by different imperial agents. It is no secret that many of them

have been carefully handled, preserved, and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments, and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world. These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the “new world.” . . . In truth, however, neither the movements nor their separation are unrelated.<sup>35</sup>

Azoulay’s central point is that the museum’s tenacious imperialist view of the world decides what needs to be bracketed out, disregarded, repressed, and excluded from perception: it gets rid of coexistence—the interdependence of people and objects that together create worlds and worldliness. And yet this coexistence is exactly what must be shown to spectators. Twenty-first-century artworks whose main striving is to divulge and generate such interdependences—basically, the artworks examined in this book—can therefore be understood as requiring that museums “unlearn imperialism.” Museums, however, are lagging behind in meeting this requirement: the restitution of artifacts to countries of origin is still significantly limited and slow; and the exhibition of contemporary artworks that question camera-shutter operations are desocialized, dehistoricized, and depoliticized—re-shuttered as it were.

The desocialization, dehistoricization, and depoliticization of artworks tackling the afflicting conditions of migration have been manifested in the main museum exhibitions that have shown these works, in particular the following American shows: *Home Is a Foreign Place* (2019), proposed by the Met Breuer; *The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement* (2019), presented at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC; *Crossing Lines, Constructing Home* (2019–2020), organized by Harvard Art Museums; and *When Home Won’t Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art* (2019–2021), shown, among other venues, at the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston). As some of these titles indicate, most of the exhibitions had “home” as their main subtext: the museum was turned into a provisional, unproblematized home or host for the wandering, dispossessed, and displaced beings represented in the artworks. As the art historian Greg Afinogenov has argued about the shows held at the Phillips, the Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Special Exhibitions Gallery (Harvard Art Museums), the political message conveyed by these institutions was far from being “the one the contemporary situation demands.”<sup>36</sup> The odd regrouping of artworks representing the traumatic experiences of migration from political perspectives *opposed* to those perpetuated by museums;



the use of wall texts that leave unaddressed the geopolitical diversity of migration; the blending of diversity into the happy American melting-pot story “of who we are and how we got here over time”; the dismissal of questions to do with responsibility (even though these questions are raised in a significant number of artworks): all of these museological decisions denied the historical present to which the works were in fact responding.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, these exhibitions consolidated a recent variation of the imperialist museum: its “participatory turn,” which discourages dissensus for the sake of consensus mainly by promoting a humanistic mission, which is to recognize the suffering others as human beings and to care for them in that capacity but only inasmuch as they remain “other,” thus allowing spectators to leave the museum with the feeling of having a good conscience. They failed to discuss the relations between migration, imperialism, and colonialism—relations nevertheless established in some of the most powerful exhibited works, including John Akomfrah’s video installations examined in chapter 2 and Kader Attia’s *La Mer Morte* (The Dead Sea) discussed in chapter 5.

The desocialization, depolitization, dehistoricization, and deworldliness of artworks operated by the tenaciously imperialist museum shrink the viewer’s and listener’s perceptual, sensorial, and cognitive experience. My conviction is that art’s and art history’s unlearning of imperialism and colonialism can contribute to undoing this shrinking. To do so, this book maintains, art history must engage with the fields of political philosophy; postcolonial, decolonial, Black, and Indigenous studies; and, more importantly, critical refugee and migrant studies. There is no understanding of European and North American art’s unlearning of migration without these fields, without a dialogue between art and these fields. One important note, however, before we begin: This unlearning does not include the artistic response to the forced displacement of Ukrainians following the Russian invasion of their country, which began as the book was in production. But it provides aesthetic and analytical tools to better understand that displacement, as well as the planetary climate migration already underway.



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