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Unsanctioned Refugee Processing: Maritime Interception, Aesthetics, Hospitality

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Unsolicited Refugee Processing: Maritime Interception, Aesthetics, Hospitality

“In the art context, to aestheticize the things of the present means to discover their dysfunctional, absurd, unworkable character.”

— Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, 2016.¹

“I’ve made some work about the migrant crisis, obviously I can’t keep the money. Could you use it to buy a new boat or something?”

— Banksy, email to Pia Klemp, 2019.²

The sea is central to constructions of the refugee – maritime *passage* indelibly linked to political *process* – and an ambivalent milieu for crossings that would initiate refugee adjudication procedures. Image-making and narrativization on water are inhibited by its otherness as an imagined place and an environment that profoundly alters human perception. This otherness also means that human rights are particularly vulnerable at sea. It is one of the deep structural violences of our era: that migrant and refugee distress and death at sea are extremities nations prepare for but do not prevent.³ In the Mediterranean, just as in waters between Southeast Asia and Australia,⁴ practices of non-assistance, interdiction and quasi-legalized⁵ turn-back determine relations between maritime migrants and border authorities. Here, on water, lies the vanguard of extra-territorialized state power that Giorgio Agamben describes in terms of “*ex-capere*,”⁶ the capturing-outside of bodies beyond the law, or what Joseph Pugliese identifies as the neoimperial “pre-frontier spaces” of powerful states.⁷ In such ways, refugee processing commences with frameworks of expulsion (which, as the UK’s Rwanda agreement⁸ shows, may also be post-maritime). If EU and UK refugee processing increasingly encompasses a hostile, expulsive

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3 management of bodies deemed disruptive or unruly, how have non-state acts of assistance at sea
4 become integrated into European constructions of asylum? What might the undertaking of rescue
5 by NGO-affiliated activists and artists bring into view of the performative condition of maritime
6 zones, places shaped by powerful state and corporate interests and ventured into precariously by
7 the category of humans Zygmunt Bauman has termed “wasted” lives?⁹

15 This discussion centres around the work of the NGO vessel *Louise Michel*, funded by the
16 pseudonymous British graffiti artist Banksy. The boat’s entry in 2020 into the domain of
17 European NGO search and rescue (SAR) activity increased the profile of this form of political
18 humanitarian activism. A 31-metre vessel named for the French anarcho-feminist, the *Louise*
19 *Michel* features a spray-paint motif and the word RESCUE in lurid pink, along with a repurposed
20 image of Banksy’s “Girl with Balloon.” Banksy’s vessel pursues – more explicitly than the other
21 NGO maritime operations it works alongside – two intertwined ends: the rescue of forced
22 migrants at sea, and the mediatized representation of rescue at sea. The *Louise Michel*’s
23 performative, publicized actions draw attention to what it might mean to render assistance in a
24 region – the Mediterranean – where refugee trauma has become, at times, a subject of
25 spectacle.¹⁰ The *Louise Michel* and other NGO vessels demand, via visual and discursive
26 reporting of their engagements at sea, that the civilian rendering of assistance be understood as
27 an insistently hospitable component of the variegated and ill-functioning ecology of refugee
28 processing.

48 This special issue of *Theatre Journal* recognizes processing as having a constitutive
49 capacity in determining the refugee as a politico-legal category of personhood; by thematizing
50 processing, the issue also opens up questions about how categorization is performed as well as
51 how it evolves in response to historical and political forces. The terminology of process has a
52 peculiar quality of simultaneously positing refugeeness in terms of fixity and legality, and of
53 signalling its durational and relational nature (that is, a becoming-through-others). By drawing
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3 attention to the function and representation of legally unsanctioned activist engagements between
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5 refugees and would-be hosts, this essay seeks to affirm that refugee processing may encompass
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7 the creation of spaces of encounter, and not merely a convergence of asylum seeker and
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9 jurisdictional agent. My discussion is concerned with how these spaces of encounter appear in
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11 mediatized representation precisely because of the centrality of representation for the refugee: a
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13 subjectivity dependent on appearance, appeal, and response. I suggest that the maritime rescue of
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15 refugees by NGOs, and specifically, the aestheticization of these interceptive acts, constructs a
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17 hospitable mode of refugee processing that is paradoxically both predicted and unsanctioned. As
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19 I will elaborate, aestheticization is considered in this discussion in a dual sense: visually, as
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21 design, but also conceptually, as framed political dysfunction.

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27 The hospitality of NGO rescue vessels like the *Louise Michel* is underpinned by an
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29 avowed political commitment to antiracist action, and in this capacity, NGOs' acts at sea can be
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31 understood as not just necessary now, but also shadowed – perhaps demanded – by violently
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33 racist maritime pasts. In his examination of how literary imaginaries might overcome “stifled”¹¹
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35 histories and knowledges of Black suffering in *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant asks his
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37 reader to imagine the slave ship: “two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely
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39 capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead
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41 slumped, the dying crouched.”¹² In her meditation on the living legacies of Black enslavement,
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43 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe reflects on the 142 Africans thrown
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45 overboard and then claimed as insured cargo loss on the British slave ship *Zong* in 1781: “they
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47 would have sunk relatively quickly and drowned relatively quickly as well. And then there were
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49 the sharks that always traveled in the wake of slave ships.”¹³ Sharpe characterizes transatlantic
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51 slavery “as a problem of and for thought,”¹⁴ slavery, she writes, “was and is the disaster” and its
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53 terror is “deeply atemporal.”¹⁵ Sharpe's treatment of temporality extends to her observations
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55 regarding linkages and echoes on water, across time. Today, forced human transit over water – a
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3 pelagic “containerization of people”¹⁶ – is precipitated by different but related global logics of
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5 exploitation and oppression. Resistance to maritime violence in the present is necessarily also
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7 resistance to neoimperial visions of relative human rights; as Sharpe suggests of the
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9 contemporary Mediterranean, “Fortress Europe’s death-dealing policies”¹⁷ are continuous with
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11 the extractive structures that made slavery conceivable.
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15 Minded of Glissant’s entreaty to readers to “imagine,” so might we attempt to imagine
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17 something of the night of January 3-4, 2022, when some 70 forced migrants who had been
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19 setting out for EU territory at Malta took refuge in inclement weather on oil giant Shell’s Miskar
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21 natural gas platform. Situated off the coast of Tunisia, the Miskar concession – relinquished by
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23 Shell upon licence expiry in late 2022 to the government of Tunisia¹⁸ – also lies within a
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25 European SAR zone. The distressed migrants were first identified by the European NGO vessel
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27 Sea-Watch International, which coordinated its airplane Seabird to dispatch the Louise Michel to
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29 the location. The individuals on the oil rig were intercepted by Tunisian naval authorities, in
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31 cooperation with Shell, and returned to Tunisia. *Processing* here manifested, as it very often
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33 does, as *return*. As one more iteration of the EU’s biopolitical regime of Mediterranean
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35 interdiction and return, the action was normative. But on this occasion, the Louise Michel
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37 rescued a subsidiary group of 31 people who had been drifting overnight in a wooden boat near
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39 the Miskar platform. After refusing increasingly hostile requests by Tunisian military crew to
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41 relinquish the people it had rescued,¹⁹ the crew of the Louise Michel transported the 31 to the
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43 Italian island of Lampedusa, where they negotiated permission with Italian authorities to
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45 disembark. For its part, Shell released a statement on the Miskar incident: “Shell had informed
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47 the Tunisian authorities and worked closely with them to ensure the safety of the people on board
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49 the boat. They have since been safely transferred to the Tunisian navy vessel.”²⁰ This statement
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51 draws on notions of order, structure and method, implicitly opposed to the disorderly
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53 “illegitimacy” of migrants’ movements into a corporate-invested extractive zone. The incident
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3 exemplifies the tightly bound nature of corporate, national, supranational, and activist/resistant
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5 stakes in the region, revealing how claims and counter-claims to rights of different forms
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7 (human, commercial, national) within the central Mediterranean are enacted, as well as the
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9 manner in which they come into public view.
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13 This essay analyses such comings into view in terms of a curation and dissemination of
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15 activities by marine NGOs, especially the Louise Michel, which I define as an artistic activist
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17 project. Posts by the Louise Michel's team are aesthetically coherent across the digital portfolio,
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19 using a slim stencil typeface – obviously evocative of the street art of the project's funder, but
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21 also perhaps gesturing to a kind of counter-military engagement – placed over photographic
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23 images in a regularized color palette of black, white and pink. The social media accounts of the
24
25 Louise Michel and other NGOs form a networked digital ecology, collectively deployed to
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27 situate the saving of lives in the central Mediterranean in two important and related ways: first,
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29 as radically hospitable (so that assistance is deemed essential and non-negotiable), and second, as
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31 necessitated by the bordering regimes of states (which are cast by NGOs as propagating
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33 racialized inequality). Representation in social media and its refraction in news media is central
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35 to this analysis because forced migration in and around Europe is associated with an
36
37 “infrequency of face-to-face encounters relative to the high frequency of mediatized looking.”²¹
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39 My discussion describes an aesthetics of interception in order to argue for the significance of
40
41 public facing and representational aspects of maritime NGOs' work. As far as refugee processing
42
43 is concerned, the NGO Civil Fleet (as it is sometimes called) exemplifies intervention in its
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45 literal sense of *coming between*: the Fleet uses direct action to disrupt expulsive state-sanctioned
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47 bordering regimes, visibly exposing the relational dynamics of asylum.
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55 However, the aesthetic work of the Louise Michel should not merely be understood as a
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57 consequence of its social media typeface or color palette. I use the term aestheticization in this
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59 discussion to attempt to describe and evaluate a dual operation, and impulses that work in
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3 parallel in the context of the Louise Michel. Following Boris Groys, I draw a distinction between
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5 aestheticization as a description of design elements that make an item “more attractive,”²² and
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7 aestheticization as a notion within aesthetic philosophy and modern art of “defunctionalisation,”
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9 or as Groys elaborates, “the violent annulment of [...] practical applicability and efficiency.”²³ In
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11 what follows, I will develop the latter idea with reference to Philipp Kleinmichel’s concept of
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13 “musealization,”²⁴ which similarly describes the aesthetic conditions of so-called artistic political
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15 activism. Both concepts of aestheticization are necessary for an understanding of Louise
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17 Michel’s interventions as aestheticized. Firstly, and most obviously, the vessel is a design object
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19 that (as I shall outline) is intended to visually intensify the work of NGO rescue, for political-
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21 artistic purposes. But at the same time, the vessel posits its own task in terms of (at least partial)
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23 failure; as Groys remarks, “In the art context, to aestheticize the things of the present means to
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25 discover their dysfunctional, absurd, unworkable character.”²⁵ Louise Michel’s aim of rescuing
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27 and bringing migrants to be processed within European jurisdictions is always going to face
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29 obstruction. Indeed, whenever the vessel faces up against border authorities, it frames the
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31 severity of its own curtailment. To put it another way, even as Louise Michel disrupts state
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33 asylum regimes, it is woven – along with other NGO vessels – into the dysfunctional and
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35 constrictive structures of states, whether in the form of boat turn-back, or vessel impounding at
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37 port, or the criminalization of crew, or the refusal of assistance following an interception. It is
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39 typical, for example, for NGO vessels in the central Mediterranean to wait for days after a
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41 rescue, sending out repeat calls to recalcitrant European port authorities to enable
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43 disembarkation.²⁶ Louise Michel’s “aesthetic” procedure is in part, then, to highlight the
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45 withdrawal of state refugee processing mechanisms in an anti-hospitable maritime zone.
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57 **Political Humanitarianism at the “Pre-Frontier”**

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3 The Louise Michel's first, widely-publicized rescue of those it describes as "guests" and "people
4 on the move" was an aestheticized event in precisely the dual sense I have sketched above: it
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6 launched a vibrant, Banksy-designed rescue boat and a stage-managed mission that was reported
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8 on by several media outlets, while its artist-funder released an accompanying video clip. The
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10 event was also defunctionalized in the sense that it largely failed as a direct-action intervention.
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13 The mission took place in the Mediterranean in the summer of 2020. The crew rescued 219
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15 people and soon sent out distress calls due to overcrowding. Authorities of Italy, Malta and
16
17 Germany were unresponsive. In the end, the Italian Coastguard transferred 49 of the most
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19 vulnerable and transported the body of a deceased man, while NGO vessel Sea-Watch 4
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21 transferred the remaining people.²⁷ Louise Michel was held at port in Burriana, Spain, for a
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23 prolonged period, its registration challenged as part of growing EU restrictions on civil rescue. It
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25 returned to sea in 2022 and undertook several rotations, rescuing several hundred people that
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31 year.²⁸

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34 Social media and an organization website are key to the Louise Michel's public facing
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36 strategy. In addition to a .org website, Twitter was the original repository of Louise Michel's
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38 time-specific information dissemination; a Facebook page was created in December 2021 and an
39
40 Instagram account in January 2022. The representational work of Louise Michel and other
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42 maritime NGOs visually disseminates encounters with refugees (here aesthetics registers as
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44 design), and also *characterizes politically* the maritime contexts in which they operate (here
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46 aesthetics is about visibilizing de/-dysfunction). The latter requires some explication. Legally
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48 unauthorized maritime transit has profoundly informed condemnatory narratives of refugeeness
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50 in recent decades and NGO vessels demonstrate the connection between constructions of
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52 refugees as disorderly collectives and neocolonial power dynamics. The nation states that
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54 refugees attempt to reach by crossing the Mediterranean are regimes that increasingly rely on
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56 extra-territorial and expulsive asylum processes. Sovereign power that is exerted beyond a state's
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3 own borders generates, Pugliese argues, sites of “externalised externality” in such a way as to
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5 “signif[y] an imperially extended and amplified understanding of geopolitical space.”²⁹ In the
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7 central Mediterranean, amplification of EU space functions with the cooperation of economically
8
9 incentivized nations, Libya and Tunisia.³⁰ Cetta Mainwaring and Daniela DeBono similarly
10
11 identify neoimperial interests in the operations of state power in the Mediterranean, but they also
12
13 observe that this power is strategically ambivalent, contending, “criminalization of NGO activity
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15 at sea is made possible through an oscillating neo-colonial imagination of the sea as *mare*
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17 *nostrum* and *mare nullius*, *our sea* and *nobody’s sea*, respectively.”³¹ While a notion of *mare*
18
19 *nullius* abdicates responsibility (attempting to erase the sea’s historical, political and legal
20
21 dimensions), assertions of *mare nostrum* are, Mainwaring and DeBono argue, means by which
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23 “states and the EU [have] reasserted their control over the Mediterranean.”³² If EU states’ control
24
25 over systems of refugee processing at sea (*mare nostrum*) is obvious when it manifests, state
26
27 abdication (*mare nullius*) can be just as coercive, producing conditions for the escalation of
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29 distress and for spectacularized assistance. In her discussion of representations of refugees in this
30
31 domain, Parvati Nair observes that when the NGO boat Aquarius languished for several days in
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33 2018 after rescuing 629 migrants, whereupon Italy and France closed their borders to the vessel,
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35 “a new socialist government in Spain offered ‘sanctuary’ by way of a political statement.”³³ As
36
37 the political and diplomatic standoff played out, close-up images circulated in the media of
38
39 stranded migrants in poor condition. Nair’s analysis of image circulation and maritime migration
40
41 emphasizes the ways in which images of distress at sea underscore the otherness of the excluded
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43 refugee from the perspective of “societies of relocation.”³⁴ The Aquarius incident demonstrated
44
45 how state prohibition has become not only part of the refugee process, but also a dramaturgical
46
47 device of sorts.

56 NGO maritime rescue has established itself, then, in a space of disordered and diminished
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58 EU process. The cessation of Italy’s military-rescue operation, Mare Nostrum, at the end of 2014
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3 and its replacement with the smaller EU-funded operation Triton, overseen by Frontex (the
4 European Border and Coast Guard Agency)³⁵ precipitated the need for rescue by other means.
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6 During the first half of 2015, commercial ships undertook a third of these,³⁶ and for a period
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8 during the European migrant crisis between 2015 and 2017, NGO operations were responsible
9
10 for the assistance of more than 110,000 people.³⁷ Since that time, rescues have dropped in
11
12 number overall, partly due to reduced crossing attempts and partly because of the seizing and
13
14 impounding of NGO boats by EU authorities. Mainwaring and DeBono trace the emergence
15
16 from 2017 of an EU-led narrative of NGO collusion with people smugglers, with the activities of
17
18 NGOs described by Frontex as generating migrant pull factors.³⁸
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24 A case can be made that the work of NGOs is less activist resistance than a fulfilment of
25 international law obligations where states have abdicated these; or as Lena Düpont contends,
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27 “not an act of grace, nor of simple solidarity” but “first and foremost a legal obligation.”³⁹ A
28
29 concept of NGOs as agents of international law is politically compelling, but it is impossible to
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31 avoid the fact that the *illegalization* of maritime migration and the *criminalization*, in EU legal
32
33 jurisdictions, of assistance rendered at sea, define the work of NGO vessels. The shared
34
35 ideological self-positioning of NGO crews reveals core priorities, and moreover, serves as
36
37 reminders that hospitality in this context is forced to operate beyond the law. Deploying the
38
39 hashtags #SolidarityAndResistance (a reclamation of the Search and Rescue acronym) and
40
41 #AllBlackLivesMatter, the Louise Michel and other NGOs situate maritime rescue as affiliative,
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43 direct-action resistance to state power, contextualized by global anti-racism.⁴⁰ If state power
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45 operates according to an “imperial extended and amplified understanding of geopolitical
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47 space,”⁴¹ the NGO Civil Fleet operates according to an amplified understanding of responsibility
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49 for others.
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Aesthetic Techniques: Visuality to Musealization

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3 The differences between Louise Michel and other maritime NGOs are where the former's
4 position as an *artistic* intervention takes shape. While NGOs generally engage in dissemination
5 activity, the Louise Michel project prioritizes symbolic and communicative work along with
6 (though not above) the actuality of saving lives. This was evident from the stage management of
7 its 2020 launch. Banksy instigated the project in 2019 when he contacted German biologist and
8 human rights activist, Pia Klemp. Banksy's email read:
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20 Hello Pia, I've read about your story in the papers. You sound like a badass. I am an artist
21 from the UK and I've made some work about the migrant crisis, obviously I can't keep
22 the money. Could you use it to buy a new boat or something? Please let me know. Well
23 done. Banksy.⁴²
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33 Klemp agreed to captain the Louise Michel and the vessel departed from Burriana on August 18,
34 2020. The story broke on August 27 in the *Guardian*⁴³ and numerous global media reports
35 picked it up, repeating details concerning Banksy's involvement. Banksy released a clip via
36 Instagram on August 29 to his then 10.9 million (now 12 million) followers, that satirically drew
37 attention to overlaps as well as contradictions that emerge at the interface of art as a symbolic
38 domain, an inadequate and hostile European processing system, and Banksy's own hubristic
39 gesture of funding of a maritime rescue project. The video contained subtitles that read: "Like
40 most people / who make it in the art world / I bought a yacht / to cruise the Med / It's a French
41 navy vessel / we converted into a lifeboat / because E.U. authorities / deliberately ignore distress
42 calls / from 'non-Europeans.'"⁴⁴ The clip presented grotesque juxtapositions, including bidding
43 at an art auction house, a luxury yacht, refugees scrambling for their lives in the sea, and a
44 member of the coast guard asleep at his desk. It ended with the words "all black lives matter." As
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3 of March 2023, Banksy's clip has had more than 6 million views.⁴⁵ Of the various
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5 representational modes connected with the Louise Michel project, the clip offers perhaps the
6
7 clearest example of what Groys describes as contemporary art activism's inheritance of *both*
8
9 design and defunctionalized modes of aestheticization. Groys argues:

16 Contemporary art activism is the heir of these two contradictory traditions of
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18 aestheticization. On the one hand, art activism politicizes art, uses art as political design –
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20 as a tool in the political struggles of our time. [...] Design is an integral part of our
21
22 culture, and it would make no sense to forbid its use by politically oppositional
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24 movements on the pretext that this use leads to spectacularization, theatricalization of the
25
26 political protest. [...] But art activism cannot escape a much more radical, revolutionary
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28 tradition of the aestheticization of politics: the acceptance of one's own failure,
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30 understood as a premonition and prefiguration of a coming failure of the status quo.⁴⁶
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37 The purpose of Banksy's clip is to reveal a status quo in which an artist can use their
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39 accumulated capital to become a participant – or, to fund participation – in a maritime region
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41 where luxury voyages share space with anticipated drownings. The clip diagnoses the structural
42
43 dysfunction of a racialized human ecology that is both failing and morally unsustainable.
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47 The wry expressive techniques employed in Banksy's clip are resonant with the Louise
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49 Michel's organization website, which announces of the vessel, "She is as agile as she is pink [...] She runs on a flat hierarchy and a vegan diet."⁴⁷ The reference to non-hierarchical organization
50
51 underscores an ideological affiliation with anarchism, a politics of horizontal power that has
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53 direct action at its heart, while the whimsical image of pink agility situates art within an activist
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55 domain. Media reports of Louise Michel's operations are accompanied by high resolution images
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3 of the brightly colored vessel with its recognizable Banksy iconography. While Klemp insists
4 upon a distinction between the work of the boat and that of its artist financier, stating “Banksy
5 won’t pretend that he knows better than us how to run a ship, and we won’t pretend to be
6 artists,”⁴⁸ the visual and discursive uses to which the former French navy vessel have been put
7 are those of political art practice. The curation of Louise Michel’s online representation reflects a
8 distinct concern with curation-cum-branding, while the photographic imagery released by the
9 team is diverse: always strikingly composed, some images depict rescue in process, with
10 migrants struggling in the water, while others depict non-identifiable rescued people in thermal
11 blankets immediately after assistance has been rendered, while still others show guests
12 recovering in what appear to be moments of relative stillness aboard the vessel. A number of
13 images of the vessel depict it artfully at sunrise or sunset. Facebook and Instagram have capacity
14 for lengthier posts, such as the “message from our guests to Europe,” posted on both platforms
15 on June 27, 2022, following a mission. This post used the project’s stencil typeface and
16 contained a photograph taken from behind of a group of guests, in clean white t-shirts, on the
17 bow of the Louise Michel, a clear blue horizon beyond; the second image was of a note in hand-
18 written Arabic, placed on a paper navigational map. Another image, taken after the 2020
19 operation and picked up in the news media, was unusual for its unashamed self-fashioning by
20 people on the move: a group of rescued guests, wearing pandemic face coverings but otherwise
21 facing the camera as they made heart gestures with their fingers, a reference to the heart shaped
22 life buoy painted on the Louise’s Michel’s flank and visible in bold diagonal at the image’s left.
23 Taken together, the Louise Michel’s imagery depicts its guests in a multi-dimensional manner,
24 sometimes underscoring expected codes of refugee representation (in states of distress and
25 extremity) but at other times confounding these. The project inserts political-artistic
26 methodology into the process of rescue at sea, and rescue methodology into the domain of
27 political-artistic process.
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3 The representation of Louise Michel's interventions is, of course, discursive as well as
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5 imagistic, as the abovementioned "message from our guests to Europe" demonstrates. Much of
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7 the textuality associated with operations consists of politically inflected reports of action. Twitter
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9 particularly suits the purposes of eyewitness reporting on the details of on-water encounters. In
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11 the wake its first 2022 operation, the activists Tweeted: "Last night the #LouiseMichel reached
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13 Lampedusa and our 31 guests were able to disembark. We wish them all the best for their
14
15 journey ahead. Our thoughts are with the around 65-70 people who were pulled back to Tunisia.
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17 #FreedomOfMovement #SolidarityAndResistance." Here, migrants or refugees are reclaimed as
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19 *guests*. Instagram is utilized by the Louise Michel activists for reporting of unfolding action –
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21 following a rescue in October 2022, for instance, daily updates were given on the hours that had
22
23 passed without EU response – but the platform is also conducive to pedagogic discourse, with
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25 FAQ posts concerning definitional topics, such as "what is a port of safety" and "what is the
26
27 principle of non-refoulement." The Louise Michel activists' regularized use of epithets in their
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29 social media, such as "so-called Libyan Coast Guard," reinforces a reframing of the vocabulary
30
31 of migrant processing in the region. The combination of reporting, pedagogy, and the
32
33 reclamation of terminology are key to the Louise Michel's discursive intervention into dominant
34
35 formations European asylum. And textuality is folded into image: text is typically accompanied
36
37 by image, while the identikit effect of hashtag citation allies it with photographic imagery. The
38
39 Louise Michel's discursive project is a political-aesthetic one, in which representation serves to
40
41 contextualize and intensify the operational work of the crew. In the context of their physical
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43 separation from public view, the operations of Louise Michel and (to greater or lesser extents)
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45 other NGOs are digitized and performative: unsanctioned refugee processing rendered
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47 mediatized events.

56 Where state-led refugee processing would rarely be understood as art, unsanctioned
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58 processing may be. Noticing that political activism and activist art are often ostensibly
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3 indistinguishable, Philipp Kleinmichel emphasizes the frame into which activist art practice
4 enters: “the artist as activist has [...] access to the symbolic economy of art and therefore to an
5 exclusive social sphere that is based on the recognition of symbolic value.”⁴⁹ The crucial
6 difference between artistic and non-artistic political activism inheres, Kleinmichel argues, in the
7 way the symbolic operates in artistic political activism:
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18 There is [...] a minimal yet irreducible difference between nonartistic and artistic
19 political activism that comprises the production of an excessive symbolic surplus
20 that exceeds the symbolic dimension of political activism. While nonartistic
21 political activism may employ aesthetic strategies with disinterest in the fact,
22 whether or not they are recognized as art, artistic political activism is driven by
23 the conscious or unconscious intention to signify and code the specific aesthetic
24 and symbolic forms of nonartistic political activism as art.⁵⁰
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37 In the case of the Louise Michel, “symbolic surplus” generated by the project may be
38 something that Klemp, as captain, would disassociate herself with – recall her statement
39 that she and her crew “won’t pretend to be artists;” tellingly, Klemp’s self-identification
40 as a non-artist was paraphrased by another Louise Michel crew member, Leona, in an
41 interview on Ben Cowles’s podcast series on NGO marine operations, *The Civil Fleet*.⁵¹
42 And yet the Louise Michel undoubtedly has access art’s symbolic economy, even if the
43 individuals that enact missions gain this access without volition. Kleinmichel makes the
44 case that the identification of artistic political activism as art is a recognition of its
45 symbolic value, through which it moves “into the context of the museum.”⁵² This
46 “musealized context,” he argues, “not only allows for, but also forces the viewer into a
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3 distance from the immediate effects of direct political action,” a framework of “time and
4 space”⁵³ from which to perceive and appraise the intervention’s meaning.
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8 Kleinmichel’s notion of musealization echoes the concept of aestheticization that
9 Boris Groys identifies as belonging to art. As Groys observes, if the object of design is to
10 “aesthetically improve the status quo – to make it more attractive”⁵⁴ the aesthetic work of
11 art is to “discover” the dysfunction of the present – the ways that it is “nonusable,
12 inefficient, obsolete.”⁵⁵ Groys puts it another way: “Art [...] accepts the status quo, but it
13 accepts it as a corpse.”⁵⁶ Groys’s subsequent comparison between the work of the
14 museum and the exposing of political corpses⁵⁷ runs parallel to Kleinmichel’s view that
15 musealized art-activism is a “simulation” in a contemporary world where activist
16 registers are diminished. Like Groys, Kleinmichel describes the staging of a failure that
17 “allows us to understand [...] methods, strategies, and historical contexts.”⁵⁸ Such
18 readings go a certain way to describing the Louise Michel’s conditions of enactment: the
19 oppressive supranational structure in which the vessel performs rescue means it does
20 much to underscore the normalized expulsion of forced migrants (that is, they show us
21 the “corpse” of a “nonusable” European asylum system). But the Louise Michel is not
22 just – indeed, not even *mostly* – a project undertaken by people who identify as artists,
23 and its diverse stakeholders arguably set it apart as a direct-action-art operation. While
24 Banksy’s aesthetic purpose remains tenaciously complex, his vessel’s non-artist crew –
25 for whom notions of aesthetics are of diminished significance – trouble the idea that, with
26 its status as a kind of art object, Louise Michel’s rendering of assistance in the
27 Mediterranean is akin to foreclosing on the possibility of political change. With this
28 trouble in mind, the following sections of this discussion seek to grapple with the
29 question of efficacy.
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Banksy and the Limits of Political Efficacy

Banksy's publicized e-correspondence with Klemp articulates with frankness two important lines of continuity between the Louise Michel and previous work in the artist's oeuvre: "I've made some work about the migrant crisis, obviously I can't keep the money." The irony associated with crafting a profitable career in part from showing up the imbrication of capitalism and forced migration is, in Banksy's case, self-fashioned to a high degree. Alongside pseudonymity, the tactics of citation and repurposing are elements of the artist's methodology and performativity. The Louise Michel is citational, repurposing Banksy's iconic "Girl with Balloon" stencils – a version of which self-shredded at auction at Sotheby's (London) in 2018 in an action known as "Love is in the Bin" – as an image along the vessel's flank of a young girl holding aloft a pink, heart-shaped life buoy. In the context of a 2017 street art project in Bethlehem, Banksy grappled in an email interview with the limits of art's political efficacy, observing: "there aren't many situations where a street artist is much use. Most of my politics is for display purposes only."⁵⁹ But in the same interview, reflecting on art in a place of political extremes – perhaps not too dissimilar from those of migrant rescue – Banksy also ventured a lingering belief in efficacy: "in Palestine there's a slim chance the art could have something useful to add – anything that appeals to young people, specifically young Israelis, can only help."⁶⁰

In *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancière offers an historicized critique of the assumptions embedded in politically engaged artistic work. He takes in a broad view of artistic practices that "presuppose a specific notion of art's efficacy"⁶¹ and identifies such work as being rooted on mimetic traditions of art that have been called into question since the eighteenth century in Europe. Rancière argues:

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3 Despite a century of critique – or so-called – directed at the mimetic tradition, it appears
4 to be still firmly entrenched, including in forms of supposed political and artistic
5 subversion. Underlying these forms is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when
6 it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside of the
7 workshop or museum and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by
8 denouncing its own participation in that system.⁶²
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20 With reference to theatrical practice, Rancière contends that while many people may not
21 subscribe to a pedagogical model of theatrical performance's capacity to "improve human
22 behaviour,"⁶³ politically engaged art practice transacts on a general assumption of edification:
23 that audiences or spectators will "continue to act as if"⁶⁴ a pedagogic capacity holds. Banksy's
24 practice seems to function according to this "as if," from which point art is inevitable.
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32 In recent years, politicized maritime motifs have been central to Banksy's work. In 2015,
33 he created several murals near Calais, France, at the site of the former "Jungle" refugee
34 encampment, one of which referenced Theodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* with a depiction
35 of distressed and drowning migrants attempting in vain to draw the attention of a luxury yacht in
36 the far distance.⁶⁵ At the 2019 Venice Biennale, Banksy set up a faux street stall of gilt-framed
37 paintings depicting across several canvasses an enormous luxury yacht, dwarfing its surrounds in
38 Venice and spilling over the frames of each individual painting. The works were displayed in a
39 tight grid formation, referencing old European academy hanging traditions, and accompanied a
40 small hand painted sign that elliptically referenced the harmful excesses of luxury, "Venice in
41 Oil." In the same year, a mural appeared in Venice, presumed to be by Banksy, of a child holding
42 a bright pink rescue flare. This, of course, is an image whose subject matter and vivid palette
43 would be revisited in the decoration of the Louise Michel.
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3 The project by Banksy that perhaps bears closest resemblance to the direct action of the
4 Louise Michel is his subversive theme park, Dismaland, constructed on the site of a former
5 public pool in Somerset, UK, in 2015. One of Dismaland's attractions were motorized refugee
6 boat sculptures depicting near-identical busts of refugees sitting listlessly aboard a vessel (one of
7 these sculptures was later sold to raise funds for refugees).⁶⁶ The contrast between these frozen
8 bodies and the desperate scrambling of refugees in the sea portrayed in Banksy's Instagram
9 video launch of the Louise Michel's 2020 voyage is a stark instance of citation through
10 documentary image-making of sorts. Upon the dismantling of Dismaland, Banksy transported
11 some of its items to Calais to facilitate the construction of accommodation units and play areas at
12 the Jungle.⁶⁷ Like the repurposing of a French navy vessel for Mediterranean SAR, the
13 repurposing of infrastructure from Dismaland to the Calais Jungle operates *both* as direct-action
14 and as representational work. Items taken to Calais were characterized by Banksy as "crap,"⁶⁸ an
15 ironic designation that pinpoints an affiliation between "wasted" lives⁶⁹ and material acts of
16 limited hospitality in a neoliberal context. The Louise Michel project brings relations of
17 hospitality more explicitly to the fore: here, hospitality is radical because (as the activists posit it)
18 it stands in opposition to a necropolitical⁷⁰ status quo.

43 **Hospitable Disruption of the Sensible**

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46 The hospitality enacted by Mediterranean NGOs is rooted in a commitment to horizontal power,
47 equality and radical borderlessness. Their marine operations – where they act in mutual support,
48 like an unofficial fleet – have a common representational purpose that is amplified by affiliative
49 social media that performs solidarity and a collectivist purpose. The operations bring guests and
50 rescuers together and, in these fraught moments, produce resistant embodied formations of
51 community; as such, they put pressure on dominant asylum politics and processes, understood in
52 Rancière's sense as the way bodies fit or do not fit in material and symbolic space.⁷¹ Rancière's
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3 notion of dissensus as disruption of dominant structures of authority has egalitarianism and the
4 visible public sphere at its centre. By staging – via the direct marine dramaturgy of interception –
5 a confrontation between on-water authority and egalitarian practice, NGO vessels constitute a
6 particularly high stakes – indeed *dramatic* – example of dissensus, in Rancière’s
7 conceptualization. The work of SAR as performed by Louise Michel disrupts the sensible order
8 of refugee processing: that is, state border regimes that extend to the world’s waterways. The
9 missions of Louise Michel and her NGO peers put hospitality at the centre of relations between
10 human lives. And this hospitality is visualized, with the circulation of activist images and reports
11 on operations asking online spectators to dwell in the represented encounter, to think about
12 authorized and unauthorized processing and how refugees are constructed therein.

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But marine encounters with power are, nevertheless, remote from the terrestrial resistances (barricades, occupations) that inform Rancière’s philosophy on publics. In order, then, to think about the disruptive capacities of Louise Michel and to clarify its interceptive aesthetics, Rancière’s vision of disruption via egalitarian dissensus may usefully be allied with Melody Jue’s vision of a milieu-specific disruption of senses and knowledge forms via marine “conceptual displacement.”⁷² The pelagic environment that mediates on-water activism informs every aspect of its representational capacities, challenges and limits. Jue theorizes the “conceptual displacement” that water effects, contrasting it with the embodied normativity of land for generating senses and, in turn, critical thought. The epistemological and embodied task that Jue sets herself by considering immersion’s impact on thought, which she terms a “milieu specific analysis,”⁷³ bears some similarities to the cultural-historical work of Glissant’s imagination or the “wake work” of Sharpe, but whereas for those thinkers, knowledge gaps are a consequence of racialized power and violation, for Jue, a decentralization of the human is necessary in order to pursue a “method of dislocating terrestrially nurtured thought into the

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3 ocean, a process that may involve physical immersion, technically mediated immersion, and
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5 speculative immersion through fiction, film, digital media, and the arts.”⁷⁴
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8 The distinction in Jue’s thought is to *other* terrestrial perception, rather than to attempt to
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10 *apply* it: “The milieu of the ocean offers an epistemological check on human knowledge
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12 formation, presenting entirely different conditions for perception, sensation, and life than
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14 terrestrial environments.”⁷⁵ Whether the interceptive aesthetics of the Louise Michel demand
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16 significant imaginative and perceptual shifts in the minds of the publics who view traces of its
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18 missions via imagistic and discursive dispatches is far from clear; what is more compelling is the
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20 possibility that the activists themselves are reshaped perceptually through their intense, sleepless
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22 on-water encounters with migrant guests. At sea, unsanctioned refugee processing is also an act
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24 of endurance. Hospitality must materialize in an inhospitable environment. The critique that Jue
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26 develops may serve as a provocation for delineating the work of Louise Michel crew members
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28 (and that of other maritime activists) and the work of Banksy as artist-funder; the embodied
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30 knowledges, the sensorial displacements, traumatic residues and bodily after-effects of being
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32 with maritime forced migrants in harsh political and environmental contexts represent an
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34 altogether different category of commitment to radical equality from that of any terrestrial
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36 supporter-spectator.
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43 And for all its bodily, durational commitment to dislocating dominant notions of human
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45 political community, NGO rescue is limited by overlapping restrictions on refugees’ capacity to
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47 become, via legal processes, rights-bearing human subjects. NGOs must articulate with statist
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49 asylum routes and their engagements cannot be, as Jacques Derrida recognized in his reflections
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51 on hospitality, an “absolute” act of “giv[ing] place” to the “unknown, anonymous other.”⁷⁶ It is
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53 therefore important to assess with caution the wider liberatory potential of activist constructions
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55 of “guests” on the move. In a time-bound space of marine encounter, NGOs do particularize their
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57 guests in a disruption – if not unmaking – of normative political community. But the
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3 positionality of guests in these processes is limited. NGOs work within spaces mapped out not
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5 just in terms of power imbalances, but according to the expulsive imperatives of states. Guests in
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7 such interventions stand only tenuously as participants in a horizontal community. Indeed,
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10 Mainwaring and DeBono's observation that NGO vessels are "an important new form of
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12 monitoring on the high seas, where oversight of government activity had previously been limited
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14 to migrant accounts, readily dismissed by policymakers"⁷⁷ only underscores the differential
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16 authority afforded to the accounts of rescuers over those of migrants in the construction of the
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18 Mediterranean as refugee processing zone. And with his profile eclipsing that of any activist
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20 working in the central Mediterranean, Banksy's art-activist intervention both contributes and
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22 draws public attention to state monitoring at sea, but it inevitably does so by magnifying the
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24 benefactor / beneficiary relation that is built into refugee status as a legal category.
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30 Yet every person who has been assisted by a maritime NGO is a person who has been
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32 transported to EU territory, where the prospect of accessing legal asylum processing frameworks
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34 has at least been opened up. NGOs precipitate a sequence of political relations or encounters.
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36 The activists' moral impetus is – as I suggested at the start of this discussion, with reference to
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38 Glissant and Sharpe – both historically informed and politically astute. In a discussion that seeks
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40 to engage Glissant's thinking on traces between past and present racialized identities to an
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42 understanding of the dynamics of contemporary forced migration, Raphaël Lambert observes,
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44 "the legal claims of today's migrants, in virtue of international refugee law, are based on the
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46 same moral principle with which Glissant endows those who survived the experience of the hold.
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48 The outcry/clamor/claim of the migrants has reached the shores of affluent nations, and these
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50 nations can no longer turn a deaf ear to them."⁷⁸ The Louise Michel project is one that seems to
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52 acknowledge that the movements of refugees are subject to political aestheticization, and
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54 moreover, that radical, hospitable direct action is part of the work that is needed to resist an
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56 image of the invader and propound an image of the guest. In a previous essay for this journal, I
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3 identified a construction of refugee transit that both confirmed and confounded definitions of
4 procession as representational movement, noting, “With roots in the Latin *procedere*, meaning to
5 go forward, advance, or proceed, ‘procession’ bears the semantic trace of its derived terms
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10 ‘process’ and ‘procedure,’ to connote movement that is framed, predictable, sanctioned. But
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12 procession readily exceeds its own descriptive boundaries, not least in its intersection with the
13
14 political.”⁷⁹ Processional metaphors for refugee movement can represent a disposition of looking
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16 that imagines influx – and in extreme constructions, “invasion”⁸⁰ – even where state-sanctioned
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18 routes of refugee arrival are absent. With the Louise Michel, Banksy has financed a direct-action
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20 art object to which mediatized visibility is critical. The undertaking is hazardous in both
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22 discursive and material senses: the imaging of refugees at sea will always risk reifying a notion
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24 of incoming outsiders, just as state evasion and the criminalization of NGO activity have
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26 produced marine dramaturgies that render SAR *per se* politically performative as well as life
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28 threatening. Louise Michel produces an aesthetic framework for marine rescue as human claim,
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33 amid clamor.

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36 When the so-called “Colston four” celebrated their acquittal in January 2022 at Bristol
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38 Crown Court (UK) on charges of criminal damage, they wore matching grey t-shirts with an
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40 illustration of an empty stone plinth, an abandoned placard and shards of stone, framed by the
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42 word BRISTOL in capital letters. The four defendants had been on trial for their role in the 2020
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44 dismantling of the bronze statue of slave-owner Edward Colston in Bristol and its
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46 (un)ceremonious dumping into the city’s harbour. The t-shirts were designed by Banksy, a
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48 Bristol native, as part of an aesthetic-political intervention devised to raise funds to support those
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50 on trial. In a mode of memory work – or rather, in her own terms, “wake work” – of a very
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52 different order than the imperialist aesthetic of commemoration in bronze, Sharpe thinks about
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54 residual traces of the bodies of drowned slaves:
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3 The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is
4 called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium [...] has a residence time of 260
5 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It
6 continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence
7 time of the wake.⁸¹

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18 In an Instagram video to promote his fundraising initiative, Banksy presents intertitles that state,
19 “up to 20,000 [slaves on Colston-managed ships] died in transit / and were thrown overboard.”⁸²
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21 The last four words appear over an image of the moment the statue of Colston is thrown into
22 Bristol Harbour, a juxtaposition that imagines an encounter or co-mingling: the remains of slave
23 and slave owner, in the residence time of the sea. The act Banksy cites in this moment of the
24 video clip – the watery denouement of the statue’s dismantling – is a performative instantiation
25 of Groys’s claim that “to aestheticize the things of the present means to discover their
26 dysfunctional, absurd, unworkable character.”⁸³ The jubilation of the Bristol crowd at the
27 moment of this collective discovery serves as a reminder that if the aesthetic work of activist art
28 is to expose political corpses, it is also to materialize an “horizon for successful political
29 action.”⁸⁴

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