

Raúl de Arriba<sup>1</sup>  
María Vidagañ<sup>2</sup>  
Ana Botella<sup>3</sup>

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## LEARNING ABOUT MIGRATIONS THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART

*Since art is a world-recognized platform for the representation and interpretation of social processes, in this paper we take an original approach and use the opportunities offered by art-based research in order to analyze the development of new narratives about the migration phenomena. Particularly, we apply a selected review of the main work of several contemporary artists whose interest is strongly focused on the economic, social and political issues related to migrations. Moreover, the paper explores the possibilities and obstacles offered by art for the dissemination of related research. In this regard, we believe that our paper contributes by enhancing the important relationship between art and social phenomena, like migrations. This relation includes, at least, two shared areas: first, the understanding that art is a space for the representation of various social processes traditionally addressed by social science. For instance, although political science scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, geographers, etc. have extensively dedicated their work to study the migration phenomena, it is less recognized the large work of artist on migrations. Accordingly, artists are accustomed to transdisciplinary intellectual work and creativity and therefore, the discourse of art on the migrations phenomena brings a fresh perspective and is welcome. Second, one of the differences between scientific research and artistic research is that in the latter, the decisions on how to dispose the elements that participate in the research and even the protocol itself is decided previously by rationalistic hypothesis and method. However, in artistic research, a final result is not as relevant, but rather the importance of the research lies in the process itself. The process approach leads each artist sets their own rules of action and this does not have to be justified beforehand. In this sense, our aim is not to replace the scientific discourse but to rescue the artistic approach as complementary and take advantage of its seductive, emotional, creative and formative potential.*

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<sup>1</sup> Raúl de Arriba, Associate Professor, PhD in Economics, University of Valencia, Spain.

<sup>2</sup> María Vidagañ, Assistant Professor, PhD in Art Education, University of Zaragoza, Spain.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Botella, Assistant Professor, PhD in Economics University of Valencia, Spain.

### **Why Learn about Migrations through Contemporary Art?**

The aim of this paper is to analyse the representation of migration phenomenon through contemporary art. It focuses on the opportunities offered by art-based research for developing new narratives about migrations. On the one hand, art is a space for the representation of social processes. The above includes the work of political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, geographers, etc., on migrations, but also artists. The broad economic, political and social aspect of migrations offers a very open approach and participatory debate. For this reason, the discourse of art on migrations is welcome; in fact, artists are accustomed to transdisciplinary intellectual work and creativity. Somehow:

“art is a place where one can think things that are not thinkable elsewhere... A good artistic problem has no end, a good solution has reverberations and good communication produces many more evocations than the information it transmits” (Camnitzer, 2012).

On the other hand, art-based research can be useful for the study of social processes. One of the differences between scientific research and artistic research is that in the later the decisions on how to dispose the elements that participate in the research and even the protocol itself is decided previously by rationalistic hypothesis and method. However, in artistic research, a final result or corroborating a hypothesis is not as relevant; but rather the importance of the research lies in the process itself. Each artist sets their own rules of action and this does not have to be justified beforehand. As Higgins states (Higgins, 1984) “each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs”. Obviously, the question is not to replace the scientific discourse, but to rescue the artistic one and take advantage of its seductive, emotional, creative and formative potential. Digital artist Daito Manabe, who has an extensive scientific background, explains the division of labour between science and art:

“The essence of science is to solve problems. My activity, on the other hand, consists of posing problems through my creations. Do I make art? I think I am somewhere in between the scientific and the artistic, but I am closer to the artistic field, yes. Because art poses problems, like philosophy. And I don’t want to solve puzzles... I want to create puzzles” (El País, 2017).

Artists have working and reflection procedures different than the techno-rationalism typical of the mainstream academy. Their approach to knowledge (learning) is configured by a creative process, where the unexpected, freedom of creation, curiosity, the emotional, sensitivity, etc. are central elements of the work. Furthermore, the expression of creativity is not incompatible with the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Creativity is connected with unexpected responses by producing novel connections using available information (Cropley and Cropley, 2008).

This means that creativity is an essential element, both for the identification of problems and for the search for solutions, so that the acquisition of content and creative experiences should not conflict. In fact, it is the opposite, there is a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and creativity: knowledge is the fundamental raw material for the development

of creativity, and in turn, creativity is present in the advancement of knowledge. In that way, art is the area of development of creativity par excellence and can be a useful tool for reflection on social phenomena (de Arriba et al., 2019).

Beyond its role in developing a deeper understanding and complex creative thinking, art is especially relevant for the kind of contribution to experience and knowledge that only art can offer. This perspective conceives art as a particular and valuable experience in the sense of Dewey (1934). From this perspective, art is capable of creating forms that allow values to be expressed as visual metaphors, activates our sensitivity and is capable of drawing attention to everyday aspects that we overlook, that is, it has the capacity to produce emotional impact (Eisner, 1972).

### **Migrations, What Are We Talking About?**

The migration phenomenon is linked to the evolution of human history. Either its causes and consequences have been broadly studied, from general and massive migrations to specific flows of migrants steaming from particular contexts. In any case, migration has great impacts on the country of origin and the host country in terms of workforce, economic flows, development, cultural and societal and political impacts. For instance, a great proportion of the migration phenomenon nowadays is performed by young adults and people in working-age having children and initiative. In that case, emigration in home countries subtract human capital and the absence of a young generation may steam as a very serious problem in many regions of the world.

In 2019, the estimated stock of international migrants (understood as the total number of people residing in a country different than their country of birth) was around 271 million representing a 3.5% of the total world population (UNHCR, 2019; UNESCO 2018). The proportion of the international stock of migrants in the world population is only slightly higher than the estimated during past decades, either in absolute terms or as a proportion number keep constantly increasing (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evolution of the stock of migrants in the world

Year	Stock of migrants in the world (in millions)	% world population
2019	271	3.5
2017	258	3.4
2015	244	3.3
2000	173	2.8
1980	102	2.3

*Source: International Organization for Migration (2019).*

Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration (OIM, 2019) infers that from these 271 million migrants, around 125 are women, 36 million are children and 150 are migrant workers. From the total, approximately 25 million are estimated to be refugees and around 5 million are international students. According to the OIM the phenomenon is

distributed by 30% in Asia, 30% in Europe, 26% in America, 10% within Africa and a 3% in the rest of the world.

Less clear are the statistics regarding migration flows (migrants entering and exiting a certain country measured in a year) which has been placed as very difficult to measure and describe, due to the lack of comparable data in many countries and regions in the world. Actually, formal migration data flows are generally available only for few countries and largely limited to the OCDE countries. In there, over five million people were estimated to enter this group of countries (OCDE, 2019). In any case, Abel and Sander (2014), in an effort to quantify and approximate a global number, state around 35 to 40 million people migrating every 5 years in the planet.

As an example of the global importance of this phenomenon, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, includes several and significant references to the phenomenon. Specifically, around two-thirds of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) contain aims and or indicators which are directly or indirectly related to migration specificities. For instance, target 10.7 calls to “facilitate orderly, safe regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”. Other examples are targets 8.7 and 8.8 on labour migration, 5.2 and 8.8 about human trafficking or 4.b on student mobility. In any case, as pointed by Foresti et al. (2018) migration is a transversal theme across the SDG targets and therefore central to effectively implement the Agenda.

In front of the importance of the phenomenon worldwide, there is an urgent need for quality data on migration to create and inform sustainable development and migration policies (IOM, 2017) as well as studies dealing with the different dimensions affected.

### **Migratory Discourse in Contemporary Art**

The migration issue is one of the current phenomena that has received a lot of attention from contemporary artists around the world. Many works have their focus on specific aspects as identity, longing, marginalization, precariousness, or more recently, the drama of refugees trying to arrive to Europe. In this article, we present some examples.

The Migration Museum of London is an art centre dedicated exclusively to migration issues, specifically to explore “the many ways that the movement of people to and from Britain across the ages has shaped who we are exploring the central role that migration has played in making us who we are today”.<sup>4</sup> This museum develops multiple activities, including online exhibitions, publications, educational resources, collaborations with universities, a blog, etc. An example of his exhibitions is “100 Images of Migration”. The collection “100 Images of Migration” is made up of images sent by professional and amateur photographers that reflect the life associated with the migration phenomenon in

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<sup>4</sup> [www.migrationmuseum.org](http://www.migrationmuseum.org)

Britain today.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition allows to cross the barrier of the stereotyped treatment made by the media and allows the viewer to know a little better the life of immigrants (image 1).

Image 1

100 Images of Migration



Source: [www.migrationmuseum.org/exhibition/100-images-of-migration](http://www.migrationmuseum.org/exhibition/100-images-of-migration)

Banksy's work is wide and varied, usually specified in graffiti format. His work includes some about economic and social issues, always treated from an unpleasant and disenchanted perspective with the system.<sup>6</sup> During his trip to the jungle refugee camp of Calais, Banksy covered several walls in the French port with graffiti related to the refugee crisis. Image 2 shows his works titled "The Son of a Migrant from Syria". It represents Steve Jobs, founder of Apple and son of a Syrian migrant to the United States, as a travelling migrant.

Vik Muniz's work is also especially impressive. In 2015, on the occasion of the 56th Venice Biennale, he presented "Lampedusa", a floating installation made of newspaper articles about migrant deaths in the Mediterranean sea<sup>7</sup> (image 3). Contextualized in the naval environment of Venice, the paper boat contrasts with the Venetian Vaporetto, yachts and gondolas designed for the enjoyment of tourists.

<sup>5</sup> [www.migrationmuseum.org/exhibition/100-images-of-migration](http://www.migrationmuseum.org/exhibition/100-images-of-migration)

<sup>6</sup> [www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/apr/21/lampedusa-migration-deaths-sea-venice-biennale>

Image 2

The Son of a Migrant from Syria, by Banksy



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Son\\_of\\_a\\_Migrant\\_from\\_Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Son_of_a_Migrant_from_Syria)

Image 3

Lampedusa, by Vik Muniz



Source: <http://biennalediveneziate.blogspot.com/2015/04/vik-muniz-lampedusa-at-56th-venice.html>

Rogelio López Cuenca is one of the most incisive Spanish artists. He has an extensive and varied work, although he is especially interested in topics such as the use of language, the media, the construction of identities or cultural criticism. His work “Golden Visa”, carried out in collaboration with Elo Vega, is an installation made in the Madrid subway as advertising space. According to the author, “the intervention presents different levels of reading, and shows the contradictions that characterize migration and its hegemonic media representation, from the criticism of stereotypes related to advertising, the media and banking systems”.<sup>8</sup> Images 4 and 5 represent two examples of the installation, whereas a publicity campaign López Cuenca ironizes about the obstacles that poor immigrants face in entering European countries such as Spain, in the face of the policy of granting visas and even nationality to rich immigrants.

Images 4 and 5

Golden Visa, by R. López Cuenca



Source: [www.lopezcuenca.com/golden-visa](http://www.lopezcuenca.com/golden-visa)

Suzanne Lacy is an American visual artist and activist who works with different formats, especially performances. Much of his work reflects the strong social commitment and includes large-scale public performances involving other artists and social groups. Her work *Alterations*<sup>9</sup> is an installation created in collaboration with Susanne Cockrell, and Britta Kathmeyer for the exhibition *Old Glory, New Story: Re-flagging the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* at Capp Street Projects in San Francisco in 1994 (image 6). It is an ironic work, an installation

<sup>8</sup> [www.lopezcuenca.com/golden-visa](http://www.lopezcuenca.com/golden-visa)

<sup>9</sup> [www.suzannelacy.com/early-works#/alterations-1994](http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works#/alterations-1994)

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populated on a daily basis by live women who sat amidst huge red, white and blue piles of used clothes. The work evokes the creation of patriotic icons, such as the United States flag, made by foreigners, in this case, immigrant women who work in the textile sector, while receiving low wages and supporting anti-immigration attitudes.

Image 6

Alterations, by Suzanne Lacy



Source: [www.suzannelacy.com/early-works#/alterations-1994](http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works#/alterations-1994)

Alan Carrasco is a visual artist and editor of the arts criticism magazine *Situations*. The topics of greatest interest in his work are postcolonial processes, territory, production and work relations, and inequality in contemporary society. His work “Kein Vaterland”<sup>10</sup> (Not a fatherland) is inspired by the famous phrase of the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels, *Die Arbeiter haben kein Vaterland* (The workers have no fatherland).

As an act of protest against the European Union migration policy, Carrasco has slightly modified the phrase to make it *Die Arbeiter aus dem Süden haben kein Vaterland* (The workers from the South have no fatherland). The new phrase has been drawn on a thermal survival blanket, in a circular shape, as the design of the European flag. The installation is completed with ten tiny images of European citizens demonstrating against the right of asylum of the refugees.

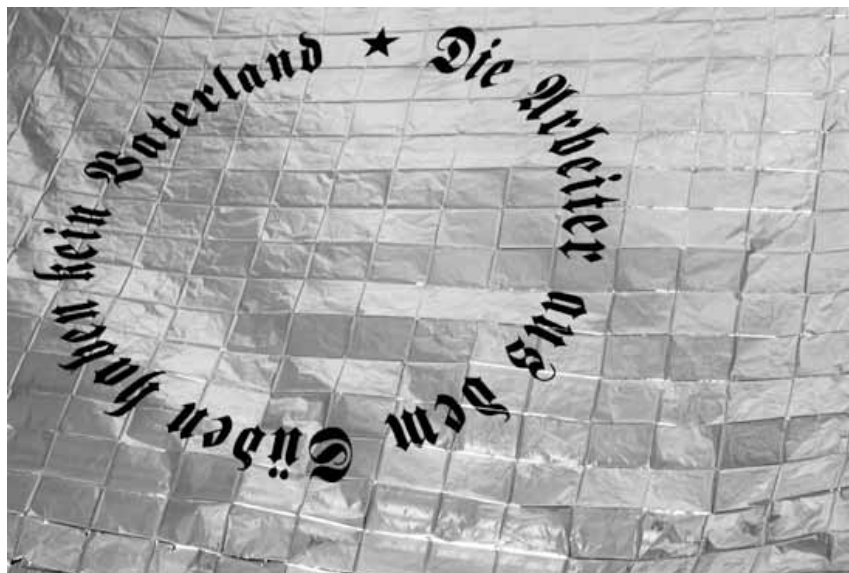
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<sup>10</sup> <http://alancarrasco.com/sp/portfolio/kein-vaterland>



Image 7

Kein Vaterland, by Alan Carrasco



Source: <http://alancarrasco.com/sp/portfolio/kein-vaterland>

Doris Salcedo's work entitled "Palimpsesto" was produced at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid in 2017/2018 and consisted of inscribing the names of the thousands of people who died in the Mediterranean Sea during their migratory trips.<sup>11</sup> The difficult search for the names of those migrants and their subsequent visibility through their registration represents, in the artist's words, a poetic act of paying tribute to them. The installation was completed by making each of the registered names visible by flooding with water each one of the letters.

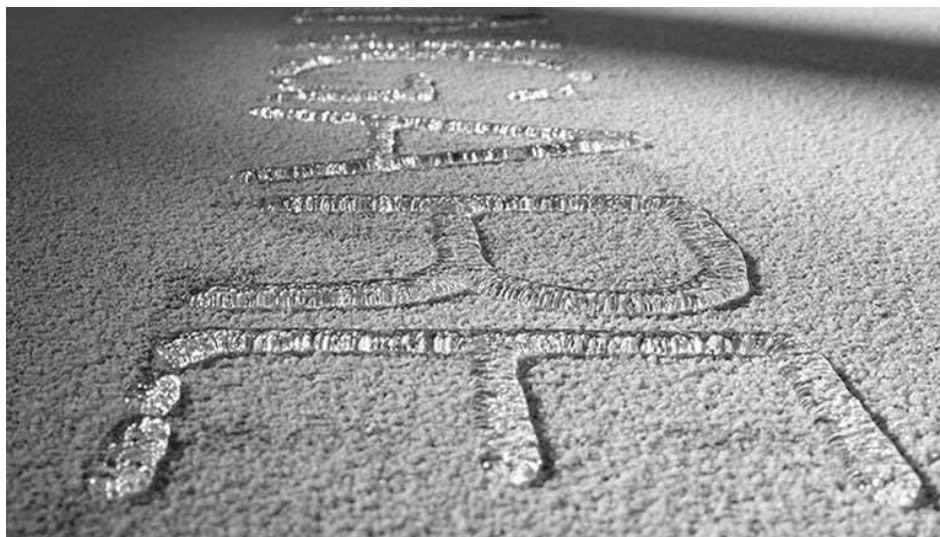
Núria Güell is a Spanish artist whose original work reflects a critical position with contemporary capitalist society and its most negative social manifestations. "Too Much Melanin" is her project for the Göteborg Biennale 2013. The work consisted of proposing to the Biennial to hire Maria to play hide and seek with the Biennale's visitors.<sup>12</sup> Maria was a Kosovo political refugee who was living illegally in Sweden for nine years and had to live in hiding while awaiting political asylum that was not arriving.

<sup>11</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttl1ieb7v5DY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttl1ieb7v5DY)

<sup>12</sup> [vimeo.com/87579085](http://vimeo.com/87579085)

Image 8

Palimpsesto, by Doris Salcedo



*Source: [www.museoreinasofia.es/exposiciones/doris-salcedo](http://www.museoreinasofia.es/exposiciones/doris-salcedo)*

Image 9

Too Much Melanin, by Núria Güell



*Source: [www.acvic.org/es/video-documentos/1498-extralocales-nuria-guell](http://www.acvic.org/es/video-documentos/1498-extralocales-nuria-guell)*

Francis Alÿs's work "Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River", is a collaborative project with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, Felix Blume, Ivan Boccara, Abbas Benhim, Fundación Montenmedio Arte and the kids of Tangier and Tarifa.<sup>13</sup> On August 12, 2008, Alÿs proposed to carry out a collective action in two specific places in the Strait of Gibraltar, one in Morocco and the other in Spain. At these two points he invited various boys and girls to make a line with little boats made with shoe soles, making an attempt of the poetic encounter between the two extremes. Those two lines of boats did not meet physically, but poetically (image 10).

Image 10

Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River, by Francis Alÿs



Source: <https://francisalys.com/dont-cross-the-bridge-before-you-get-to-the-river/>

Virginia San Frantello and Ronald Rael, in collaboration with the Chopeke de Juárez collective, installed a rocker on July 28, 2019, crossing the fence that separates the border between the US and Mexico, exactly in Anapra (Ciudad Juárez) and Sunland Park (El Paso).<sup>14</sup> This action, called "Teeter Totter Wall", involves altering the intrinsic idea of separation of a device (the fence) to turn that same device into support for the union (although in an ephemeral way) of the inhabitants of the US and Mexico, through playing. At the same time, as the authors state, this action also wanted to convey the idea that any decision made in one country affects the other, that they maintain an unbalanced relationship.

<sup>13</sup> <https://francisalys.com/dont-cross-the-bridge-before-you-get-to-the-river>

<sup>14</sup> [www.rael-sanfratello.com/?p=1617](http://www.rael-sanfratello.com/?p=1617)

Teeter Totter Wall, by Rael San Fratello



Source: <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/10/08/teeter-totters-as-activism-ronald-rael/>

## Conclusions

This paper studies the representation of migration phenomenon through contemporary art. It relies on the opportunities offered by art-based research for developing new narratives about migrations. Art is a good place for the representation of the social processes. Many political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, geographers, etc., work on migrations, and also artists. The political and social aspect of migrations offers a very open approach and participatory debate. For this reason, the discourse of art on the migrations is welcome. Artists are accustomed to transdisciplinary intellectual work and creativity.

One of the differences between scientific research and artistic research is that in the latter, the decisions on how to dispose of the elements that participate in the research and even the protocol itself is decided previously by rationalistic hypothesis and method. However, in artistic research, a final result or corroborating a hypothesis is not as relevant, but rather the importance of the research lies in the process itself. Each artist sets their own rules of action and this does not have to be justified beforehand. Obviously, the question is not to replace the scientific discourse, but to rescue the artistic one and take advantage of its seductive, emotional, creative and formative potential.

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