

# The Sea is the Limit

We Need to  
Talk about Migration

IS.

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It is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man's political survival today is imaginable ... The refugee who has lost all rights, yet stops wanting to be assimilated at any cost to a new national identity so as to contemplate his condition lucidly, receives, in exchange for certain unpopularity, an inestimable advantage ... Refugees expelled from one country to the next represent the avant-garde of their people.

—Giorgio Agamben, "We Refugees"<sup>1</sup>

Migration is not a condition we choose to adopt, and it is often imposed on us. It is an emergency, a scenario that cannot be avoided, an upheaval to endure, a critical situation. Migration is a temporary narrative we adopt to move away from violence, trauma, conflict, and disadvantage, toward a supposedly safer and more peaceful environment than the one we have left behind. The state of migration is supposed to be a transitory, temporary event. Yet for most of us who have experienced the upheaval of migration, or immigration, it rarely ends once the destination has been reached. In fact, once the actual act of migrating is complete, the post-migrant condition becomes a new reality for the migrant. The traumatic experience of leaving one's homeland behind rarely, if ever, fades away.

The idea to respond to the acceleration of the migrant crisis across Europe was first articulated in an earlier version of the exhibition *The Sea is the Limit* organized in 2016 by Patrick Heide Contemporary Art in London. In the preceding summer of 2015 over a million refugees crossed the Mediterranean borders of the European Union, via the Aegean in particular, and prompted very hostile reactions from some member states, an event that shook the very foundations of the political structure of the EU. Relatively small in its format, the exhibition raised important questions about the situation of migration, including the representation of the migrant crisis in the media, the documentation of the rescue operations on the Italian island of Lampedusa, and interpretations of colonial sea trade routes. The discussions with Patrick Heide over the weeks leading up to and during the exhibition made me think that the subject was far from closed and needed further investigation and exposure. In 2018 the project was selected by York

Art Gallery for inclusion in its exhibitions program, and I was invited to lead the project as a guest curator, enabling me to expand the scale of the show and including ambitious new works by artists of different backgrounds and diverse histories.

*The Sea is the Limit* brought together works by international artists that address the issues of refugees, borders, migration, and national identity. Drawing on both historical and contemporary narratives that shape identity and opinion, the artists question the meaning of nationalism, free movement, inclusion, and exclusion. Images of refugees and migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean in unsafe, overcrowded vessels have been commonplace in the media since 2015 and have become powerful symbols of the "migrant crisis." The phrase "migrant crisis," however, is contestable, as the word "crisis" implies a situation that is temporary and, therefore, requires temporary measures and solutions. The reality proves different. Migration to Europe is expected not only to continue, but to increase, creating what we can describe as a "migrant condition." The ongoing position of migrants who managed to survive the arduous journeys across the seas is often precarious, dangerous, and uncertain. Refugees and migrants stand at the limits of societal acceptance and become stateless non-residents of the world. The sea is a metaphor for society's position toward migrants, which keeps them afloat while the sense of temporality of the "migrant condition" remains. Hostility turns into indifference, the last frontier where human life and its value is challenged and undermined.

Referring to the sharp clash between expectation and reality experienced by migrants crossing the seas in search of safety and a better life, the artists in the exhibition address the fragility of human life when exposed to the elemental powers. The sea serves as a metaphorical symbol of all migratory and diasporic experiences, where physically perilous journeys across continents and seas also represent the continuous uprooting and disconnection of emotional journeys. Dispossession, alienation, and trauma do not always manifest themselves in direct physical experiences but are too familiar to many a migrant as an emotional backdrop to the physical upheaval of forced transition.

*The Sea is the Limit* featured artists who have been working on the topic of migration, borders, and diaspora for many years, sometimes for decades, and many of the participating artists were migrants themselves. Using the language of painting, drawing, sculpture, video, installation,

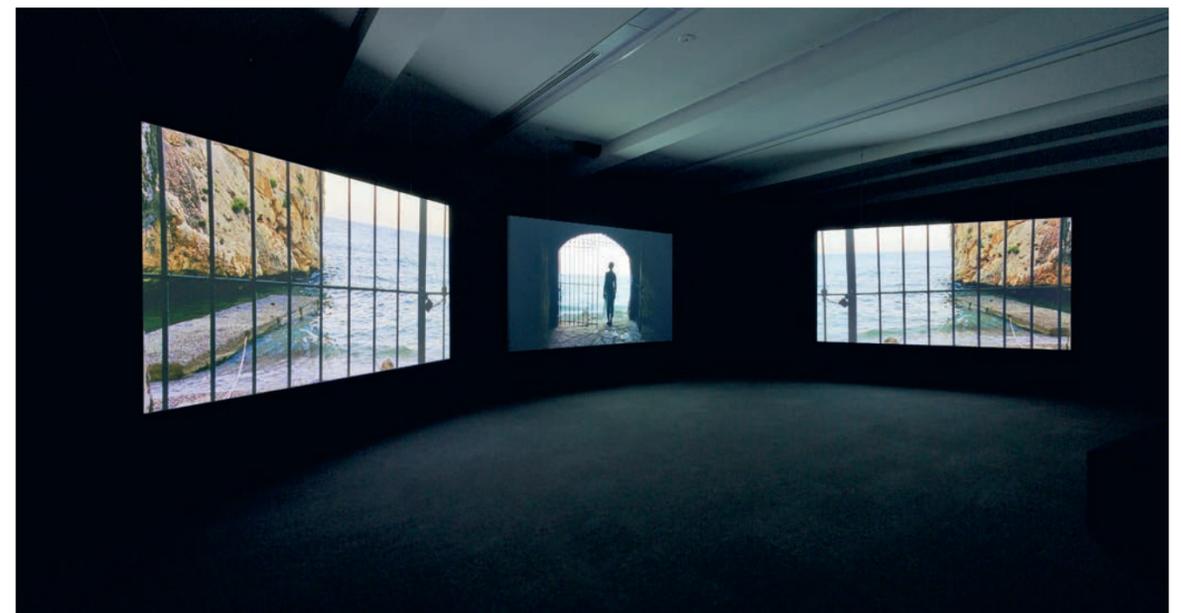
**Fig. 15.1** Installation view, *The Sea is the Limit*, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Qatar, 2019

**Fig. 15.2** Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007. Three-screen installation, shown here at *Borders, Barriers, Walls*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2016

and virtual reality, the artists explored the complex experiences and multilayered emotions associated with borders and migration, statelessness and belonging. The artists did not aim to offer us solutions but instead to bring our attention to these challenges in a meaningful way. This personal positioning of the artists sets the premise of the exhibition apart from sensationalist interpretations of the “migrant crisis” that make the distinction between “us” and “them,” alienating those who move from those who remain, and instead brings empathy and compassion to the fore. In that sense, the sea no longer is the limit, the ultimate frontier, but instead could be interpreted as a new beginning, a limitless sea of humanity.

When *The Sea is the Limit* was shown at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar in the context of the 8th Hamad bin Khalifa International Symposium on Islamic Art in 2019, it crossed continents and borders physically, culturally, and metaphorically (Fig. 15.1). While this version of the exhibition drew largely on the installation in York, the opportunity to present this exhibition in the context of the symposium allowed me to extend the dialogue between contemporary artists working with the themes of migration and borders further, and to reach new academic audiences.

As a curator of this exhibition my focus was not so much on the representation of actual migration by sea in the physical sense as on examining the ways in which different artists reflected upon the psychological, sociological, and geopolitical elements of migration and borders, and how these reflections initiated conversations about mobility and migration, rendering visible what Dutch cultural theorist and artist Mieke Bal refers to as “migratory aesthetics”: a methodology of thinking about migration through visual form.<sup>2</sup> One of the seminal works that exemplifies this methodology of transforming multifaceted narratives of migration into aesthetically complex and visually striking narratives is *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), a multi-screen film installation by the British artist Isaac Julien (Fig. 15.2). The installation examines the perilous journeys that thousands of African and Asian “clandestines” undertake every year, departing from North Africa and traveling across the Mediterranean Sea to the southern Sicilian coast, in search of better economic and human rights conditions. Transferred from larger vessels into small and overcrowded fishing boats, thousands are left to drift at sea, waiting for days to be rescued, or drowned.



The work is visually arresting, bordering on seductive, and balances between poetry and drama, where reality is interlaced with fiction, and natural beauty contrasts with the horror of human suffering. The single-screen version of the film, *The Leopard (Western Union: Small Boats)*, was featured in the Diaspora Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Julien's poignant reflections on diaspora and migration, alongside other artists' exceptional works, were influential in the choices of my curatorial methodologies for *The Sea is the Limit* project.

Another artist whose work on the theme of migration and borders was influential in developing ideas for the exhibition is the Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera. Bruguera's live interactive piece *10,142,926* was commissioned by Hyundai for the Tate Turbine Hall in 2018 and featured a vast portrait of a person hidden beneath the gallery floor which, reacting to increase in temperature, could only be revealed when there were enough visitors interacting with the floor surface at any one time.<sup>4</sup> In another part of the installation, visitors' hands were printed with a number representing the daily toll of migrant deaths, and an organic irritant made those entering the gallery space cry uncontrollably. Some years ago, Bruguera formed a Migrant People Party (MPP) in Mexico, which aims to give a voice and a chance for representation to the millions of voiceless migrants in Mexico who live in an ongoing physical and political limbo.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the idea of empathy as a route to addressing the migrant crisis, Bruguera poses challenging questions about each and every one of us and our personal positioning within the migrant crisis narrative. The powerful visual language of *Western Union: Small Boats*, and the transgressive, empathetic approach rendered visible in *10,142,926*, were capable of achieving a powerful impact through these exceptional reflections on migration and statelessness, mobility and borders, by actively engaging the viewer with the complexity of the physical and emotional journeys that are undertaken by those experiencing migration.<sup>6</sup>

There is an interesting notion of the durational experience of the "migrant condition" as it is witnessed for example in the work of Nidhal Chamekh, a Tunisian artist based in Paris, whose work was included in *The Sea is the Limit*. Chamekh's large-scale, meticulously executed drawing *Studying Circles* (2015) features an incident that occurred in one of the public squares in Tunis, where a market stall vendor set himself alight as a protest against the authorities' violence and injustice



Fig. 15.3 Nidhal Chamekh, *Studying Circles*, 2015. Graphite on paper, 240 x 300 cm (94 1/2 x 118 in)

(Fig. 15.3). Events like this sparked the Tunisian revolution in 2010–11 and the Arab Spring, in turn initiating conflict and violence in the wider region, with millions of people forced to flee their homes, embarking on perilous journeys across land and sea. A “graphic witness”<sup>7</sup> in this historic moment, Chamekh brings his audience inside his work, where the viewer becomes an accomplice to the crime, joining other passive bystanders, motionlessly watching the tragedy unfold. This compositional setup resembles the boxing ring, or an arena designated for gladiators fighting

with wild animals. Chamekh's art critiques the lack of empathy where cold observation of violence is rendered as part of popular entertainment, and is thus accepted and normalized.

Furthering his ongoing investigation into migration, Chamekh created a body of work that reflects his experiences and observations at the now-dismantled Jungle refugee camp in Calais, France. Chamekh's drawings portray the lives of those who have succeeded in crossing the sea and have arrived at supposed safety on land, yet their lives remain precarious. The drawings *Etude d'un Habitat Fortune* and *#icare* (both 2016) belong to the series that Chamekh developed using video footage and photographic material he shot in the Jungle, as well as the drawings he made in the studio, which focus on ideas of confinement and escape. Featuring a tent-like structure modeled on a giant tortoise shell, and an imagined set of wings, the drawings make us think of Icarus's failed flight, while also referencing secret notes made by detainees for smuggling into the outside world, which is oblivious to what goes on behind the barbed wire fences of the Jungle. These works comment on the state of refugees in the camp, who are forced to settle outside the societal boundary, bringing connotations of wilderness, danger, and disorder. Acting as bookends to the story of migration, Chamekh's drawings present the viewer with the preamble and the aftermath of migratory journeys, questioning the ability of our society to offer any solutions to the ongoing challenges that the survivors are continuing to face.

The notions of migration, border crossing, and the risks associated with various journeys are visualized in Taus Makhacheva's practice, which works at the intersection of film, documentary, performance, and installation. With deep family roots in Dagestan, Makhacheva lives and works in Moscow, while developing a strong international reputation as one of the leading contemporary artists of her generation. The themes of disappearance, invisibility, and the sea are explored in Makhacheva's *Baida* (2017), a video and performance piece that took place during the 57th Venice Biennale in the open waters of the Adriatic Sea, where several performers appeared and disappeared near a capsized boat that was transported from the Caspian Sea (Fig. 15.4). The work combines two narratives characterized by the sense of loss and fear of being forgotten. One narrative is presented as a conversation between the art world protagonists traveling on a boat in Venice's lagoon to view Makhacheva's performance piece at sea. The journey is full of ambiguous



Fig. 15.4 Taus Makhacheva, *Baida*, 2017.  
Video of performance

uncertainty, and the conversation is both vague and anxious, as nobody really knows where they are going and what are they expecting to experience. This fear of invisibility and disappearance resonates with the anxieties experienced by most artists in today's fast-paced, digitally enhanced, unpredictable, and fickle art world. Another parallel story has evolved from conversations between Makhacheva and fishermen in the village of Stary Terek in the artist's native Dagestan. Setting off on their perilous journeys in the Caspian Sea, the men never know if they will come back alive. When they fear being lost at sea if their boat capsizes, the fishermen tie themselves to the prow so their relatives could recover and mourn their bodies. This fear of disappearance, of being—or of becoming—invisible and forgotten, is what connects the two narratives, intertwining the conversation on the boat in Venice with the story of the Caspian Sea fishermen.<sup>8</sup>

The work is a comment on the precarity of human life and the struggle to survive against overwhelming economic and natural forces.



Fig. 15.5 (above) Susan Stockwell, *Trade Winds*, 2019. Paper currency, found materials, and coins; installation view at St. Peter's Church, Cambridge

Fig. 15.6 (opposite) Susan Stockwell, *Trade Winds*, 2018. Paper currency, found materials, and coins; installation view, York Art Gallery

At the same time, its satirical tone also addresses the expectation, experience, and behavior of art biennial visitors. In *Baida Makhacheva* achieves a powerful effect of mirrored resonance, where the viewer feels both trapped and lost, being at once the observer and the observed, the victim of oblivion and the perpetrator of forgetting.<sup>9</sup>

The theme of journeying and migrating by sea is also explored in the work of London-based artist Susan Stockwell, where previously used objects are infused with new meaning, tackling the issues of geopolitics, postcolonialism, migration, and power. These ideas are materialized in the stunning and evocative installations *Sail Away* (2015) and *Trade Winds* (2016; Figs. 15.5, 15.6).<sup>10</sup> The latter—consisting of a flotilla of small boats made from old paper currency, stamps, tickets, and maps—explores the mythological connotations of boats as symbols of transition from the material into the spiritual world, and as carriers of our dreams, as well as vessels for adventures, escapes, and journeys. The delicate and playful nature of paper boats is subverted by the duality of their meaning as they bring associations of colonial trade.





Fig. 15.7 (opposite) Susan Stockwell, *Finesilver-Blackgold*, 2016. Digital print on silk crepe, 91 x 31 cm (36 x 12 1/4 in)

In *Finesilver-Blackgold* (2016) the artist uses a famous image of the slave ship *Brookes*, a diagram depicting the stowage of slaves on a boat, layered over a ledger card that Stockwell found in a disused garment factory in Texas (Fig. 15.7). This work comments on the historical and contemporary imperial trades pursued by the world superpowers, hungry for economic expansion. Stockwell's piece strongly resonates with the *Rescue Operation* photograph taken from a helicopter by Massimo Sestini in 2015, depicting a hugely overcrowded boat traveling with migrants across the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup>

The unnerving similarities between the slave ship image used in *Finesilver-Blackgold* and Sestini's photograph create powerful parallels between the historic slave trade and current human trafficking. Further tracings of past histories are seen in *Blood Lines* (2015), a three-dimensional maplike sculpture made from old wooden bobbins and red thread and assembled as a tension piece. Resembling airplane route maps or underground rail lines, the work traces the imaginary routes symbolic of current and past migrations.<sup>12</sup>

Reflections on trauma and migration are powerfully rendered in the work of Baghdad-born artist Mohammed Sami. Sami's background as a political refugee who came from Iraq to Sweden in 2007 informs his paintings. Sami's works resonate with post-traumatic experiences that mirror the stories of refugees and migrants who are conflict survivors. The intensity of memory that is rippled through Sami's charged palette and the tightly devised compositions of his paintings are indicative of narratives that are both personal and ambiguous. The viewer is confronted with painted compositions that describe elements of real and imagined interior and exterior spaces. The language of Sami's paintings has almost cinematic qualities, where colours, shapes, and shadows of seemingly ordinary objects are intensified to an almost unbearable pitch, enhanced by the sense of unearthed memories and complex emotions that charge them. Sami's handling of paint is both visceral and controlled, while his manipulation of textures is at the same time intuitive and constructed. The paintings seem tightly held together yet there is an underlying feeling that everything in them is on the brink of collapse. The paintings offer complex painterly interplay between everyday objects, interiors, and mises en scène.

The interplay between shadows and light occupies primary place in the theatrical sets of Sami's canvases. *Sunday* (2019) portrays a sun-flooded



**Fig. 15.8** Mohammed Sami, *Sunday*, 2019.  
Acrylic on linen, 100 x 90 cm (39 1/4 x 35 1/2 in)



**Fig. 15.9** (above left) Mohammed Sami,  
*Beautiful Exile*, 2018. Acrylic on linen,  
137 x 177 cm (54 x 69 1/2 in)

**Fig. 15.10** (above right) Mohammed Sami,  
*Notes from Underground*, 2018. Acrylic on  
linen, 191.5 x 175.5 cm (75 1/2 x 69 in)



space that emanates an almost physical presence of blinding brightness and stifling heat (Fig. 15.8). The shadow spills off the windowsill, as if melted by midday heat. There is a tangible sense of loss in this painting, with the shadow possibly signifying the tragedies that might have occurred, the unknown or the unknowable events that perhaps took place here. The viewer is left with the sharp sense of a complete absence of humanity and the overwhelming presence of trauma. In *Beautiful Exile* (2018) the perspective of the room is reversed, creating an unnerving sense of the interior space sliding off the canvas frame (Fig. 15.9). The room appears bright with the sunlight streaming in from the window, yet the absence of the window frame suggests that we are looking into a building that has been damaged, with part of the interior destroyed. An empty bedroom interior in *Notes from Underground* (2018) continues to utilize the cinematic and the photographic frame, where the perspective

is manipulated, twisted, and at times negated, as if it has been obliterated in postproduction (Fig. 15.10). The large interior is filled with reminders of human presence yet it is eerily void of humanity. We are the voyeurs, not the participants. Entering those painted worlds that Sami creates is like going through an out-of-body experience with him, with the artist's gaze hovering on the brink of consciousness and the subconscious, dream and nightmare, life and death.<sup>13</sup>

A very different interpretation of the refugee crisis, borders, and migration is offered by a multimedia Turkish artist, Halil Altındere. In his critical and political approach, Altındere explores political, social, and cultural codes, focusing on depicting marginalization and resistance to oppressive systems. Refusing to see the problems of the country in which he lives as exclusively local, the artist scrutinizes topics such as urban transformation and gender relations in collaborative works with a series of people who have had first-hand experience with them, from street vendors to hip-hop artists to ballerinas. In his early works Altındere challenged concepts of the nation state and authority in Turkey by utilizing everyday objects including identity cards, banknotes, and coins.

The subversive and playfully touching image of refugees clinging to the wings and body of a commercial aeroplane in *Kofte Airlines* (2016) is connected to other works examining the European migrant crisis. *Homeland* (2016) is a blend of realism and fiction, where the artist explores forced migration, and features the voice of a Syrian rapper who is now based in Berlin, with real footage of waterways and crossings in Turkey that end the journey in Tempelhof, the airport site used as a refugee camp in Berlin, the city where Europe's response to the refugee crisis was forged.<sup>14</sup>

Altındere's seminal work *Journey to Mars* from his *Space Refugee* project (2016) is a virtual reality piece that reinterprets the story of the first Syrian astronaut Muhammed Faris, who took part in the Russian mission on board the *Mir* space station in 1987, becoming a national hero (Fig. 15.11). Hafez al-Assad's regime was ready to embrace and promote Faris, using him as an instrument in its propaganda games, and forcing him to subsequently seek refuge in Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

*Journey to Mars* "addresses the flow of refugees, a truly global issue, in an extensive project composed of several ensembles of works. Framing an ironic response to the pervasive negative attitudes and racist stereotypes with which large parts of European population view the refugees from



Fig. 15.11 Halil Altındere, *Journey to Mars*, 2016. Virtual reality video, wallpaper, and 3D spatial installation

areas ravaged by war and terror and victims of political, religious, and ethnic persecution from countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan, *Space Refugee* proposes a sanctuary for refugees in outer space."<sup>16</sup>

Reflection on borders and migration has been a continuous theme that I have been developing in my own practice over the years. Once I was a migrant too. I left my home in Moscow and moved to the UK, the country that became my home for over fifteen years. I did not leave the USSR, my homeland that no longer exists on any political map of the world, during war or conflict, nor did I depart under duress of political persecution. I did not risk my life by crossing the sea in a precarious boat, nor was I running away from a violent domestic situation. In fact,

my migration was entirely voluntary, stipulated by the perestroika and glasnost that preceded the opening up of the former Soviet Union, when increasing numbers of the “intelligentsia”—artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, and other creative practitioners—moved to the West, where possibilities of travel, exposure, and better opportunities beckoned. And so we left our small apartments in big cities, waved goodbye to our extended families and lifelong friends, and set our sails for the wide open oceans of the “free world,” shedding the weight of our personal histories, leaving the past behind. Yet how little did we know about the power of the past, how it penetrated every fiber of our bodies and souls, becoming an integrated part of both our dreams and our nightmares. Uprooting and starting afresh has its appealing qualities, as does fitting in and becoming part of one’s new social landscape. Yet living as an immigrant never really ceases to be part of one’s existence, no matter how well integrated we become into the lives of our adopted countries. In fact, I believe migration is a kind of a psychological condition, if not a permanent state of mind. It is the condition where one never really belongs or feels at home anywhere, where the state of flux is the state of the everyday, where the sense that one might have to move again is ever present, and there is no reason to be dropping any permanent roots anywhere. I call this way of being a “migrant condition,” and in fact this suspended, mobilized state is almost like weightlessness, magical and bizarre, comforting and frightening, strangely liberating and confining at the same time.

*Blankets Project* (2018) is an ongoing series of wearable objects containing personal memories that visitors are encouraged to hold and wear (Fig. 15.12). Resembling ecclesiastical ceremonial robes or traditional Muslim women’s attire, the *abaya*, the weight and warmth of the woolen blankets envelopes the wearer in a comforting cocoon, while also evoking images of migrants rescued from perilous sea crossings and wrapped in metallic emergency blankets. Each blanket object features an image reproduced from my family albums, with portraits of my grandmother and my grandfather, whose family fled their home in Georgia after the Bolshevik Revolution and migrated to Soviet Russia, leaving all their possessions behind, except for a collection of photographs.

To me, the *Blankets Project* represents the desire to reconnect with something warm, familiar, and personal when one experiences disconnection, loneliness, and rootlessness as a migrant—a feeling I

Fig. 15.12 (overleaf) Varvara Shavrova, *Blankets Project*, 2018. Silk screen print on eight felt blankets with metal fixings, 180 x 120 cm (71 x 47 1/4 in) (each)

remember clearly from when I first left my home in Moscow as a young artist, to make my new life in the UK. By inviting visitors to wear the blankets, I hope the feelings of loss of identity and desire for basic comfort that are experienced by millions of migrants and refugees from all over the world can be shared with a sense of empathy, through the process of direct physical encounter with my artworks.

The making of this work also focused my thoughts on the importance of creating ongoing conversations about migration, thus continuing to focus on this subject that might be pushed away from public attention, as other crises take hold of media platforms. As we witness the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, while the migrant crisis has not subsided nor decreased, the voices of millions of refugees risk being drowned out by the coverage of the coronavirus. It is our duty to keep this discourse alive.

The question that I asked myself at the beginning of this project was whether artists have a role to play in the issue of migration, and whether this role can in reality be influential, gather momentum, and create change in the current situation, challenging the status quo, and ultimately helping migrating communities in their struggles. My conclusion is that they certainly do, and they absolutely can. Having shown this project to a diverse group of viewers, from London and York to Doha (Fig. 15.12), I have been continuously amazed by the willingness of the public to engage with the discourse about migration, and the urgency with which these discussions have been addressed. This experience led me to conclude that artists are not only capable of taking part in this urgent and vital discourse, but indeed are able to instigate change, and this has been an empowering realization.

Today, more than at any other time, we must offer our support to the most vulnerable in our society, those who flee from danger, violence, starvation, disease, and war. Amid the looming climate crisis, continuous ecological disasters, the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic, and continuing economic uncertainty, artists more than any other members of society are not only able to bring these issues into focus, but are also capable of creating an intellectual and emotional “protective blanket” that I believe is critically important in securing hope and potentially helping the survival of this planet.

