



Pic.1. Young refugees engaging with visitors as part of the Crossing Borders events.
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DEBORA MINÀ DOMENICO SERGI

HORNIMAN MUSEUM AND GARDENS, PAN INTERCULTURAL ARTS AND
APOW (AMAZING PEOPLE OF THE WORLD) BY REFUGEE YOUTH
LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

BOAT 195:

A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN HISTORY OF MIGRATION BY A
GROUP OF YOUNG LONDONERS
FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

STARTING POINT/ PROBLEM WHICH GAVE RISE TO THE PROJECT

Boat 195 is a section of a 16m long vessel which helped 253 Eritrean nationals to cross the Sicilian channel in August 2013. Boat 195 is a permanent part of the World Gallery of anthropology at the Horniman Museum and Gardens as a testimony of contemporary Mediterranean crossings.

The objects invite visitors to rethink the Mediterranean as a bridge rather than a barrier between three continents and to challenge our modern understanding of national borders and communities. Boat 195 wants to tell the story of the millions of people who are fleeing war and persecution. It is a reminder of both the right to and duty of hospitality in contemporary Europe.

Boat 195 is displayed alongside a video tracing the ethical dilemmas involved in collecting and interpreting the object, giving visitors an insight into the different life stages of the object and its change of value as a boat carrying refugees, as a commodity, and as a museum object. The intention is to provide a rich context to the process of collecting and the actors involved, showing how objects might undergo processes of transformation in becoming ethnographic.

In an effort to open up the interpretative process to refugee voices and experiences, a group of young refugees and asylum seekers was involved in the curation of Boat 195. As part of the process, the Horniman Museum worked with pre-existing community partners Pan Intercultural Arts and APOW.

Pan Intercultural Arts has been running theatre projects with young asylum seekers and refugees for over a decade and participants of the programmes have



Pic. 2. Boat 195.
© Horniman Museum and Gardens

visited the Horniman Museum and created work inspired by its collections. The longevity of the project and the investment of the Museum in including the voices of displaced people in its permanent collection was the main reason driving this collaboration.

TARGET GROUPS

Boat 195 was co-curated by Yonatan, Seher, Sabrin, Abdulrahman, Abu, Kit, Ardiana, Kisanet, Sara, Younis, Maria and Sheyda, a group of young people from Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Iran, Albania, Uganda, Ethiopia and the UK. They were part of Future and Fortune theatre groups by Pan Intercultural Arts, APOW (Amazing People Of the World) youth group by Refugee Youth, and the Horniman Museum Youth Panel.

The group then delivered an interactive installation/ workshop for the general public during the Crossing Borders event.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE

- Use material culture as a contestation of borders and contemporary politics of belonging.
- Imagine an ethnographic museum of the future that uses objects to actively engage with the legacy of colonial traumas.
- Contribute to narratives of migration as a human phenomenon
- Foreground refugee voices and capability, overcoming the lack of agency determined by medical models of engagement.
- Give young refugees the opportunity to interpret the theme of migration in the Mediterranean from their point of view and lived experiences.
- Empower refugees to engage creatively with members of the public, contributing to dispelling myths around refugees as passive subjects.
- See their experience represented and valued in mainstream cultural institutions beyond tokenistic gestures.
- Use the creative process to create a space of intercultural dialogue, enabling young people from a non-refugee background to work together with refugees and find common ground.

PERIOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

March 2017 – March 2018. Boat 195 is still displayed as part of the World Gallery.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE PROJECT

1. Longevity of partnership.

The project was a result of a well-established, long-term partnership between the organisations involved. The building of trust with project participants was also insured by previous projects which consolidated our working practice. This includes training delivered by young refugees to young people from a non-refugee background and an annual event called *Crossing Borders*, programmed by local refugee communities.

2. Creative exploration of Boat 195 – The established group of young people visited the museum Study Collection to look at the section of Boat 195. In pairs, participants were asked:

To write down all they could notice about the physical appearance of the boat (*Wood, triangle, light blue colour with red and yellow stripes, burnt, a star shape on the bottom, a damaged edge, layers of paint, screws*).

To think about what the boat could have been used for (*A fishing boat, one day the trading was not going so well so they had to change their business into carrying other things*).

To tell its story with the voice of the boat itself (*I was born in the sea and my dream was to travel and explore more; I was a boat and I saved people, I was a boat and I was strong, I was a boat and I could not save some lives, I was a boat and now I am tired*).

Finally, we opened a space for personal reactions (*I feel disconnected as our stories, mine and the boat's, are so distant and different; I remember death; When I saw the boat I remembered the smell of wood, it's part of my life*).

As a result of this first workshop a story was created for the gallery label of Boat 195.

3. Mapping the Mediterranean – on the following workshop we explored the history of the Mediterranean basin as a place of trade, exchange and migration. We also introduced the idea of Sabir, the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, a pidgin language used mainly for trading in the Mediterranean basin from the 11th to the 19th centuries.

We showed the group this map of the Mediterranean rotated in different directions and we asked “What do you see?”. An angry elephant, a karate move, and an animal feeding on a fish were some of the answers.

Using all these words and discussion as creative stimuli each participant wrote a poem encapsulating what the Mediterranean meant to them.

One of the poems created:

*Bahara ya Mediterranea
Is a beautiful angry elephant that's ready to attack
Just when you say goodbye to it.
Mi, my sister, Malta's best food that Malta loves
The climate and music calm his soul
Venir, I come, to an island of Cyprus with the best view
But Croatia is holding a gun to my head,
Like a monster, it just wants to drag me back to my weakest self.
Credir, I believe, Italy is screaming save her life for mercy's sake.*

4. Workshop for Crossing Borders event – for this phase we asked the young people to create an activity for the general public of the Horniman Museum to engage with the themes they had explored. This event was prior to the opening of the new Anthropology gallery where Boat 195 is exhibited. They decided to create an installation that would guide the audience through a creative journey that included listening to a soundscape of words and poems, reflecting on the ambiguous map of the Mediterranean and being asked by the young people “what does the Mediterranean mean to you?”. Audience reactions were recorded and added to a final soundscape piece.

5. The display – The label accompanying Boat 195 alongside the video was developed by the group as part of the process and it is displayed alongside a documentary about the process of collection and interpretation.

I can feel the fear inside me. I am unstable, shaking with uncertainty. The voices inside me are shouting, screaming but I can't see a thing. They must be switching for the night shift. The disturbance is causing the children to cry. Yet I can't do anything but hold them. A light flashes, blindly bright in the darkness. It is coming for my passengers. Bringing my people to safety, security and much needed kindness. (Poem by Seher and Yonatan)

KEY APPROACHES AND PRINCIPLES MOST VALUABLE FOR THE AUDIENCE

This project generated three levels of engagement:

- young people (refugees and non-refugees) were engaged in a creative process that allowed them to explore the theme of migration from an historical, political and personal point of view. Safety of participants was paramount



Pic. 3. Visitors responding to the workshop delivered by the young refugees. © Domenico Sergi

and the process was devised to give all participants the choice to engage as much or as little as they wanted with the themes and to decide what contribution to make, in particular for what concerned personal material.

- museum visitors were engaged by the group in an interactive installation during the Crossing Borders event. They had the opportunity to reflect upon their connection with the Mediterranean Sea and how the perception of it has shifted in current times. Some of their reactions are documented in the soundscape produced.
- finally the Boat 195 and the documentary are still currently displayed in the gallery.

LANGUAGES USED DURING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

We used mainly English. Some participants used their own language in creative tasks.

PARTNERS AND EXTERNAL EXPERTS

This project was devised and delivered as a collaboration between the Horniman Museum and Gardens, APOW (Amazing People Of the World) and Pan Intercultural Arts. Participants from refugee backgrounds were recruited from the regular groups run by APOW and Pan, joined by local young people member of the Horniman Youth Panel.

Domenico Sergi is a Senior Curator at the Museum of London. Domenico is an anthropologist and he worked at the Horniman Museum and Gardens and lectured at UCL, London. He holds a PhD in museum and refugee studies and he will publish a monograph on Museums, Refugees and Communities with Routledge in the spring of 2021.

Debora Minà is a theatre artist, educator and facilitator of socially engaged creative practice. She is a visiting lecturer in Applied Theatre at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Goldsmiths College. Since 2014 she is Pan Intercultural Arts' Project Director of Future, a youth theatre group for unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Pan Intercultural Arts is an arts-based charity that uses performing arts to improve the wellbeing and skills of vulnerable young people such as unaccompanied asylum seekers children, refugees, female survivors of human trafficking, and young people at risk of social exclusion.

Shanti Sarkar was an APOW Development worker. She provided pastoral support for the participants and participated in the evaluation of the project.

APOW (Amazing People Of the World) is a youth group run by Refugee Youth charity. It has at its heart a participatory and inclusive approach. The primary aim of our work is to increase emotional wellbeing and resilience and improve communication skills in young refugees, as well as alleviating isolation through promoting positive friendships and networks .

SIGNIFICANT RESULTS AND INDICATORS OF THE PROJECT'S SUCCESS

A few months after the end of the project we asked participants:

«What was the most significant part of the Boat 195 project?»

Their responses guided us through the creative, ethical and practical challenges of this project and its successes too.

“The most significant part of the Boat project is the actual boat, when I went to see it, it brought me back memories from my past so I think it's actually so relatable and fascinating”.

“The first time I saw the boat. I walked inside and saw the shape I just couldn't believe it. It was the same as my boat, even the colour. When we were writing about it though poetry it meant so much to me. It made me think of travelling to a new place to be more safe”.

It was the same as my boat. This was a major ethical challenge that we faced. Would this project be too close to their own experience? Were we exposing them to the risk of retraumatisation? Both Pan and APOW work with refugees and usually avoid the use of personal stories in order to give participants the chance to redefine their

identity beyond the trauma narrative of their life. Nonetheless we believed that we could offer some of them the opportunity to contribute to the general discussion in a very special way. To limit the risks, we chose the participants that we thought were mature enough to engage with the project, and whilst we considered having a therapist in the room, eventually we trusted the relationship we had with them and the relationships they had with each other.

"I enjoyed writing the poetry. It was emotional that's why I liked expressing it through poetry".

One participant was overwhelmed the first time we saw the boat. This is the risk that we knew was possible. However, because of her trust relationship with the facilitators and the group, she was able to make a decision about whether or not to continue the project. Eventually she decided to engage further and could process her emotions through creative writing.

In particular we devised a series of creative workshop that allowed participants to engage with the theme of the Mediterranean as little or as much as they wanted to, giving them the choice to move away from any personal story if they wished to and to engage with other themes.

"It's amazing for people to see how people come across the sea. It's something you'll never forget and other people hopefully will understand the situation we've been through and not forgot it. Different generations will understand...they will care more about previous people putting themselves in danger to be more safe. It's important to tell our children so they know. So they know who they are".

*Every person's
search for safety
is unique.*

"The best thing about Boat 195 is that is a very current project. I think that most museums always focus on the past. It was very nice to have the refugees and ourselves (the Horniman Youth Panel) contributing to bring a very current issue into the museum that we can reflect upon in years to come".

We feel this is one of the successes of the project. Museum collections are one way of capturing the past, but often they present history through the lens of colonial and imperialist powers. This project was important for the people involved, because it offered them the opportunity to be the interpreters of the present and to connect it to a long history of travel around the

Mediterranean.

"Finding out where the boat has come from and what people go through to cross seas to reach the shore of safety. As a refugee I am always aware that every person's search for safety is unique and seeing the boat made me think of all the stories that have boarded its deck. I can only imagine what people have gone through in a boat that didn't seem safe enough for just few people. I'm sure hundreds of people have boarded the boat 195 hoping to seek refuge in a less hostile county to where they have been fleeing from. However how many of them actually have reached the shore is still a question mark that occupies my brain".

Every person's search for safety is unique. Too often the narrative around people seeking safety is stereotyped and flattened to an identity of either victim or hero. We were aware of the risks of reinforcing this view. How could we represent every individual?

"What a privilege to be part of an exhibition that will last for years. It has been a long process and I am so happy that there is a permanent exhibition that looks into the journey of refugees and how they get here. Is not easy leaving a whole life behind and this project shows how far some of us have to go to reach safety. Some of us risk everything to be able to experience a "normal" life". "It feels good. To be recognised. We will show it to our children".

An exhibition that will last for years. This was mentioned several times. The fact that the exhibition was there to last. The fact that it is accessible for free to them and their friends. The fact that they dream of taking their children to see it. The longevity of the project is key to its success and the investment of the Museum made this process significant for them and not tokenistic.

[Soundscape What do you sea?](#)

LIMITATIONS AND RISKS ARISING DURING PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND MECHANISMS FOR MINIMIZING THEM

We were aware of the many risks of this project, in particular:

- Risk of retraumatisation. Seeing the boat and remembering possibly traumatic experiences was one of the main concerns of this project. As mentioned above we decided to trust the relationships within the group and we devised exercises that allowed participants to choose their level of engagement with the themes. We offered the opportunity to move away from personal trauma stories to tell a wider group narrative and reflection.
- Risk of misrepresentation of refugee experiences, in particular the risk of reduction to disempowered victim status. We addressed this by exploring the wider theme of migration and participants' responses to it, together with their aspirations for the future.
- The project required careful planning and high flexibility from all partners to ensure that we were meeting the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the group. We constantly assessed accessibility and we included regular participants' feedback in the process to make sure we were responding to their needs, ideas, and logistical obstacles.

FACTORS ENSURING THE PROJECT'S SUSTAINABILITY

- Length of partnerships between organisations involved
- Mutual understanding of the challenges and opportunities of engagement work with refugees