

ON THE POLITICS OF (MUSEUM) EXHIBITION



More about the future (potential) of museums

I was at a very thought provoking talk today at Bard Graduate Center [Link]. Yannis Hamilakis told us about an exhibition he has helped curate that is currently running at Haffenreffer Gallery, Brown University USA. It is called *Transient Matter: Assemblages of Migration in the Mediterranean*.

Yannis leads a research team who have been visiting a refugee camp, Camp Moria, on the Aegean island of Lesbos, in a project he calls archaeological ethnography. The exhibition displays objects and photographs collected in their fieldwork.

In showing the everyday artifacts associated with experiences of forced migration, Yannis wants archaeological exhibition to witness suffering and injustice, turning discarded items such as life vests into documentary evidence, personal items like baby feeding bottles into mnemonics that stir feelings. He wants the objects and photos to evoke experiences that might be forgotten, and in so doing to provoke action.

Here is how the project is described on its web site:

Each year, millions of people, often from previously colonized countries, are forced by conflict or compelled by necessity to migrate to what they perceive as safer and more prosperous countries, often the previous colonial metropolises. With land crossings effectively blocked, most migrants must make dangerous sea crossings.

How are we to understand this landscape? What is to be done with the material remnants of border crossing, things often designated as “environmental pollution”? And what about the new materials and edifices erected by authorities or produced by migrants themselves, be they artworks, crafts, or mundane and functional items? What happens to these materials and belongings when they enter the museum?

The materials assembled here, collected from or produced on Lesbos, an island on the Greek-Turkish border, invite us to understand migration by paying attention to the things that migrated and crossed borders together with humans or were created at the border. Things that were treated as “trash” become here objects that convey not only knowledge but also affective power that transcends the confines of the

museum. This border assemblage foregrounds both the agony and pain of displacement as well as the resilience, determination, and inventiveness of the new nomads of our age.





The research team have not just collected items and taken photographs, but also engaged with camp internees. The exhibition displays artworks they have made, artifacts they have crafted, instant (Polaroid) photos they have taken of everyday camp life with cameras given to them by the researchers.





What I wished for

- There is really only one voice in the exhibition – that of the curators. I wished that we might hear more voices in dialogue and conversation. I have been commenting a good deal recently about how an academic voice can drown out others [Link] [Link]. While it is right in research-based work to respect privacy, there is also surely an obligation to manifest different and diverse voices, to empower others to be heard. I am not sure that the artifacts and photos gathered for the exhibition really do *witness* the experiences of the people in the camp. The baby's feeding bottle in the glass case remains as anonymous as the instant polaroids that are displayed without the names of those who took them (on the website all are attributed to Yannis himself). The affective energy of objects and photos, their capacity to move us, comes from their collection by the researchers, their display in a gallery in a wealthy university in the United States. In this rhetorical displacement the artifacts are taken to assume the authority of the researchers and their institution who have made the choice to represent the people in the camp, to make a case, to make an “assemblage”, this collection.
- The voice and authority are distinctively academic. I do wish Yannis had not introduced the exhibition to us with an argument that the exhibition is part of an effort to move beyond current paradigms of exhibition. He told us that he saw

the project as one of Deleuzian assemblage, a hauntology (after Derrida) in a crisis of reception of the past, as the colonized past comes back to haunt the present, the state agencies of Europe who need to deal with the legacy of colonial oppression. Is this kind of justification needed? Are the people interred in Camp Moria best conceived as the ghosts of the colonizing past returning to haunt Europe? Are discarded objects, such as life vests taken from what Yannis called the “life vest cemetery”, the best witness to this humanitarian mess.

What I liked

It is truly difficult to navigate such issues. The project deserves all our support in associating humanitarian challenges with the resources of an archaeological academy.

- I liked the honesty expressed by Yannis, that the exhibition could be taken to fail to “represent” its subjects. He is very conscious of the way objects in glass cases in museums can be detached and distant, even as they also evoke. I do wish he had told us about the events that have accompanied the exhibition that he said were intended to overcome the transformation of the items gathered according to curatorial reason into artifacts designed to have an effect upon the museum visitor through specular display, in vitrines, on walls.
- The project mobilizes an archaeological sensibility, sensitive to the energy of things, asking the question of what, if anything, archaeology has to offer to the actuality of contemporary experience. In such an archaeological sensibility the everyday is brought into association with events and experiences, such as mass forced migration, that occupy a global and historical stage. And by actuality I mean the dynamic of presence and absence: while we see people momentarily present in the news, we might not be so aware of the ongoing experiences that are pushed into the background, made absent, in the very media representations that grab our attention.
- In this the exhibition is a kind of cultural probe, prompting one to reflect upon the textures of everyday human experience, on what should be remembered, on the friction between different accounts and representations, those reported by news agencies, those experienced by many many ordinary people who are typically featured as mere traces in mainstream mass media. We are confronted with questions of the adequacy of representation – what does it take to find empathy

with others? An archaeology of the everyday can work to help bring us together.

Archaeological practices, such as gathering and exhibiting, are about now and the future, as much as they are about what remains of the past.

Garbage transformed and the limits of exhibition

Some time ago with David Platt and Bill Rathje, I wrote a commentary on the aftermath of 9/11, the debris and artifacts taken over to the reopened Fresh Kills landfill site on Staten Island, and a deeply moving exhibition that documented some of the personal items recovered from the destruction. The article (in *Modernism/Modernity* 2004) discussed the category of discarded garbage, ruin, everyday experience, contemporaneity and senses of history, and future archaeology rising from the debris of the present.

The Perfume of Garbage – Modernism/Modernity 2004 – [Link]

I am now inclined to ask whether the exhibition of such “transient matter” shows us the limits of an archaeological aesthetic that involves objects, discarded and found, however evocative they may be taken to be, displaced, relocated in the institutional space of a gallery, incorporated into academic discourse.

Archaeology and speculative design

What else might be done?

The limitations of such modes of exhibiting archaeological artifacts led to my body of work with Mike Pearson – theatre/archaeology, the re-articulation of remains of the past as real-time event – performance-based intervention in matters of contemporary concern – [Link].

Yannis is right, I am sure, that archaeology is well conceived as something located in and with responsibilities to now, to contemporary matters of concern. We might put to one side sometimes the desire to witness and represent experience, and emphasize the creative agency in the likes of curatorial work, taking up things, making works, interventions that attend to concerns, needs, responsibilities. The pragmatics of working creatively to address need and concern – another way of describing this is the practice of *design*.

Design Column was the name given to a series of remarkable exhibitions curated by Annemartine Van Kesteren at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam between 2012 and 2016. Every three months she took up a matter of current concern raised by the likes of big data and surveillance, transhuman corporeality, and yes, migration, and gathered together experimental works by design studios that offered ways of dealing with the concern.

So rather than exhibit “witnesses” to a topic, *Design Column* offered a space for critical and speculative design to work on and through a matter of contemporary concern, where designers could share the work of their studios in addressing needs and challenges to make better futures.

With no separation of idea and object, and in radical articulation of past, present and future, *Design Column* offered pragmatic *interventions* that pointed forward. Here’s a description of the principle:

Ideas that make a difference. Every three months the Design Column focuses on a news item in the form of a small exhibition. The column is a place where new ideas are made visible, where the power of imagination is given expression. Designers and artists are especially interested in experimental imagination. With their idiosyncratic vision, they see things differently and are capable of bringing about change. The Design Column creates a space for these innovative concepts.

The *Design Column* series was followed by *Change the System* (to January 2018), another remarkable collection of works in speculative critical design – [Link]

I was part of five of the Design Columns in 2013, offering commentary to stimulate discussion and debate – [Link] [Link]

Archaeology, the actuality of pasts-in-the-present, is a key component of future

world building.

Design Column #11 [\[Link\]](#) (November 2015-January 2016) and Design Column #13 – [\[Link\]](#) (June-August 2016) dealt with Migration Matters.

Here are some extracts.

Design Column #11 Migration Matters featured practical and more conceptual projects related to the migration crisis. This new Design Column explores what happens when design is deployed to study the political dimension of this problem. Design Column #13 Migration Matters 2 poses the question: can design make visual sense of the abstract figures, and mountains of metadata our reality seems to be made up of?

Eisuke Tachikawa, Toshiyuki Nakaie, Kaori Hasegawa, Second Aid Kit, 2011

NOSIGNER is a design studio, which aims to make a positive contribution to society and the future. A mere forty hours after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that engulfed Japan, the studio launched the website OLIVE. O stands for the circle on the Japanese flag, thus OLIVE means 'Japan LIVE'. People could use the website to share survival tips that could help during the disaster. OLIVE thus functioned as a collective knowledge database. The information has now been assembled in a book and in partnership with the Kohshin Trading Company, NOSIGNER has produced a survival pack: The Second Aid. The pack contains summaries from the OLIVE Book and tools that are useful in emergency situations.



Jan Rothuizen, Martijn van Tol en Dirk Jan Visser, Refugee Republic, 2014

Artist Jan Rothuizen, multimedia journalist Martijn van Tol and photographer Dirk Jan Visser have made an interactive multimedia documentary to give a more accurate picture of life in refugee camps. Viewers can choose their own routes through Camp Domiz, a refugee camp in Syria, and learn about the everyday lives of the inhabitants. The combination of drawings, film footage, photography, audio and text creates a unique sensory experience.



Pim van der Mijl, Front Room, 2015

The integration of asylum seekers mostly takes place behind closed doors, resulting in little contact with Dutch residents. This is why designer Pim van der Mijl invited a few inhabitants of the asylum seekers center in Onnen to design a meeting place in the middle of the local community; in the center of Onnen. Van der Mijl assessed the various skills of the inhabitants and together they explored ways in which they themselves could help shape this meeting place. The result is the Front Room: a space in which the asylum seekers are able to host their Dutch neighbors in order to get acquainted with each other. Van der Mijl wishes to distill a method from this project, thus making it possible for this initiative to be duplicated at other locations.

Forensic Architecture (Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, SITU Research), Liquid Traces, The Left to Die Boat case, 2014

Forensic Architecture is a research agency made up of architects, scholars, filmmakers, designers, lawyers and scientists that gathers and presents spatial

analysis. Its findings are used as evidence by international prosecution teams, political organisations, NGOs and the United Nations. The project The Left to Die Boat examines how a boat with 72 refugees was allowed to drift for fourteen days in the Mediterranean Sea. Only nine of the refugees survived. This reconstruction demonstrates how different actors operating in the Central Mediterranean Sea used the complex and overlapping jurisdictions at sea to evade their responsibility for rescuing people in distress.

Archive – Design Column at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam – by Annemartine Van Kesteren

Design Column #1 – Micro Impact – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #2 – The Human Index – [\[Link\]](#)- Shanks Commentary – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #3 – Likes – [\[Link\]](#) – Shanks Commentary – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #4 – The Circle is Round – [\[Link\]](#)- Shanks Commentary – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #5 – Body Building – [\[Link\]](#) – Shanks Commentary – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #6 – Dataism – [\[Link\]](#) – Shanks Commentary – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #7 – Wasted Matter – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #8 – Beyond the Senses – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #10 – Crazy Care – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #11 – Migration Matters – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #12 – Spaceship Earth – [\[Link\]](#)

Design Column #13 – Migration Matters 2 – [\[Link\]](#)