Of Life and Death: The Ambivalent Aesthetics of Migrant Sea Crossings

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ABSTRACT

In the context of escalating global instabilities, the question of departure—specifically migrant sea crossings—has become a pressing issue, rendering their representation an urgent subject of inquiry. Contemporary art has responded to that urgency by exploring a variety of aesthetic strategies that disclose the necropolitics of sea crossings. This thesis considers one of these strategies: the aesthetics of ambivalence. It focuses on contemporary artistic practices that highlight the ambivalence of migrant sea crossings. Its main claim is that ambivalence—the coexistence of opposites—is aesthetically explored as a *pharmakon*—a dual entity that simultaneously embodies poison and remedy; the weaponization of the sea and the sea as a promise of a better future. This claim is argued following a case studies approach, each case study being devoted to an artwork that conveys sea crossings as both a journey of life and death: Syrian artists Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea* (2020), Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013-2017), and Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002). I propose that by inviting the viewer to contend and confront the coexistence of life and death in sea crossings, the aesthetics of ambivalence persistently *sustains* the duality of the pharmakon to heighten awareness, that is, to instantiate what Bernard Stiegler calls a "therapeutic reversal." Stiegler asserts that this countermeasure renders thinking itself, when engaged critically and intentionally, into a form of care—an active force of resistance to the prevailing problematic narratives that shape society today. This therapeutic reversal, born out of the aesthetics of ambivalence, is central to the works: it invites us to confront the destabilizing ambivalence of the pharmakon, being neither entirely about life nor death. Understanding, as these works suggest, becomes rooted not in resolution, closure, or one definitive framing (either as life or death) but in persistently contending with both. The aesthetics of ambivalence calls for a continual commitment to bear witness and think with these narratives' inherent tensions, ruptures, and silences so as to reframe understanding as an affective thinking practice—one that seeks meaning within the unresolved complexities of migrant sea crossings.

RÉSUMÉ

Considérée dans le contexte de l'évolution incessante des instabilités mondiales, la question du départ—plus précisément, celle des traversées maritimes des migrants—est devenue pressante; sa représentation est devenue urgente. L'art contemporain a répondu à cette urgence en explorant diverses stratégies esthétiques qui dévoilent la nécropolitique de ces traversées. Ce mémoire examine l'une de ces stratégies : l'esthétique de l'ambivalence. Il se concentre sur les pratiques artistiques contemporaines qui mettent en lumière l'ambivalence des traversées maritimes des migrants. Son principal argument est que l'ambivalence—la coexistence des opposés—est explorée esthétiquement comme un *pharmakon*—une entité double qui incarne à la fois le poison et le remède; la militarisation de la mer et la mer comme promesse d'un avenir meilleur. Cette hypothèse est argumentée selon une approche d'études de cas, chaque étude de cas étant consacrée à une œuvre d'art qui représente les traversées maritimes à la fois comme un voyage de vie et de mort : *Purple Sea* (2020) des artistes syriens Amel Alzakout et Khaled Abdulwahed, *Palimpsest* (2013-2017) de l'artiste colombienne Doris Salcedo, et *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002) de l'artiste palestinienne Mona Hatoum. Je soutiens qu'en invitant le spectateur à affronter et à confronter la coexistence de la vie et de la mort dans les traversées maritimes, l'esthétique de l'ambivalence entretient constamment la dualité du *pharmakon* afin de le sensibiliser, c'est-à-dire instaurer ce

que Bernard Stiegler appelle un « renversement thérapeutique ». Stiegler affirme que cette contre-mesure transforme la pensée elle-même, lorsqu'elle est engagée de manière critique et intentionnelle, en une forme de soin—une force active de résistance face aux récits problématiques dominants qui façonnent la société contemporaine. Ce renversement thérapeutique, né de l'esthétique de l'ambivalence, occupe une place centrale dans ces œuvres : il nous invite à affronter l'ambivalence déstabilisante du *pharmakon*, qui ne se réduit ni entièrement à la vie ni entièrement à la mort. Comme le suggèrent ces œuvres, la compréhension des trajets migratoires prend la forme non pas d'une résolution, d'une clôture ou d'un cadre définitif (que ce soit la vie ou la mort), mais d'une confrontation persistante des deux. L'esthétique de l'ambivalence appelle à un engagement continu à témoigner et à réfléchir avec les tensions, les ruptures et les silences inhérents à ces récits, afin de redéfinir la compréhension comme une pratique de pensée affective—une pratique qui cherche à comprendre à même les complexités non résolues des traversées maritimes des migrants.

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INTRODUCTION: Of Life and Death

In actualizing Thomas Nail's prophesy of the twenty-first century as "the century of the migrant,"[1] the ongoing international intensification of socio-political conflicts exacerbates the question of departure for many citizens: the need to escape intolerable and oppressive conditions—discrimination, disaster, persecution, and violence—becomes more pertinent than ever.[2] Among the possible departure routes, sea crossings are the most perilous for migration due to the heightened life-and-death stakes they entail. The migrants are pushed to take dangerous sea routes by border regimes that transform sea hazards—harsh weather conditions, strong currents, and unpredictable conditions—into what Lorenzo Pezzani terms "liquid violence."[3] These environmental challenges have become lethal obstacles. Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller from the Forensic Oceanography project have come to conceptualize the prevailing anti-migrant regime as an assemblage of "maritime frontiers"; it shows that this regime is supported by the media, which frame migrants as passive victims or "illegal" threats to national borders.[4]

Responding to this growing criminalization and dehumanization of mobility, contemporary artists have engaged with the imagery and narratives of 21st-century sea crossings to reveal how the sea, portrayed as a neutral force of nature in media, has become a tool for death. A range of aesthetic methods have been explored to counter this regime, such as storytelling; "counter-

[1] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2015), 1.
[2] "The global data also show that displacement caused by conflict, generalized violence and other factors continues to trend upward to new highs. Intractable, unresolved, recurring and newly reignited conflicts and violence have led to an increase in the number of refugees around the world.," International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2024*, (Geneva: IOM), 52.
[3] Lorenzo Pezzani, "Liquid violence: investigations of boundaries at sea by Forensic Oceanography," The Architectural Review, April 10, 2019, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/liquid-violence-investigations-of-boundaries-at-sea-by-forensic-oceanography.
[4] Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, "Drifting Images: Liquid Traces: Disrupting the Aesthetic Regime of the EU's Maritime Frontier," *Leviathan Cycle*, 2021, accessed November 11, 2024, https://leviathan-cycle.com/essays/drifting-images-liquid-traces-disrupting-the-aesthetic-regime-of-the-eus-maritime-frontier/.

forensics"—a term coined by Thomas Keenan (the Director of the Human Rights Project at Bard College) after artist Allan Sekula; archival projects that document migrant journeys; and counter-visualization.[5] These aesthetic strategies convey the agency of migrants; they expose and undermine the prevailing narratives that dehumanize migrants and prevent them from accessing their right to seek refuge. In this thesis, I propose and conceptualize another artistic method: the "aesthetics of ambivalence." Instead of perpetuating a border regime as mere violence, "ambivalent" artworks articulate a paradoxical coexistence of life and death, *thrusting*[6] the viewer into the complexities of sea crossings. The thesis will analyze the aesthetics of ambivalence unfolding in the following three artworks: Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's documentary film called *Purple Sea* (2020), Doris Salcedo's walk-through installation *Palimpsest* (2013-2017), and Mona Hatoum's installation *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002). It raises and responds to the following questions: How does the aesthetics of ambivalence unfold? What does it do? How is it productive in addressing the complexities of sea crossings?

The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: A Definition

Engaging with these questions requires, as a foundational step, a precise definition of ambivalence. This inquiry finds its clearest resonance in art critic Craig Owens' seminal essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," where, per Owens, the ability to convey opposing elements together within a single work of art engenders ambivalence: a tension

[5] A selection of exemplary works listed respectively, which may not be limited to each category, Bouchra Khalili's *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008-2011) or Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's *Ali's Boat* (2015); Forensic Architecture's *The Left-to-Die Boat* (2014); Mayumi Hirano and Mark Salvatus' *Pacific Crossings: Load na Dito*, Halil Altındere's *Space Refuge* (2016-2019); Tania El Khoury and Basel Zaraa's *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2020).

[6] The term "thrust" is used here intentionally, drawing on Santiago Zabala's discussion in *Why Only Art Can Save Us* (New York: Columbia University, 2017), 3, where he underscores the necessity of art's decisive intervention in the world. This artistic intervention, according to Zabala, confronts the viewers to rest with the tension or discomfort rather than offering a simple answer and resolution.

that challenges and complicates straightforward readings of representation.[7] Owens makes a noteworthy distinction between ambivalence and ambiguity by discerning them into two distinct artistic endeavours. Ambiguity is concerned "with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign," whereas ambivalence pertains to "rather, *two clearly defined but mutually incompatible readings* [that] are engaged in a blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them."[8] Owens' insightful consideration of both terms emphasizes the challenge but also the need to differentiate these concepts from one another, highlighting how each distinct artistic engagement ignites different responses from the viewer. Ambiguity pertains to the deliberate use of uncertainty or multiple meanings in an artwork, making room for interpretation or allowing diverse readings. It invites the viewer to engage with the manifold layers of signification that potentially exist within the artwork, leaving them in a state of questioning, even confusion, when experiencing the artwork. Ambivalence, on the other hand, involves a tension or conflict within the artwork itself, where well-defined interpretations or emotions of multiple sorts coexist together. In doing so, the synchronicity of conflicting interpretations often provokes two possible yet contradictory interpretations from the viewer. Owens elucidates this by stating that "It is, of course, in allegory that 'one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue and as a vice,'[9] and this works to problematize the activity of the reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty."[10] Owens suggests that by conveying opposing interpretations or emotions simultaneously in a single work of art, ambivalence requires the viewer to contend with the synchronous presence of both positive and negative interpretations. By grappling with the

[7] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 61.
[8] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 61.
[9] Karl Giehlow, *Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance besonders der Ehrenpforte Kaisers,* quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 174, cited in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 61.
[10] Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 61.

multiplicity of meanings embedded within, the viewer cannot settle on one clear resolution or preference. For Owens, this interpretative struggle resulting from the work's ambivalence is an indication of the artwork's postmodern *progressive* nature. The tension keeps the viewer unsettled, unable to settle on one clear reading, challenging conventional interpretations and requiring a deeper engagement as they confront the unresolvable conflict between opposing meanings within the work. After all, a situation can be both good *and* bad, high *and* low, luminous *and* dark, about life *and* death. But, how should we understand the progressiveness of the aesthetics of ambivalence in terms of sea crossings?

The Lack of Urgency and Necropolitics

To understand how an "ambivalent" artwork about the migration crisis can be progressive and to understand what progressiveness actually means in this context, it is crucial to highlight how the coexistence of life and death is not an easy one to depict. Let us insist on the darkness of that crisis. With each passage marked by escalating risks and violence, sea crossings epitomize the necropolitical governance that philosopher Achille Mbembe describes as a form of state authority where states "dictate who may live and who must die."[11] The denial of safe passage and legal avenues aligns with the necropolitical governance Mbembe describes, where migrants are forced to take perilous maritime crossings and migrant lives become disposable. Necropolitics not only denies safe passage but actively contributes to the risk of death by intentionally withholding rescue operations and humanitarian aid, condemning migrants to endure extreme physical conditions during sea crossings. It is through this necropolitical structure that maritime crossings remain inherently fraught with fatal danger, intensified in urgency, globally unseen, and signalling a

[11] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 11. On contemporary art's uncovering of the necropolitics of migration, see Christine Ross, *Art for Coexistence: Unlearning the Way We See Migration* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2022), chapter 1

worsening situation that most likely remains yet to fully unfold: the Central and Eastern Mediterranean passages from North Africa to Europe—from Libya to Italy—or from Turkey to Europe are marked by overcrowded, frequently capsizing vessels;[12] the Atlantic crossing from West Africa to Spain's Canary Islands exposes migrants to hazardous currents and prolonged open-sea exposure in unfit boats;[13] Venezuelan migration entails perilous journeys on unstable vessels to the Caribbean, especially to Trinidad or Tobago, beset with violence and natural threats;[14] and the English Channel crossing from France to England, increasingly fatal, places migrants in small, precarious boats facing turbulent waters.[15] All of these routes are marked by a combination of unlawful mistreatment of migrants, heightened border controls, and insufficient humanitarian response and aid, which contribute to the profound precarity migrants continue to endure daily. Despite their location and maritime jurisdiction differences, a common thread runs through them: the states' main responses to migration are the absence of urgency and the proliferation of policies of non-intervention. During sea crossings, states' necropolitical authority materializes through deliberate strategies like delayed rescue operations, jurisdictional policies aimed at deterrence, and calculated neglect. Migrants become victims of necropolitics when the oversight of their endless drift, irregular movements, and spatial deviations becomes the rule.

[12] For a detailed account of the Mediterranean migration crisis in 2023, see Al Jazeera's report, "More than 2,500 dead, missing as 186,000 cross Mediterranean in 2023," *Al Jazeera*, 29 September, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/29/more-than-2500-dead-missing-as-some-186000-cross-mediterranean-in-2023.

[13] To better understand the decade-long effects of humanitarian organizations and activists resisting border enforcement policies in the Mediterranean, see Maurice Stierl, "Ten years of maritime resistance in the Mediterranean Sea," *Al Jazeera*, July 31, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/7/31/ten-years-of-maritime-resistance-in-the-mediterranean-sea.

[14] The struggles of Venezuelan families seeking answers for migrants missing at sea and the urgent need for accountability are highlighted in Vivian Sequera's report. See Vivian Sequera, "Venezuluean families seek answers over migrants missing at sea," Reuters, July 17, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuelan-families-seek-answers-over-migrants-missing-sea-2023-07-17/.

[15] Journalist Rob England examines the United Nations' declaration of 2024 as the deadliest year for migrants crossing the English Channel. The article emphasizes the increasing losses and the need for a coordinated international response. See Rob England, "UN says 2024 is deadliest year for Channel migrants," *BBC News*, October 9, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj9j8r8z90wo.

Under the guise of this deliberate inaction, the sea itself becomes a necropolitical tool and an instrument of "liquid violence"[16]—a term that Pezzani uses to describe the compounding threats of erratic weather, strong currents, and conditions leading to dehydration, starvation, and hypothermia. The longer migrants are exposed to the unforgiving physical conditions of the sea, the more hazardous their survival becomes. The absence of rescue operations and the implementation of active deterrence policies transform the sea into a deathscape—an active agent of harm, where survival and life constantly hinge precariously on chance rather than on the assurance of safety.

Life is surely part of this deathscape insofar as the impulse to flee violence is a life impulse. Yet, the subjugation of life to powers of death (necropolitics) permeates across all stages of sea crossings—before, during, and after—encompassing systemic productions of precarity and disposability: the constant exposure to life-threatening conditions of the sea, overcrowded and poorly maintained boats, mistreatment by smugglers, delays in rescue efforts by border patrol, and, upon survival, the continuation of exploitation (limited legal protection, social exclusion), should they be fortunate enough to have survived the crossing. It likewise permeates the media portrayals of migrants that cast them as passive victims or threats. When depicted as intercepted by military technology, migrants are confirmed as "illegal" (even though they have been, in fact, "illegalized"), a process that, in turn, normalizes the idea of the need to further securitize borders.[17] The militarized interception of migrants is justified as a response to the perceived threat they pose, necessitating further policing. Dominant media are thus a necropolitical apparatus that perpetuates the turning of migrants into what Giorgio Agamben terms "bare life"—individuals stripped of

[16] Lorenzo Pezzani, "Liquid violence: investigations of boundaries at sea by Forensic Oceanography."
[17] Nicholas de Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002), 436.

legal and political recognition, rendered unprotected, and perpetually vulnerable to states' violence.[18] The media depictions not only fail to address the necropolitical policy of (non)interference that is driving sea crossings but also fail to show the migrants' lives under necro-conditions—they become secondary to "the spectacle of border control,"[19] as Nicholas de Genova describes it: the migrants have no names, experiences, aspirations or struggles.

It is within this necropolitical framework, I suggest, that the aesthetics of ambivalence is progressive. Why? Because it introduces the possibility of life. On one hand, it exposes the persistent necropolitical forces that constantly turn these crossings into sites of violence and suffering; on the other, it conveys the potential for a future, the possibility of escape, and a better life. The viewer, confronted with these opposing interpretations, is compelled to grapple with the tension, unable to resolve, choose, or settle on a fixed interpretation of the sea crossings. It thrusts us into this unresolved tension, asserting that comprehension arises not from fully capturing the event but from engaging with its gaps, silences, and absences. The three artworks examined in this thesis—*Purple Sea*, *Palimpsest*, and *Drowning Sorrows*—ask us to witness injury, loss and death without losing sight of the possibility of remedy and change. This means that the possibility of life is not only represented in the artworks but also in the interpellation of the viewer, who is invited to recall, to witness, to mourn migrating beings. Sea crossing is a *pharmakon*.

Holding Ambivalence: The Therapeutic Reversal

The progressiveness of the aesthetics of ambivalence is best understood when reading Bernard Stiegler's philosophical work. In his book *What Makes Life Worth Living*, Stiegler discusses the pharmakon in relation to technology—stating that the silex is one of the most

[18] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.
[19] Nicholas de Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," 436.

fundamental pharmakons, insofar as it possesses the inherent paradoxical property of being both a poison (a silex can be used as a tool to destroy or kill) and a remedy (a silex can be used to build a shelter).[20] In both possibilities, nevertheless, the pharmakon renders itself as "an agent of change" or a relationality that instigates transformation.[21] Bernard Stiegler urges that "the decisive question is how to transform a poison into a remedy."[22] In response, particularly in his analysis of contemporary audiovisual technologies, he proposes that pharmakons have the potential to activate therapeutic reversals to counter the care-less-ness instigated by these technologies (and our use of them) when they hinder the human cultivation of reason, attention, and formation of ideas. Therapy represents the conceptualization of the "new age of the formation of care and attention for facing the care-less-ness of a global consumer society"[23] and, hence, bears a stabilizing effect in the face of global disorder. In his later book, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century*, Stiegler perceives reason as "a possibility within each of us, and as such it constitutes, as a potential by everyone but one that must be actualized, a responsibility that is always both individual and collective."[24] This therapeutic reversal consists of a new conception or a *new critique* that considers thinking as a form of caring, focusing on the individual's capacity to protect, subvert, or resist the drift toward the economic and technological structural disorder. In Stiegler's words, "To care-fully think [penser] the Anthropocene in the twenty-first century is to think at the limit of the thinkable [pensable]—and of the 'care-able' [pansable]. This thinking that cares at the

[20] Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge; Polity Press, 2013), 10.
[21] Benjamin Breen, "What did the pharmakon mean to the Greeks?," *Drugs & Poisons in World History* (blog), January 10, 2016, https://poisonhistory.wordpress.com/2016/01/10/what-did-pharmakon-mean-to-the-greeks/.
[22] Bernard Stiegler, "Bernard Stiegler: Elements of Pharmacology," by Felix Heidenreich and Florian Weber-Stein, in *The Politics of Digital Pharmacology* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022), 87.
[23] Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 180.
[24] Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge-Malden: Polity Press, 2015), 16.

limit requires us to think the limit; it requires what [...] described as *new critique*."[25] All this to say that by equating thinking with caring, the therapeutic reversal that Stiegler proposes not only emphasizes the necessity of pausing to reflect and critique but also frames such practices as essential forms of resistance to the prevailing technologies that structure contemporary existence. It argues that, in a world increasingly driven by automatic responses and unchecked impulses, the act of thinking intentionally becomes a critical countermeasure. This reflective endeavour is not a passive exercise but rather becomes an active, political, existential responsibility. In this way, thought itself becomes a form of care—a necessary means of subverting prevailing tendencies and fostering a more deliberate and reflective mode of existence. The main claim of this thesis is that the aesthetics of ambivalence—art's representation of sea crossings as a journey of death and life, poison and remedy—instantiates the therapeutic reversal of these sea crossings. Ambivalence is an invitation to think, feel and tell without any possibility of resolution. This therapeutic reversal can be performed by the represented migrants, but it can also be performed by the viewer. Migrants are represented as caring, and viewers are invited to care for the pharmakon, *that is,* for sea crossings.

Three-chapter Structure

This thesis examines three works interwoven with ambivalence: an aesthetic method that holds opposing interpretations together while searching for a therapeutic reversal. The aesthetics of ambivalence invites the viewer to contend and confront the coexistence of life and death, not to offer resolution or escape; it thrusts to heighten awareness. Such is its therapeutic impulse. The analysis of Alzakout and Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea*, Salcedo's *Palimpsest*, and Hatoum's

[25] Bernard Stiegler, "Hypercritique," in *The Neganthropocene*, trans. Daniel Ross (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 206.

Drowning Sorrows address the following key questions: How does the aesthetic of ambivalence unfold? What does it do? How is it productive in addressing the complexities of sea crossings and many unfolding crises? By claiming that the productivity of their aesthetic strategies lies in the therapeutic reversal they either represent or activate, this thesis adopts a case-studies approach to tease out the different forms the aesthetics of ambivalence can take. The aesthetics of ambivalence is not one; it is plural.

The first chapter examines Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea* (2020), a 67-minute documentary that chronicles Alzakout's perilous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, filmed through footage recorded on her wrist-mounted camera. The case-study approach to this Mediterranean Sea crossing—from Syria to Turkey and ultimately to Lesvos Island, Greece—paired with an interview I conducted with Amel Alzakout conveys her intense negotiation of life and death. I propose that *Purple Sea* discloses sea crossing as a *pharmakon*—poison and remedy. It does so, especially by exploring the dialectics of the montage—the switching from above- to below-shots of the sea crossing, which exposes the injured bodies attempting but also struggling to stay above the surface of the Mediterranean. But *Purple Sea* also represents an aural therapeutic reversal: Alzakout's voice-over telling her story. By doing so, the ambivalent framing of the sea crossing invites us to witness and listen to Alzakout's act of self-care. The chapter mobilizes María Puig de la Bellacasa's conceptualization of care entanglements as participatory processes to highlight the work's original contribution to the representation of migration.

The second chapter considers Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013-2017), a walk-through installation that initiates the act of mourning for migrants who have lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean in the last twenty years. Like in mourning, the perpetual movement of water droplets—resembling tears—lays bare ambivalence, as they briefly form the

names of migrants on the ground, only to appear and disappear and reappear in an endless cycle, mirroring the transient yet persistent nature of remembrance where life and death remain intertwined. I propose that the therapeutic reversal of sea crossing in *Palimpsest* is instigated by the perpetual repetition of the appearance-reappearance-disappearance-and-reappearance of names through water movement. But it is, perhaps more fundamentally, taken up (or not) by the viewers invited to mourn, remember and grieve as they experience the installation. I use here Jacques Derrida's understanding of mourning as a process that resists closure. I also explore Judith Butler's notion of "ungrievable" lives to argue that *Palimpsest* transforms lost lives—ignored or deemed insignificant—into grievable lives, with the help of the viewers.

The third and final chapter engages with Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002), an installation of bisected bottles suspended on the floor, resting in a paradoxical tension—simultaneously floating yet sinking, contained and uncontained, balanced and unbalanced. This ambivalence—being neither fully one state (floating) nor the other (sinking)—teetering through the installation elicits a sense of uncanniness in the viewer: the familiar qualities of bottles as functional objects are rendered strange. The chapter sustains two main claims. First, the openness of the installation to multiple interpretations enables a reading of the bisected bottles akin to the precarious fate of migrants navigating treacherous water—succeeding and failing to stay afloat and resist the necropolitics of the sea. Second, it invites the viewer to an encounter with the abject; unsettling their sense of stability further as the implied liquidity of the floor extends outward over the shared ground. I draw on Umberto Eco's "open work" aesthetics to carve out *Drowning Sorrows*'s interpretive openness, which often depends on context. One of these interpretations is the installation's capacity to refer to migrants' struggle in sea crossings, particularly when viewed in the context of the Venezuelan and ongoing migrant crisis. Julia Kristeva's theorization of the

abject further informs my argument, as I contend that the liquidity of the floor implied in the work evokes a fear of losing one's ground—both metaphorically and literally. This profound sense of insecurity experienced by the viewer initiates what I propose as a therapeutic reversal: an affective remedy to the always-ambivalent pharmakon of migrant sea crossing.

CHAPTER ONE: The Ambivalence of the Sea: Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea* (2020)

Purple Sea (2020), co-directed by Amel Alzakout (b. 1988, Syria) and Khaled Abdulwahed (b. 1975, Syria), elucidates the stark realities of displacement, characterized by continuous neglect, injury, and death. After the start of the Syrian war in 2011 and the devastation it brought upon the country, Alzakout left Syria and moved to Istanbul in 2013. In response to lengthy visa approval times and uncertainties regarding her eligibility, Alzakout decided to end her wait in Istanbul and take the tumultuous journey to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea with the help of smugglers right after her partner Abdulwahed's departure to Berlin by plane in 2015. *Purple Sea*, a 67-minute-long documentary[26] which premiered at the Berlinale in 2020, is an edited recording of and a response to the crossing. It consists of 2K footage taken by the Contour ROAM 3 camera mounted on Alzakout's wrist during the sea journey. The camera footage captures the visceral immediacy of events after the overcrowded boat capsized following its departure from Izmir, a city in southwest Turkey, en route to Lesvos Island in Greece. Initially planned to share the journey with her partner, Alzakout documented the crossing both intentionally and unintentionally, as the recording went on even after the boat sank into the water. The images encompass the arduous moments that ensued after the boat carrying 303 people on board, including Alzakout among its passengers, descended into the water at the threshold of Europe, 280 meters into the Greek coastline on October 28, 2015.[27] Even though the rescue vessels were present on site, rescue operations were only carried out after some four hours of drifting at sea, eventually saving 243 migrants and leading to the death of at least 43 passengers.[28] The fate of 7 passengers remains

[26] *Purple Sea*, Format: 2K DCP, ProRes mov, h264 mp4; aspect ratio: 16:9, 25 fps, colour; sound: 5.1 and stereo.
[27] Forensic Architecture, "Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe, Lesvos, Aegean Sea," Published February 19, 2020, 23:36, https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/shipwreck-at-the-threshold-of-europe.
[28] Forensic Architecture, "Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe".

unknown.[29] The struggle to stay at the surface of the water while awaiting rescue is conveyed by the upside-down twirling of the camera (fig. 1), showing close-up images of orange lifejackets in perpetual motion (fig. 2) and broken pieces of the wooden boat floating on the sea. The soundtrack transmits the screaming and cries of the endangered bodies. Following the pace of the sea waves, the camera oscillates, moving back and forth but also above and below the sea (fig. 3). The camera will then mostly remain underwater, proposing close-up shots that obscure the exact location of the bodies (fig. 4) and render the sounds above the sea indiscernible. The voices are subdued by the sound of water, the motion of the currents, and the waves hitting and displacing the camera. The close-up shots exclude the faces of the passengers and any marker of identity to focus on their dangling legs and feet. The constantly swaying camera provides no horizon line; it propels a continual sense of instability and a nausea-inducing feeling. When the camera occasionally resurfaces above the sea, the dangling legs are replaced by the vastness of the sky and the cries for help; emergency whistles are heard in the background. The use of montage adopted as a dialectical technique by Alzakout and Abdulwahed is crucial here: it coalesces footage underwater with some exposure to scenes above the waterline to emphasize the difficulty—the near-impossibility—of staying afloat. In doing so, it exposes the horrors of migrant sea crossings—their exposure to neglect, injury, and death—while trying to maintain the possibility of life by displaying the resistant bodies above the waterline.

Alzakout's voice-over, written and recorded years after her journey (the crossing took place in 2015, and the film was released in 2020), is also key to the montage's dialectics: while preserving the sentiment of urgency, it enables *Purple Sea* to extend beyond a mere documentation of an injury. The voice-over consists of Alzakout's unspoken mental states, worries, memories,

[29] Forensic Architecture, "Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe".

and feelings experienced or recalled during and after the sea crossing. It refers to moments from her childhood with her sister, the protests leading to the war in Syria, her decision-making process to leave the country, the route she took to reach Europe, and her dreams of a future life with Abdulwahed after reaching Europe. She addresses questions to her partner and reads a poem she wrote when she was 6 years old. At times, she addresses the viewer, the political authorities, and the coast guards. Similar to the sudden shifts in the camera's perspective and the constant swaying of the images, Alzakout's storyline unfolds in an unpredictable way. The storyline manoeuvres rhythmically like a pendulum: between the past and present, the living and dead, chaos and resistance.

Purple Sea is thus not only a documentation of necropolitics but also a narrative of care as a response to necropolitics; it explores storytelling as a fostering counterpart to migratory injury and death. But storytelling does not resolve injury and death; the unfolding of necropolitics is manifested throughout the whole film. In its capacity to hold two or many contradictory realities—life and death—together, *Purple Sea* remains compellingly ambivalent. In this chapter, I propose that *Purple Sea* is an aesthetics of ambivalence: the video engages with the sea crossing as a pharmakon (both poison and remedy), disclosing it to be a deathscape and lethal entity for migrants *but also* an element that makes fleeing from necropolitics possible, both as a route and an activity that generates care through storytelling. Death and freedom. Above and below the sea, before and after the sea. The chapter will be mobilized by the following question: what is the productivity of this aesthetics of ambivalence? Hence, the chapter's four-part structure. Part 1 revisits the temporary definition of the aesthetics of ambivalence, integrating Craig Owens' insightful formulation of the term—a formulation which is unique in its capacity to speak about ambivalence as an artistic endeavour, as well as in its capacity to distinguish ambiguity and ambivalence (terms

that are often confused to the detriment of the merits of the latter).[30] Owens' analysis will be slightly revised in the chapter's conclusion, but it provides a convincing entry door to *Purple Sea*. Part 1 will be followed by a phenomenological description of *Purple Sea* (Part 2) and an examination of *Purple Sea*'s ambivalence—sea crossing as poison *and* remedy, sea crossing as deathscape *and* storytelling—fully grounded in that description (Part 3). This investigation establishes a dialogue between the work and Achille Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics as well as María Puig de la Bellacasa's study of care so as to specify the work's aesthetics of ambivalence. The conclusion brings us back to Owens' postmodern promotion of ambivalence and Stiegler's therapeutic reversal (Part 4). The purpose of that re-examination is to see how *Purple Sea* reorients that aesthetics to account for twenty-first-century migration.

1. Revisiting the Aesthetics of Ambivalence

Purple Sea explores the intricacy of depicting the sea crossing: a liminal encounter where hope and despair, life and death, freedom and confinement intersect. Drawing on the theoretical framework of ambivalence outlined in the introduction of this thesis, wherein two (or many) clearly defined by mutually incompatible readings resting in tension, I argue that ambivalence functions as the central strategy within the film. Unlike ambiguity, which invites a plurality of interpretations through layered signification, ambivalence provokes a confrontation between conflicting yet well-defined meanings, leaving the viewer suspended within their irreconcilability. But, how should we understand the progressiveness of ambivalence for *Purple Sea*?

Drawing upon Owens' conceptual framework, *Purple Sea* does not ask the viewer to question the implied meaning of the artwork, nor does it use uncertainty as a method of meaning-

[30] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 61.

making. It resists ambiguity. Rather, I propose that *Purple Sea* is ambivalent as it rests on a tension between two clearly defined antithetical readings of the sea: the sea crossing as a deathscape and as a generator of storytelling, as previously mentioned in the introduction. The coexistence of two irreconcilable readings of the sea—a lethal entity and care activity—complicates the presumption that the sea exists independently from (direct or indirect) human intervention. This, I consider, is significant in showing the sea's role in migrants' lives. The violence (as postulated further down, the necropolitics) they experience during their crossing is counterparted by Alzakout's storytelling as an act of care. My main claim is that *Purple Sea*'s representation of the migrant crisis is *progressive* because the viewer is invited to contend with both synchronous realities together—as the viewer becomes aware that the sea, in the migrant situation, is and will always be both violence and care. The two components exist interdependently, which means that care must be devised without losing sight of the persistence of violence. The reverse, of course, is also true: the latter does not erase the possibility of the former. I will expand on this experience in Part 3. But first, let us look more attentively at the work to better ground the understanding of the aesthetic strategies at play in *Purple Sea*.

2. The Work

Purple Sea starts unwinding as Alzakout utters in Arabic, "It's a beautiful day. The sun is bright. The sea is sharp"[31] on a dark screen. Shortly after Alzakout's voice greets the viewer in its tranquil and self-assured tone, the footage of the radiant sun and vivid blue sea appear in a brief glance. The camera abruptly turns upside down, half of the screen obscured by Alzakout's hand, offering a loose portrayal of bodies adorned with orange vests on the wooden boat in the sea. The

[31] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*, directed by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed (Berlin: Pong Film, 2020), 2K DCP.

footage rests on the abrupt and recurrent motions of the camera: this means that the scene unfolds through details provided haphazardly, including vibrant orange vests, echoing screams, and a wooden boat—a ship that capsized during the migrants' sea crossing. The recurrent circular motion of the camera persists as it descends beneath the sea's surface, only to resurface amidst a tumult of cries echoing in the background. Below the water, the footage confines our perspective to the close-ups of Alzakout's hand, her vest, and the water currents.

Alzakout's voice-over intertwines with the camera's recurring motion, narrating a childhood memory alongside the continuous underwater footage. The camera excludes a broader depiction of the scene and seizes the furthermost details of remnants of the incident in close-up shots. She describes standing by a pond, holding her sister's hand, before abruptly letting go and jumping into the water. Alzakout recalls a poem she wrote about the pond: "Croak Croak. A frog jumps into a pond. Croak Croak. A fish swims away. Croak Croak. The frog jumps onto a leaf. Croak Croak. A bird flies past. Croak Croak. The frog catches a fly. Croak Croak. The frog falls asleep on a tree. Croak."[32] She remembers the feeling of cold experienced in the darkness beneath the water before being pulled out. She recounts the events following thereafter, describing her intense cough and the eventual relief of taking a deep breath. Alzakout asks, "Where am I?" expressing her tremor. This follows her question, "Did I ever tell you about the pond?,"[33] expressing her disorientation as she speaks to Abdulwahed, while the distant sound of a siren in the background brings us back to the grim reality of the shipwreck.

The camera movement repeats itself: it floats back up again and then emerges underwater again. Shortly after, Alzakout reminisces about the series of events and her feelings, such as her moment of saying goodbye to her partner Abdulwahed in Istanbul as he left for Berlin by airplane.

[32] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[33] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.

She remembers the grey shirt he was wearing, his star-shaped ear piercing, the possibility of never returning to Syria again, the invitation he extended to Alzakout to meet him in Berlin, his goodbye kiss, and her inability to grasp the possibility of not seeing him ever again. She recollects happenings of the period following his departure, the photos of Berlin sent by Abdulwahed, and her dreams of spending time with him in Berlin, walking in the streets, drinking coffee at a café, and going to the cinema. The voice-over disrupts as the camera ascends above water, framing the perspective from behind one of the migrants' heads, against a scene echoing the cries of the children and the ropes holding them together.

Soon after, Alzakout's voice-over continues entailing a series of inquiries directed towards her partner, in the form of a unilateral dialogue: "Any news? How long do you have to stay in the refugee camp? What are you doing right now? Are you sleeping? Are you thinking of me?"[34] Alzakout informs Abdulwahed that she is learning German and watches old Syrian soap operas on YouTube. Recalling an earlier memory, she remembers watching the green missiles over Iraq on television thirteen years ago with her family, whereas she now finds herself watching the war in Syria live on YouTube. Alzakout highlights that the cameras film and deliver every detail: "Snipers against demonstrators. Run. Grenades against bakeries. Run. Bombs against vehicles. Run. Missiles against homes. Run. Chemical weapons against everything. Leave."[35] Alzakout's voice-over suspends as the footage captures the migrants tethered together, adrift amidst the unforgiving waves of the sea, collectively screaming "Help!" and pleading for urgent aid. A hand, grasping one of the ropes binding everyone together, comes into view as the vast undulating sea reveals legs floating with sneakers adorned with neon stripes alongside the silhouette of a migrant wearing sweatpants with a waist bag attached.

[34] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[35] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.

Alzakout resumes recounting her time after crossing the Syrian border and arriving in Istanbul, expressing frustration upon discovering the two-year waiting period for visas to reach Europe. Following a heated conversation with Abdulwahed in which he insists on visiting her in Istanbul, she refuses and decides to undertake the perilous sea crossing to reunite with him in Berlin. After selling their belongings, she meets the smuggler, who is a film producer (the poster hanging on the wall is of a film that won an award at the Cannes Film Festival). On her way out, she encounters a girl and her brother there to meet the smuggler. When the girl asks Alzakout if she is afraid of the impending journey, she denies her fear. However, she confesses later her distress by asking, "Should I say yes?"[36] After saying goodbye to her cat and embarking on the journey to Berlin, Alzakout reflects with irony on the bureaucratic barriers that do not impede her cat's flight unlike her own. Alzakout announces her departure with a humble assurance: "I am ready now."[37] The camera intervenes, ascending to capture the weathered hands that have endured being soaked in the water for a prolonged time. It frames an individual wearing a coat, its belt barely holding on, a diaper adrift in the currents, and feet in socks yet bereft of shoes.

The camera immersed underwater displays a mass of legs dangling on the screen when Alzakout begins narrating the events preceding her decision to undertake the sea crossing to Lesvos. She describes the overcrowded bus, where some passengers are forced to stand due to a lack of seats. The trip's claustrophobic atmosphere manifests itself as she finds herself unable to open the curtains and windows, leaving her feeling confined and disconnected. Alzakout recalls the moment she stepped on the vessel. She remembers witnessing a woman pointing out to the sea to a young girl near her: "Look how close we are. I can see the hills on the other side."[38] Alzakout

[36] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[37] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[38] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.

describes herself as taking the upper deck with her eyes on the hills. She notes the packed crowd aboard the vessel, watching passengers capturing selfies whom she eventually joins by taking a selfie of her own. She observes a smaller boat drawing nearer to take the smuggler abroad. She later sees him wave goodbye with a smile. Following the smuggler's departure, Alzakout describes the water coming onto the lower deck. A guy jumps into the water, and later, his head gradually disappears between the waves. Her voice-over unanticipatedly transitions to envisioning herself with Abdulwahed in Berlin, sitting on the grass in spring. Alzakout asks: "What do we name our daughter? Think with me."[39] She alters the narrative immediately after, wherein Abdulwahed is in Berlin in a park, accompanied by his daughter, whom he has named after Alzakout, as they stroll hand in hand. She changes the narrative once more, imagining herself alone in Berlin and with Abdulwahed resenting her. As she contemplates potential future scenarios involving herself and Abdulwahed, she reflects on the harsh reality of her situation. She reveals that she had been a journalism student in Damascus to become a war correspondent and how her conditions now led her to become one. After Alzakout's stress on the absurdity of occurrences leading to this moment, the camera moves above the sea surface, revealing crowds of people accompanied by black chunks of bags floating beside them, along with a plastic bottle and a wooden shard from the shipwreck.

As the submerged camera is obscured by Alzakout's hand holding the screen with the vibrant hue of the orange jackets glimpsing from the corner, the voice-over resumes: Alzakout simply narrates the collapse of the ship, she loses the ground under her feet, releases her grip on the railing and leaps into the churning sea. Her distress finds expression in a fragmented series of calls, which are interwoven with the repetitive cadence of her childhood poem: "Croak. Mayday. Croak Croak. SOS. Croak."[40] Amidst this moment of crisis, she raises a profound inquiry, "Why

[39] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[40] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.

do we all scream in English?," questioning the prevalence of English as the universal language of outcry. The unexpected appearance of a helicopter overhead amplifies her frustration (fig. 5). She describes hearing the helicopter, which is now visible in the image, flying above their heads and signalling its startling intrusion. In response to the unexpected presence of the helicopter, she questions, "What is it doing here?" and observes its disruptive effect on the already turbulent scene, noting, "It whirls up the waves." Upon noticing the red light blinking inside the helicopter—a clear indication of recording—she questions the ultimate destination of these unconsented images depicting the plight of migrants: "Where will the images end up? On YouTube? On television? Regular news or breaking news? What do you call us? Refugees? Criminals? Victims? Or just numbers? Fuck you all! Stop filming!" As the waves intensify, she describes witnessing the man next to her losing his glasses, the woman in front of her screaming in fear and asking whether the girl in her arms is still alive. In reaction to this distressing moment, Alzakout describes herself as turning her face away, choosing not to respond, and stating, "I am invisible." Seeking solace, she takes refuge in her memories with Abdulwahed, "I smell your hair. I feel your breath on my neck. Time belongs to us," and the elusive hope of a future together "We laugh. We are in Berlin. We dance."[41] The violent imagery fades, replaced by a dark screen as Alzakout's final words are heard: "Yesterday, I dreamt. I am in the sea. I lie on my back under the surface of the sea. The sun is warm. I feel warmth with every pore of my body. The sea is purple. I'm not afraid anymore."[42]

3. *Purple Sea* and its Aesthetics of Ambivalence

The antithetical radicality of *Purple Sea* stems from its ability to capture the viewer in a palpable tension: life-and-death serves as a poignant reminder of the high stakes involved in the

[41] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.
[42] Amel Alzakout, excerpt from voice-over in *Purple Sea*.

sea crossings. This dichotomy reminds us of the perilous nature intrinsic to sea crossings, where the precarious balance of survival hangs in the balance. The ambivalence coursing through *Purple Sea*, as I propose, is rooted in its capacity to introduce the sea as a pharmakon (both poison and remedy), revealing the sea to be a deathscape, housing a ferocious and death-defying journey for migrants while also acknowledging the sea's capacity to engender the possibility of escape from the grip of violence. As stipulated in Part 1, the necropolitics—the systemic exposure of migrants to neglect, injury, and death[43]—endured by migrants throughout their crossing is confronted by Alzakout's voice-over as an act of care. The variety of aesthetic strategies that are present in tandem throughout the film's trajectory effectively conveys this tension arising from the two contradicting interpretations of the sea. The unfolding of necropolitics is manifested through the employment of the camera's dialectic method of montage, whereas Alzakout's storytelling facilitates a narrative rooted in care to escape from and resist violence. The aesthetics of ambivalence elucidates the sea's complex reality, not only as a hazardous pathway for migrants but also as a space for undertaking the endeavour of care. The film effectively intertwines these opposed interpretations together, defying the preconceived notions of the sea as a self-governing entity, free of human involvement.

- The Sea as Deathscape

The montage configures the above and underwater scenes interchangeably during the film, creating a dialectical motion. The constant motion of the camera confronts the viewer with asymmetry, instability, and lack of framing, obscuring the geographical location and whereabouts of the boat. The fear and the inability to situate oneself—both the passengers and the viewers—in the frame is further intensified by a lack of a horizon line; the line where the sea meets the sky. By

[43] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 91-92.

obscuring the horizon with the dialectic method of montage, *Purple Sea* exacerbates the challenge of situating oneself in the visual frame. This altered sensory experience reorients the viewer's relationship to the seascape; it transforms it into one that is merely characterized by buoyancy and currents. In doing so, the film invokes Heidegger's view of the horizon as a reference point for understanding and situating one's position within one's surroundings.[44] Heidegger's discussion expands beyond the literal meaning of the horizon (a geographical boundary that demarcates a location) to define the horizon as an existential conceptual framework that includes and discloses each and every aspect shaping a being's existence in the immediate present. In *Purple Sea*, these aspects include Alzakout's past traumas, present struggles, and future hopes, as well as the politics of migration, the ultimate factor that contributed to Alzakout's decision to make the sea crossing despite the possibility of dying. The absence of a discernible horizon, facilitated by the relentless force of the sea depicted through the montage, not only obfuscates Alzakout's physical location but also imperils her very existence. It warns us—the viewers—about the sea's unforgiving vastness and its irresistible aptitude while also warning us against necropolitics. These forces are exposed as capable of perishing lives within.

Let us push this point a bit further. The absence of the horizon line is both a warning device and a disorienting device. As viewers, we are swept up in the frenetic motion of the camera; we are confronted with a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability akin to the feelings experienced by the migrants themselves. The harrowing limbo in the sea, caused by the irresistible strength of the tumultuous sea waves, leaves the viewers unanchored. The disorienting effects of montage may trigger (as it did for me) sensations of nausea, vertigo, and bewilderment, mirroring the physical and psychological toll of being at the mercy of the treacherous and politicized waters. This inability

[44] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), 39.

to oppose or overcome the powerful force of the sea constitutes Achille Mbembe's portrayal of how the individual is reduced to being a "living dead,"[45] as they are left in a state of injury, weakness and unprotectedness,[46] which, in the case of *Purple Sea*, is maintained by the indifference of the maritime authorities and the voyeurism of the helicopter. The status of the *living dead* stems from the deliberate decision of non-assistance supported by national jurisdictions, such as those sustaining and sustained by Greece's and Turkey's patrol of maritime borders.[47] The partitioning of the Mediterranean into national jurisdictions fragments and compartmentalizes responsibility; it allows states to evade accountability for the endangered and loss of migrant lives when the migrant vessels are left to wander from one jurisdiction to another, or to wander *between* jurisdictions. As the Mediterranean Sea becomes a liminal space of jurisprudential suspension, it places the migrants in a situation of non-sovereignty: the lack of (non)intervention entails that they can no longer be sovereign over their bodies—their bodies, in other words, are endangered. The same must be said about the intrusion of the helicopter used for media coverage. In *Purple Sea*, the helicopter appears unexpectedly above the migrants' heads amidst the screams in the background. Its spinning blades churn up the waves, further agitating the already tumultuous sea. This moment of intrusion and endangerment exemplifies what Mbembe has designated as "the politics of verticality," wherein sovereign power is confirmed through the use of surveillance technologies and infrastructures over and above.[48] Operating from a high vantage point, the helicopter stands as a tangible extension of the state authority. In all likelihood, media agencies will later convey the image of migrants as passive victims illegally crossing the European Union

[45] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.
[46] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.
[47] Lorenzo Pezzani, "Liquid violence: investigations of boundaries at sea by Forensic Oceanography," *The Architectural Review*, 10 April 2019, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/liquid-violence-investigations-of-boundaries-at-sea-by-forensic-oceanography.
[48] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 81.

borders.[49] The persistent and degrading external (non)interference, carried out concomitantly by the military, the police and the media, transforms the sea into a "death-world"[50] or a deathscape, where the migrants cannot but struggle to survive. Mbembe affirms that the terrain—the sea in *Purple Sea*—is instrumentalized by nation-states to extend their own sovereign privileges over the human body, dictating who deserves rescue and who is left out to perish.[51]

The unyielding complexities of the deathscape epitomized by the Mediterranean Sea become further evident upon closer examination of different scenes above and below the surface. While the dialectical movement of the camera effectively conveys the feeling of disorientation, it does so not only visually but also sonically. When the camera is filming below the water, the ambient sounds above are muted and muddled. These shots immerse the viewer in an environment where clarity is elusive, and the boundaries between reality and abstraction blur. They articulate what scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris refers to as a "submerged perspective," a "renewed perception" from below: a camera perception that navigates the depths of the sea amongst the dangling legs, in search of an above that cannot be clearly seen or heard precisely because the sea has been impaired by necropolitics; the sea has been turned into a site of interlaced injured bodies, floating belts and plastics, a graveyard-in-the-making. [52] The submerged perspective discloses a death- or injury-scape.

- The Sea as Care

On the other hand, Alzakout's voice-over script is pivotal to *Purple Sea*'s aesthetics of ambivalence: it transforms the portrayal of the deathscape through storytelling. In his exploration

[49] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 81-82.
[50] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.
[51] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 66.
[52] Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Introduction: The Submerged Perspective" in *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

of the pharmakon, Bernard Stiegler reveals the inherent paradox of the concept, functioning both as remedy and poison. Due to the dual nature of the pharmakon, it becomes an agent of change or a relationality that instigates transformation. Stiegler urges that "the decisive question is how to transform a poison into a remedy."[53] I suggest that the transformative prospect of the pharmakon—its therapeutical reversal—occurs through Alzakout's storytelling. Storytelling recasts the portrayal of the sea as a deathscape into a route that can and does generate care. To make storytelling operative (more on the actual storytelling below), *Purple Sea* refrains from exposing the migrants' identities and injuries in a manner that could exacerbate their already precarious situation. Alzakout explains that this decision was taken carefully by the directors and the production team to protect the victims from spectacularization.[54] The intentional omission of details, the nonlinear and incomplete narration of the event: these two choices constitute the basis of the storytelling—they invite the viewer to participate in the storytelling, they respect the impossibility of narrating the "whole" event, once and for all, from one unique perspective. For instance, Alzakout recounts the moment when she met a girl at the smuggler's office who asked her if she was afraid of making the sea crossing, as well as the moment when a woman and her daughter take selfies not knowing that their boat will capsize soon after. The viewer is left to anticipate the extent of the untold tragedies Alzakout and the passengers of the shipwreck may have encountered. The sheer magnitude of the accident becomes even more inconceivable with the realization that only a fraction of it is revealed. *Purple Sea* thus asks the viewer to participate in the Alzakout's incomplete storytelling. It invites them to engage in the suffering of those involved in the accident. The viewer confronts the complex reality of care.

[53] Felix Heindreich and Florian Weber-Stein, "Bernard Stiegler: Elements of Pharmacology" in *The Politics of Digital Pharmacology* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022), 87.
[54] Author's interview with Amel Alzakout, January 31, 2024.

What does this storytelling consist of? It recounts Alzakout's unilateral dialogues with Abdulwahed. In her voice-over, Alzakout shares their struggle to cross borders apart from each other, as well as her decision to make the sea crossing to reunite with Abdulwahed. She envisions a better future with him in Berlin—going to the cinema, the prospect of raising a child together with her partner. Alzakout shares a childhood memory. She questions Abdulwahed, and expresses her anger towards him, recognizing his absence and the impossibility of him answering her queries. In these sequences, the sea contains the idea of a threshold that holds the promise of a better future and the difficulty of fulfilling that promise.

Listening to Alzakout's story about her experience but also about other migrant experiences of the same shipwreck, and simultaneously being invited to fill in the details and imagine the magnitude of the event and the interdependencies that shaped it, the viewers cannot act to rescue Alzakout or answer her questions, but they can participate in the "entanglements of care" as María Puig de la Bellacasa frames it[55]—an entanglement where "interdependency is not a contract, nor a moral idea–it is a condition" which is "concomitant to the condition of life for many living beings in more than human entanglements."[56] Puig de la Bellacasa has convincingly shown that this inherent interdependence is not a pressure (or a kind of enforcement) instilled upon the individual through a moral order or policy. Rather, it is a necessity for existence. She also reminds us that the "responsibility for what/whom we care for does not necessarily mean being in charge, but it does mean being involved."[57] *Purple Sea* dismantles the hierarchy of the caregiver and care-receiver (including the hierarchy of the observer and the observed): the passengers are

[55] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 9. For a discussion of care in the context of contemporary art and migration, see Christine Ross, *Art for Coexistence: Unlearning the Way We See Migration* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2022), chapter 5.
[56] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 70.
[57] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 90.

not passive—they act, they make decisions, and they try to survive. Moreover, the whole story is not told, and will never be told: it requires that we listen and re-tell the story, as I am doing here.

Engaging in Alzakout's narration of the shipwreck through her individual experience and still accounting for other migrants who experienced the incident with her, the viewers also witness Alzakout's self-care: *Purple Sea* is an opportunity to come to terms with trauma. Storytelling does not necessarily resolve Alzakout's trauma; rather, it is an attempt to find solace by reflecting upon the events of the shipwreck event. In so doing, Alzakout's voice-over telling her story instantiates an aural therapeutic reversal. It raises the prospect of healing. Alzakout is reclaiming her narrative autonomy from the demeaning depictions of mainstream media agencies. Puig de la Bellacasa states that "in order for reclamations of the political significance of everyday 'personal' experience" […] we need a notion of everyday ethics as agency that is invested by collective commitments and attachments."[58] In other words, self-care or individual well-being is part of the remedy, although it cannot ethically be prioritized at the expense of broader social justice concerns and the interconnectedness of care. In *Purple Sea*, Alzakout brings forth an understanding of self-care that extends beyond individualistic practices; it supports the necessity of care as a collective introspection. She has acknowledged the limitations of her narrative: she can only speak on behalf of her experience as someone who has gone through the lethal sea crossing; she emphasizes that migrating is a process that everyone experiences individually.[59] But *Purple Sea* does provide glimpses of other migrant stories; she is telling her story to *someone*, and she is telling an incomplete story to a potential listener—Abdulwahed and any viewer of the film.

[58] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 140.
[59] Author's interview with Amel Alzakout, January 31, 2024.

4. Conclusion: How Can an Aesthetics of Ambivalence be Productive?

Purple Sea can be said to reconfigure Owens' postmodern formulation of ambivalence to encompass the intricacies of twenty-first-century migration. It conjures the productivity of ambivalence by urging us to both acknowledge and outgrow the representation of migration as a straightforward exposure to danger, injury, and death. Motivated by the question raised in the introduction, "What is the productivity of this aesthetics of ambivalence?," this chapter has shown that ambivalence prompts us not to reduce the migrant situation to injury or death, despite the persistence of violence. The aesthetics of ambivalence invites us to become aware of the enduring presence of necropolitics while attuning to migrant storytelling and its materialization of care. By foregrounding the realities of life and death simultaneously, *Purple Sea*'s representation is progressive insofar as it prompts us, the viewers, to recognize not only the sea crossing as a pharmakon but also the possibility of transforming it into remedy, bringing us closer to Steigler's theorization of therapeutic reversal and further away from Owens' promotion of ambivalence as a double-entendre.

The film's aesthetics of ambivalence instantiates a therapeutic reversal by challenging the artist as well as the viewers: it asks us to be attentive to and participate in care work even though—or perhaps because—necropolitical violence persists; it asks that we envisage the potential of transforming necropolitics into care. Within this framework, care does not entail the resolution of the migrant struggle. As Bellacasa suggests, even care work necessitates constant interrogation and adaptation, and as Stiegler argues, it requires a continuous dedication to thinking "care-fully," since its efficacy relies on a variety of factors, including the diverse needs of the care recipients and the power positions of the caregivers. This is to say that *Purple Sea*'s aesthetics of ambivalence's productivity or progressiveness lies in its irrefutable discomfort. It requires a commitment to constant introspection and a reiterated questioning about how to listen to, how to

story-tell, how to represent the distress of migrant beings, and how to ensure that the remedy (storytelling, care) does not transform itself into the poison (necropolitics)?

CHAPTER TWO: Ambivalent Mourning: Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013-2017)

Doris Salcedo (b. 1958, Columbia) evokes the memory and presence of lost lives of migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean with her work *Palimpsest* (2013-2017). Initially displayed for a European audience, the work facilitates an evocative sensory engagement for grieving migrants who drowned during sea crossings over the past twenty years while fleeing conflict and disaster in their countries of origin.[60] The walk-through installation, originally exhibited at the Palacio de Cristal, Centro de Arte Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid in 2018, invites visitors to negotiate the space, consisting of sand-colored large stone slabs that cover the entire gallery floor, resting across about 400 square meters (fig. 6).[61] When navigating the installation, visitors are invited to acknowledge and experience the stone slabs—each measuring 4.5 meters in length by 1.28 centimetres in width—inscribed with the names of drowned migrants. A closer inspection reveals *Palimpsest*'s pulping nature: water droplets gently well up through tiny apertures in the porous stone, which have been designed to resist water absorption with fine pebbles.[62] The water droplets then coalesce to write new names over the names inscribed on the stone slabs (fig. 7). The stone slabs can be said to absorb the droplets, re-enacting in so doing the drowning of the migrants, before emerging once again to trace new names momentarily. *Palimpsest,* hence—and this will be the main claim of this chapter—conducts the act of mourning: a mechanism of remembering, sorrowing, and working-through the disappearance of migrants that provides dignity to the lost lives in a period of crisis where humans have failed to do so. Through repeating this appearance-disappearance-reappearance-re-

[60] Mary Schneider Enriquez, *Doris Salcedo: The Materiality of Mourning*, (Boston: Harvard Art Museums, 2016), 134.
[61] "Doris Salcedo's Refugees Homage in Palimpsest," Arte Aldía, accessed May 12, 2024, https://www.artealdia.com/News/DORIS-SALCEDO-S-REFUGEES-HOMAGE-IN-PALIMPSEST.
[62] Mieke Bal, "Citational Aesthetics: For Intermediality as Interrelation," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn, Asun López-Varela Azcárate, and Miriam de Paiva Vieira (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 464.

disappearance cycle, *Palimpsest* is the act of mourning itself as it undertakes the responsibility of initiating a ritual that was not granted to the migrant beings who have died in the sea while attempting to flee their country. The water that is released through the complex hydraulic system announces the names: it holds its own agency and is the conductor of this rite. It sheds tears (fig. 8), announces life and death, returns the tears to the ground, and repeats the cycle. In its cyclical nature, it echoes the unending tide of lives continually being washed up on European shores over the years: as it provides their names, it invites viewers to remember and grieve. With each remembrance, the invitation to mourn is reaffirmed.

Countering the European Union's refusal to disclose or search for the migrants' names, Salcedo and her team dedicated five years of research—investigations, interviews with relatives, and documentation—to identify some of the anonymous lives lost during sea crossings.[63] The names of migrants were meticulously cross-referenced from newspapers, social media platforms, and official reports, only those with comprehensive information on their identities—beyond mere names—such as age, profession, and background were included in the exhibition.[64] Among the names inscribed in the installation, the youngest migrant was 30 days old while the oldest was 46.[65] In total, the stone slabs that line the entire gallery space honour 300 names from more than 35 countries.[66] The act of naming is vital in *Palimpsest* as it rejects anonymity and embraces their unique identities, preventing their deaths from disappearing in vain and initiating the necessary act of grieving.

[63]"Stones that 'weep' the name of the dead," BBC News, accessed May 27, 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05n4g7q.
[64] Foundation Beyeler, "Doris Salcedo: 'Palimpsest'," *YouTube*, 4:58, November 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQgmn35vJ7Y
[65] Foundation Beyeler, "Doris Salcedo: 'Palimpsest'."
[66] Foundation Beyeler, "Doris Salcedo: 'Palimpsest'."

One might have initially assumed that the water emerging over the ground to inscribe names of migrants who drowned in 2011 and 2016 entirely removes the faint names inlaid in the stone of those who lost their lives before 2010.[67] *Palimpsest*'s cycle ensures that the removal is only temporary, insofar as the names will eventually reemerge. The ungrievable lives become grievable, making their absence present again. *Palimpsest* also temporarily yet repetitively superimposes and overlaps appearing and disappearing names. That coexistence is crucial: this is where lies the work's aesthetics of ambivalence. Names appear and disappear at the same time; they eventually make room for other names, which will also vanish, and the initial names repetitively reappear to re-disappear. Such is ambivalence; such is mourning. In short, *Palimpsest*'s continuous liquid movement transcends the monument as an official, resolved, and established practice of remembrance so as to activate *and* continuously reactivate an act of lamentation that prevents these deaths from simply being confined to the past. There lies the productivity of its aesthetics of repetition and ambivalence—the instantiation of a reversal stimulated by its anti-monumental stance; its request that we mourn repetitively, reiteratively, unresolvably.

Palimpsest raises the following questions: What is this pharmakon called mourning? In other words, how is ambivalence productive, what does it mean to mourn and how does one mourn migrants who have drowned while crossing the sea? In this chapter, I suggest that the act of mourning activated in *Palimpsest* is a remedy to the poison of necropolitics. It flourishes through ambivalence; it blooms through the coexistence of opposites (appearing and disappearing names). The installation prevents migrants from simply being overlooked or forgotten, perceived as lives fading away with indifference, it ultimately proclaims migrant lives as grievable, as lives that *must*

[67] "Doris Salcedo : Palimpsest," une diletante, accessed May 27, 2024, https://elisabethitti.fr/2022/10/08/doris-salcedo-palimpsest/

be grieved. To clarify my claim, my argumentation will be structured into four sections. Part 1 will present a preliminary definition of the palimpsest, exploring Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of the notion; that conceptualization will help us describe *Palimpsest*'s aesthetics of ambivalence. This will be followed by Part 2, a thorough description of the work. The description will lay the ground for Part 3, an attempt to understand *Palimpsest*'s aesthetics of ambivalence as an act of mourning. This examination will initiate and rely on a conversation between three thinkers, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, between Freud's conceptualization of mourning, Derrida's reconceptualization of Freudian mourning, and Butler's inseparable concepts of grievability and ungrievability. In my conclusion, I will carve out the therapeutic productivity of *Palimpsest*'s aesthetics of ambivalence.

1. The Palimpsest

The core implication of Salcedo's work is conveyed through its living and breathing nature: water droplets rotate, writing in palimpsest, continuously inscribing new names over those inlaid in stone. This perpetual emergence of names thus indicates that mourning never ceases; the losses resist disappearing into oblivion. Exploring the notion of palimpsest in a famous essay written in 1924, Sigmund Freud proposes the metaphorical construct of "the Mystic Pad" to elucidate the processes through which the human brain retains and recalls memories.[68] Mystic writing pads are children's toys consisting of a wax slab covered by a layer of cellophane and a sheet of paper. The slate can be written with a stylus, a pointy instrument, or even a fingernail. Writing on the sheet leaves an impression on the wax underneath, which appears as a dark trace through the plastic.[69] The writing can be simply erased by lifting the cellophane from the surface of the wax slab beneath.

[68] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'," in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIX, (London: Hogwarts Press, 1961), 228.
[69] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'," 229.

The dark traces then disappear, and the surface becomes clear again, much like a freshly wiped blackboard. The ephemerality or swift appearance of the writing composes the mystic or magical quality of the writing pad. Yet, further examination reveals that the traces remain visible in the wax slab underneath the plastic sheet. The act of writing, hence, always occurs in palimpsest, in the presence of previous writings.

The operation of the mystic writing pad, according to Freud, is analogous to how the impressions from the outside world are registered in the human brain.[70] Freud describes the "appearance and disappearance of writing" on the mystic pad to be akin to "the flickering-up and passing away of consciousness in the process of perception."[71] Impressions of the outside world move through the conscious mind, without leaving lasting marks, and reach a deeper level where they are preserved as unconscious memories. Much like the writings on the wax slab, impressions remain on a deeper level. This prevents the writings as well as the unconscious impressions, from being easily accessible or obscured in human memory. Freud emphasizes, that similar to the way writing on the mystic pad always overlays previous marks, conscious impressions occur amidst unconscious ones, creating a perpetual palimpsest. The notion of the palimpsest, thus, hinges on the idea that present observations coexist with past impressions, which are never fully erased and are often assumed to be ephemeral.

Expanding on Freud's conceptualization of the palimpsest, French philosopher Jacques Derrida furthers this analogy by probing into the dynamic interaction between the wax slab and the plastic sheet as the marks' visibility depends entirely on this interaction.[72] Derrida focuses on this process to illustrate how memory arises through the interaction between different layers (the

[70] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'," 231.
[71] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'," 230.
[72] Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad',"

conscious and the unconscious).[73] The erasure is never complete and traces of what was there continue to influence the present apprehension. Derrida's emphasis on the contingency of the marks' appearance underlines that what we remember always remains retrospective as it is constantly informed by past memories and writings.[74] This opposes the idea of fixed, immutable memories and suggests a fluid, dynamic process of remembering.

Drawing on Freud's analogy of the mystic writing pad, Salcedo's work likewise engages in a continuous palimpsest of mourning, anchored in the tension of the coexistence of opposites—names appearing and disappearing simultaneously. This, as I proposed in the introduction, renders *Palimpsest* ambivalent. Just like in the operation of the mystic writing pad where writings can be erased on the plastic sheet but still leave traces underneath, during mourning, the names eventually appear and disappear, exposing the names inlaid in stone, only to reappear again. Mourning, thus, becomes a perpetual palimpsest where each act of remembrance adds to the layers of grief and memory, never fully erasing previous or current losses. This, I consider, is significant as *Palimpsest* keeps the names active in mourning through water's movement, even if they are not always visible on the ground. Unlike the mystic pad's static nature, this continuous movement in *Palimpsest* insinuates that mourning is more than a recollection of a singular event but a Derridean fluid, dynamic process where past memories continuously inform and transform the ongoing act of mourning. More on this is in Part 3, but suffice it to say for now that the palimpsest is a structure which is inherently ambivalent. It may even act as a pharmakon whose potential is to provide a remedy to necropolitics. Before discussing this potentiality, it is essential to examine more closely the work that unfolds such a process.

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[73] Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), originally published in French by Éditions du Seuil, 1967, 284.
[74] Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," 282.

2. The Work

A sign at the door greets the spectators. It informs them that *Palimpsest* is a site of mourning, memory, and commemoration while also cautioning them that the installation is extremely fragile. Upon their entry, spectators witness an apparently empty gallery space. Lowering their heads, they observe large stone slabs laid side by side, lining the whole width and depth of the gallery. These grey, rectangular stone slabs are identical in shape and form. At first sight, the installation resembles a monument or perhaps, with stone slabs resting next to one another with names inscribed on them, a burial ground. Silence pervades the room. As each step is taken, the spectators navigate through the installation, processing the names as they move in close proximity to the inscriptions written in the sand. The names, striking out in darker hue on the grey stones, belong to migrants who drowned while crossing the sea before 2010. Some of the names include Malak, Bakr, Behzad, Azizi, Yosef, and Semret. Unexpectedly, the sand covering the stones shifts as water trickles. Water droplets start to write the new names over the names inlaid with sand: Malika, Ahmad, Mahmoud, Noman, Safi, and Tamira. Names of migrants who drowned between 2011 and 2016, trying to cross the Mediterranean. *Palimpsest* transcends the notion of a static monument, as it moves and pulses with life. The movement of water is facilitated by a complex hydraulic system concealed underground, controlled by computer algorithms, and maintained with thin pipes.

Tiny apertures in the porous ground allow the drops to well up, initially emerging as minute droplets that slowly coalesce to form names. As the water droplets move over the names inlaid in sand, they overwrite them in the same size and font. The names inscribed through the water drops possess a slightly convex reflective surface, shining vibrantly under the bright light. The transparent water droplets appear delicate and even ethereal. Although the stone in-laid names may seem to have entirely disappeared, closer inspection reveals their traces. Overlaid on top of each

other, the names form a palimpsest. Dark tiny pebbles mixed with sand resting on the stone slabs resist water absorption and retain the water on the surface. The droplets linger for a few minutes, appearing like tears as if the ground is weeping. Gradually, the water droplets begin to tremble and seep away, absorbed slowly by the ground. Once the water has entirely disappeared, the stone inlaid names are revealed again, just before the water cycle repeats with droplets rising from the ground to write new names. As the spectators walk through the installation, the water continues its movement, inscribing names each time it emerges. The gentleness of the water becomes evident when someone carelessly steps on a name, causing the water to spill over the edge, and create small amorphous blotches on the firm, flat surface. Its texture resembles that of mercury as the non-absorbent tiny pebbles suspend it over the ground. With a few gentle swipes of two fingers, the water effortlessly rolls back into its hollow form, allowing *Palimpsest* to resume its cycle. With each repetition and the appearance of each name, the silence within the installation intensifies.

Witnessing the delicate cycle of water rising over the ground and being continuously absorbed by the ground, one wonders about the intricate process that enables this phenomenon. Doris Salcedo notes that after dedicating five years to recovering the names, an additional five years were devoted to developing this complex hydraulic system.[75] The years-long rigorous research — spent recovering the names of drowned migrants in the Mediterranean — was prepared through a course of investigations, interviews, and documentation.[76] The research was executed in many different locations including Mytilene on Lesbos, Fuerteventura in the Canary Islands and other European cities where Salcedo's team visited to recover the names of migrants who drowned crossing the sea.[77] The team members investigated the public records as well as press accounts that

[75] Foundation Beyeler, "Doris Salcedo: 'Palimpsest'."
[76] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," in *Doris Salcedo 'Palimpsest,'* ed. Honey Luard, (London: White Cube, 2018), 5.
[77] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 6.

were published. These accounts were crucial in following the leads to interview and connect with the survivors and family members of the drowned migrants. The team later explored morgues, hospitals, and cemeteries in Lesbos and Fuerteventura, where they faced several different challenges from the local authorities who were dedicated to not sharing information about losses and keeping their names private and anonymous.[78] The information collected through diverse efforts, methodologies, and strategies was subsequently employed to develop an atlas of images depicting graves from the cemetery in Lesbos.[79] These graves primarily consisted of piles of dirt marked by small rudimentary signs bearing handwritten numbers and the estimated date of the death. The images from the ossuary in Fuerteventura showcased square concrete slabs, as opposed to the customary marble, with numbers and dates haphazardly written on them.[80] The research was then extended to further explore how the technical operations of the installation would be engineered. This included specialized experiments that were conducted to develop the complex hydraulic system with engineers, chemists, architects, and computer specialists.[81] There were a total of about 30 team members involved in the preparation of the exhibition.

The installation of the work likewise required great precision. The stone slabs, each weighing 800 kilograms were individually made in Salcedo's studio in Bogotá to be later shipped to the Crystal Palace in Madrid, where *Palimpsest* was initially exhibited.[82] They were later shipped to England to be exhibited at the White Cube where the size of the installation was smaller than in Madrid. The necessity for nanoscale precision was at odds with the industrial-scale

[78] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 6.
[79] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 6.
[80] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 6.
[81] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 5-6.
[82] Andreas Huyssen, "A Palimpsest of Grief, Writing in Water and Light," 6.

operations of the work, as each slab had to be meticulously installed atop the existing floor and levelled individually to ensure the water did not overflow the letters of the names.

3. *Palimpsest* and its Aesthetics of Mourning

I began by claiming that the unremitting palimpsest of mourning *Palimpsest* activates is inherently ambivalent, declaring both life and death at the same time. I then claimed that the palimpsest is an ambivalent structure in and of itself in Part 1, drawing on Freud's analogy of the mystic pad and Derrida's interpretation to better understand the continuous palimpsest that the work successfully generates with the water's transient yet repetitive movement, continually retaining the tension of the coexistence of opposites. I argue that the productivity of *Palimpsest* resides in its capacity to declare both life and death through the temporary yet repeated superimposition and overlapping of names. In order to elucidate this claim thoroughly, I will mobilize the description of the work laid out in Part 2 by responding to the following questions: How does *Palimpsest* declare sea crossing as both life and death? How does life manifest itself in the work? In what form does death present itself in *Palimpsest*? What remedy does it propose to complicate the pharmakon of sea crossing? Responding to these questions will be crucial in understanding how *Palimpsest*'s endless repetition and ambivalence transform the act of mourning into a therapeutic testament to the enduring impact of lost lives.

Palimpsest's continuous operation, through its constant inscription and erasure of names, crucially keeps the rite of lamentation active, thereof ensuring that deaths do not merely fade into the past; rather, they persist in the present as living reverberations through memory and mourning. Each cycle of appearance and disappearance (as water completes its course) subtly hints at their lingering presence, suggesting a continual recurrence in the present. As postulated in Part 1, the

installation challenges the assumption that mourning can be finally resolved or concluded gradually.

The argument sustained and defended in this section goes as follows. Salcedo's work is a palimpsest of mourning, encountered in motion; it is active, operating, and breathing. As such, it insinuates that mourning is an ongoing process, ever in flux, and never fixed thereof challenging the idea that mourning can ultimately be resolved or finalized: it prevents the finality of death from eclipsing the ongoing resonance of migrants' existence. In so doing, it effectively transcends the monument as an official and resolute emblem of remembrance; instead, it continuously activates an act of remembrance and lamentation that precludes these deaths from simply being forgotten or confined to the past, while also disclosing the migrant crisis as ongoing. This active process of mourning, retained by *Palimpsest*, ensures that deaths are not relegated to the past: they remain present (in memory and in mourning, they are present as living reverberations) and are suggested as repeatedly occurring in the present. The work thus resurrects the migrants' lives from the void of absence and forgetfulness, transforming ungrieveable lives—losses that are often ignored or deemed insignificant—into grievable ones. Death *and* life: the aesthetics of ambivalence activates, allows, proposes, and invites mourning—a special process of mourning not merely as an act of remembrance and acknowledgment of death but also as a profound recognition of the ever-present influence of the deceased in the present. Herein, I suggest, lies the productivity of *Palimpsest*'s aesthetics of repetition and ambivalence, which will be explored in greater detail in the forthcoming section, with the help of Freud's and Jacques Derrida's theorization of mourning and Judith Butler's investigation of (un)grievable lives.

- *Palimpsest*'s Work of Mourning

The constant cycle of names—appearing, disappearing, reappearing, redisappearing—in *Palimpsest* conjures a profound tension that not only initiates but also perpetuates the act of mourning. Each name's appearance evokes the memory of a life once lived, piercing the viewer with the realization of loss. Simultaneously, each disappearance signifies another life lost drowning in the necropolitics of sea management. This encounter, with names always shifting in flux, endorses what Sigmund Freud describes—in his famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917)—as the painful realization of loss heralding the mourning period.[83] In further defining the act of grief, Freud describes mourning as a task or experience that demands a conscious awareness of what has been lost.[84] Once this realization has been reached, then the work of mourning takes on; a phase of enduring longing for the lost one.[85] In *Palimpsest*, the viewer comes to the realization of the loss with each iteration as names of drowned migrants persistently confront the viewer. The installation, in so doing, reveals the causes of the grieved bodies: the necropolitical sea that migrants fall victim to by drowning. In contrast to Freud's theorization of mourning, however, as the appearance-disappearance-reappearance-disappearance of names unfolds, the viewer is immersed in an endless cycle of sorrow and lamentation. This activation of names offers no respite, embracing the tenacious character of mourning wherein memories constantly resurface, filling the mourner's world with nothing but the presence of their absence. As the gallery space houses a tide of names, it engulfs the viewer overwhelmingly. *Palimpsest* can thus be considered a mourning entity that shapes the viewer's experience into one that is dedicated to the unending presence of the lost drowned migrants. Let's delve deeper into this.

[83] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV, (London: Hogwarts Press, 1961), 243.
[84] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
[85] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.

A detailed look at *Palimpsest* reveals its autonomous operation; the names appear and disappear at their own pace, resisting any attempt to halt that movement. This autonomy produces an immersive environment that progressively compels the viewer to partake in its act of mourning. The viewer begins to breathe and move with *Palimpsest*. As the viewer navigates the installation, they become a part of the act of mourning that *Palimpsest* activates, perpetuating this rite of grief unremittingly. The viewer, led by *Palimpsest*, is invited to surrender to the overwhelming absence of the migrants, to what Freud describes as a: "world which has become empty"—an affect central to mourning.[86] In describing mourning, Freud compares it to melancholia—mourning being the process where the mourner perceives the external world as desolate and devoid of meaning following a loss, in contrast to melancholia which is the feeling of loss of interest in the external world resulting from a lack of sense of self or ego.[87] The empty world implies the emotional void that permeates one following the death of the lost one. The emptiness Freud speaks of is a description of the mourner's world, which is, in fact, utterly pervaded by the haunting presence of the lost one's absence. *Palimpsest* conveys this tension through the movement of water that permeates the gallery room. While the stone slabs laid side by side immediately evoke the sensation of a desolate cemetery, the movement of droplets contrarily mobilizes the installation. Their movement transforms *Palimpsest* into a living entity. Through its continuous palimpsest, the installation embraces more than a mere lack of tangible presence; it embodies the palpable absence of drowned migrants. Much like a palimpsest, the mourner's (the viewer's) world becomes a place where the lost one is simultaneously gone yet deeply embedded and ever-present. The installation, in this manner, invokes the memory and presence of those who have drowned, filling the space with the mere actuality of this tragedy (their loss) and their memory. The omnipresent absence

[86] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 246.
[87] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.

becomes a constant reminder of the lost one, making their absence felt profoundly. *Palimpsest* thus reveals the weight of the persisting memory of the lost one in shaping the mourner's world. By evoking these losses, the movement of water does not recover the presence of migrants completely; rather, it evokes the lingering reverberations and enduring echoes that remain persistent in mourning. It is through this endless process of remembering and re-experiencing that loss is preserved and kept alive. Contending the absence of the lost one, *Palimpsest* houses both life and death, presence and absence that is always felt simultaneously in mourning.

The ongoing act of lamentation that *Palimpsest* activates through the movement of water challenges Freud's interpretation that the period of longing for one in mourning can be progressively completed through the gradual acceptance of loss.[88] While Freud argues that acceptance results in a resolution of mourning that eventually enables the mourners to divert their attention from the lost one,[89] *Palimpsest*'s persistence defies the idea of finality. It resists resolution. Much like the ongoing grief of those who resist without closure. Even when the visitor leaves the gallery space, *Palimpsest* continues to breathe, move, and mourn autonomously. I suggest taking a closer look at the impossibility of resolution in mourning through *Palimpsest*'s persistent movement using French Philosopher Jacques Derrida's description of mourning as an unending act of remembering. [90] This closer look will disclose that, although mourning can be seen as a therapeutic reversal (the transformation of the pharmakon into care), it is the unendingness of mourning that specifies the therapeutic reversal in *Palimpsest*. Contrary to Freud, Derrida argues that it is impossible for the longing for the lost one to be finalized in mourning.[91] Resonating with

[88] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.
[89] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 255.
[90] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 115.
[91] Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 94-95.

Derrida's interpretation, *Palimpsest* continuously activates the act of lamentation for unlimited time. For Derrida and in *Palimpsest*, mourning is not an event with an end, but a perpetual state of being, an ongoing dialogue with the absence that never fully resolves.[92] Mourning involves an enduring and constantly renewed engagement with the memory of the lost one.[93] *Palimpsest* suggests that true morning involves an acceptance of the endless nature of grief, recognizing that the lost one continues to preserve their presence within us through endless remembering of memories and emotions. The installation, in this way, echoes the sentiments of those, like the loved ones of drowned migrants, who grieve without resolution and most importantly, it demonstrates the *necessity* of mourning as endless. By perpetually activating the act of mourning, *Palimpsest* ensures that the memories of the migrants who drowned are kept alive, resisting their erasure by the necropolitics of migration. The installation emphasizes that without this continuous act of mourning and remembrance, these individuals would be completely lost and forgotten, revealing a moral imperative and responsibility to actively mourn.

As such, *Palimpsest* fulfills the rite of grief that humanity has failed, lamenting not only for the migrants who have lost their lives but also for the viewer's failure to properly mourn these lives. Such is its therapeutical reversal. It beckons us to recognize and engage in our ethical obligation of remembering. In embodying this responsibility, I suggest that *Palimpsest* emphasizes the requirement of honouring these lost lives with dignity, urging viewers to recognize and engage with their ethical obligation of remembering. The visitors are invited by *Palimpsest* to realize that the work of grief is never truly done and is an ethical responsibility to acknowledge the lives of migrants and give them the respect and recognition they deserve. As Derrida poignantly states, "One should not develop a taste of mourning, and yet we *must* mourn. We *must*, but we must not

[92] Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 94-95.
[93] Derrida, *The Work of Mourning,* 160.

like it."[94] This philosophical statement emphasizes that mourning is a necessary and unavoidable process. *Palimpsest* houses the echoes of the past that resonate endlessly, inviting the viewer to engage in an ongoing conversation with absence, while acknowledging the discomfort and pain inherent to this process. By recognizing that life and death coexist ambivalently within mourning, the viewer fulfills the ethical responsibility to keep the memory of the lost alive, ensuring that their lives endure.

- Grievable Lives

While Freud focuses on the process of acceptance leading to the resolution of mourning and Derrida emphasizes the perpetual nature of grieving, Judith Butler's insights delve into understanding how names are necessary for mourning and should not be taken for granted. Her work on (un)grievable lives is useful here, insofar as it resonates with *Palimpsest*'s call—which is to ask viewers to mourn beings who have been erased from collective memory. It allows us to deepen our claim, which can be worded as follows. In activating the work of endless mourning, *Palimpsest* resurrects the presence of migrants' lives from the void of absence, forgetfulness, and internalization by fulfilling the mere condition of possibility for mourning: the act of naming. In so doing, it has in fact transformed ungrievable lives—losses that are ignored because the lives are deemed insignificant—into grievable ones. The act of naming is crucial here: it is the condition of the possibility of mourning the lost migrants. During an interview with Tim Marlow, the Artistic Director of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, Doris Salcedo recounts that naming was the profound origin and objective of the work. She describes the haunting image that emerged during her research and persisted throughout the creation of *Palimpsest*: "The image of the earth crying

[94] Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 95.

the name because we are unable to mourn collectively."[95] To better understand the power of naming, let us now briefly summarize philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler's investigation of the precarity of beings and its relation to the social structures that dictate which lives are deemed valuable and which are rendered visible.[96] This investigation becomes pivotal as it challenges the systemic exclusion of individuals marked by precarity, who are consistently denied recognition and worth—individuals whose death is ungrievable because of these processes of denial.[97]

"An ungrievable life," writes Judith Butler, "is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all."[98] Ungrievability is the fate of precarious lives—lives which have been denied fundamental rights—such as security, well-being, respect and recognition.[99] Precarity delineates how power and social structures operate to selectively confer or withhold value and protection.[100] The necropolitics of the European border regulations, discussed in Chapter 1, exemplify this precarization by denying migrants the right to safe movement. By denying their rights to safety, necropolitics effectively strips migrants of their humanity, reducing them to mere statistics rather than recognizing them as individuals with inherent dignity and rights. The implications of precarity extend beyond the immediate denial of rights; they permeate social attitudes when the names of migrant deaths are not disclosed or considered significant enough to be publicly announced or lamented. *Palimpsest* is an attempt to start repairing this state of affairs. Having died anonymous deaths, their dignity can be restored through the care and dedication that Salcedo devotes to writing the names of the precarious migrants who have died in the

[95] Doris Salcedo, "Doris Salcedo in conversation with Time Marlow," interview by Tim Marlow, 2017, in *Doris Salcedo 'Palimpsest,'* ed. Honey Luard, (London: White Cube, 2018), 38.
[96] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 30.
[97] Butler, *Frames of War*, 27-28.
[98] Butler, *Frames of War*, 92.
[99] Butler, *Frames of War*, 28.
[100] Butler, *Frames of War*, 30.

necropoliticized process of migration. This involves the meticulous research conducted to recover their names. Salcedo and her team's methodology and the deliberate inscription of the names into the artwork counteract the anonymity and erasure imposed by social neglect. Once the names are recovered, the act of mourning can be initiated. The lost migrants become grievable. The therapeutical reversal as begun.

4. Conclusion: What is this Pharmakon Called Mourning?

The names inscribed in *Palimpsest* thus symbolize more than just identities; they represent the struggle against forgetting and the perpetual assertion of the inherent worth of every life lost. As it names, the installation counters the oblivion that befalls upon ungrievable lives. This act not only acknowledges their individuality but also demands recognition of their inherent worth and the injustices they had to endure crossing the sea. In memorializing the lost lives continuously, with each iteration, *Palimpsest* demands a critical assessment of our responsibility to acknowledge and mourn lives. It challenges us to reconsider how we assign value and recognition to lives.

Its perpetual movement holds life and death together to keep ambivalence alive so as to demonstrate that mourning is not simply about commemorating past losses and extending its reach into the present. It is in the manner that the pharmakon in *Palimpsest* operates—as a means of acknowledging and confronting loss as a force that prolongs the sense of absence, disrupting any prospect of finality and closure. The artwork hence instantiates what I propose to be a therapeutic reversal, as Stiegler terms it, through the appearance-reappearance-disappearance-reappearance of names: the very process of attempting to grapple with loss is iterated perpetually and remembering or confronting destabilizes the viewer. The viewers, hence, perhaps more fundamentally, take up (or not) the act of mourning *Palimpsest* initiates together to mourn, remember, and grieve as they experience the installation. Hence, it is only through embracing and memorializing these losses

that *Palimpsest*, through its constant movement together with the viewers' participation in the act of mourning, sustains the memory of the lost lives. It perpetuates the very instability that it seeks to address—namely, the precarious tension between absence and presence, where the act of remembrance becomes both a stabilizing force and a reminder of the fragile, ever-shifting nature of loss and memory of those who would be otherwise be lost into oblivion.

CHAPTER THREE: Ambivalence in the Uncanny: Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002)

Most recently displayed at the San José Museum of Art in 2020 in the U.S.,[101] Mona Hatoum's (b. 1952, Lebanon) *Drowning Sorrows* (2001-2002) imbues one with feelings of strangeness and disquiet.[102] The installation consists of 96 fragmented tequila glass bottles,[103] each cut in half and placed on the gallery floor by Hatoum in an oval arrangement, measuring 4 x 98 1/2 by 98 1/2 inches (fig. 9).[104] The transparent bottles, once everyday items, were sourced and bisected by Hatoum during her residency in Caracas, Venezuela.[105] Illuminated from directly above, the bottle fragments encounter the viewer at the gallery's corner, with some appearing as top halves and others as bottom halves (fig. 10). It is through this aesthetic strategy I argue that the uncanny emerges in *Drowning Sorrows*: while the bottles seem familiar, recognizable everyday objects, their now unevenly slit form renders them unsettling as they appear to be both floating on and sinking into the floor. These bottles are no longer simply ordinary; they appear to be bobbing on an unstable surface (fig. 11). Viewed in the context of the migrant crisis—especially in relation to the Venezuelan refugee crisis during the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro since the 1999- Bolivarian Revolution, which has led to the largest displacement crisis in the world, with approximately 7.7 million refugees and migrants as of August 2023[106]—and considering Hatoum's "open work" aesthetics (following Umberto Eco's term, coined by the semiotician to

[101] *South East North West: New Works from the Collection*, an exhibition at the San José Museum of Art that began on October 30, 2020 and ran through October 3, 2021.
[102] San José Museum of Art, "3 to 1: Mona Hatoum, glass, bottles, and migration," YouTube, August 20, 2021, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtCo0Cj_7r0&t=30s.
[103] "Nothing Stable," 50X50: Stories of Visionary Artists from the Collection, San José Museum of Art, accessed August 25, 2024, https://50x50.sjmusart.org/hatoum/#nothing-stable.
[104] "Nothing Stable," 50X50: Stories of Visionary Artists from the Collection, San José Museum of Art, accessed August 25, 2024, https://50x50.sjmusart.org/hatoum/#nothing-stable.
[105] "Drowning Sorrows," in *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence* (Doha: Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 46.
[106] "Persistence of the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis," Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified January 31, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/persistence-venezuelan-migrant-and-refugee-crisis.

designate artworks that invite viewers to participate in the interpretative process),[107] the installation suggests migrants trying (succeeding *and* failing) to stay afloat and resist the necropolitics of the sea amidst treacherous waters. It deploys sea crossing as a pharmakon, similarly to Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea* and Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest*. In this chapter, I propose that *Drownings Sorrows*'s singular aesthetics of ambivalence is shaped not only by the paradoxical combination of familiar things but also by the uncanny feelings created by that combination. Ambivalence, here, generates and is sustained by the uncanny, a concept Sigmund Freud describes as an emotional response that arises from the intrinsic tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, which coexist yet remain irreconcilable.[108] In his famous essay "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud encapsulates this concept by asserting that the "Uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind."[109]

Hatoum's intervention prompts the following questions: How is the uncanny set off by the work? How is the uncanny productive? This chapter's main claim is that *Drowning Sorrows*'s aesthetics of ambivalence—the uncanny concomitance of its floating and drowning bottles—works to raise awareness of the migration crisis. To substantiate my argument, I will begin by defining the concept of the uncanny, drawing on the work of one of its principal theorists, Sigmund Freud, in Part 1. Then, building on this definition, I will provide a brief account of contemporary art's renewed deployment of the uncanny in Part 2, especially in contrast to the surrealist heyday investigation of the notion between the 1920s and 1940s. Part 3 teases out Hatoum's unique exploration of the uncanny as a consistent motif throughout her work. For instance, Hatoum has steadily privileged the uncanny by altering the familiar physical characteristics of everyday

[107] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, (Massachusetts; Harvard University Press, 1989), x.
[108] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' in *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XVII, (London: Hogarth Press, 1955; originally published in 1919), 219.
[109] Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' 240.

objects: embedding soaps with pins in *Nablus Soap* (1996), dramatically enlarging kitchen tools in *La Grande Broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)* (1999), and distorting the form of a bed in *Webbed* (2002). This, in turn, will lead us to Hatoum's works concerning migration where the uncanny is also steadily privileged. These different sections (Part 1, 2 and 3) form the basis of my analysis of *Drowning Sorrows*'s aesthetics of ambivalence in Part 4 where I outline and investigate the tripartite progression and conditions of possibility of the uncanny: the ordinary object gone wrong, the "open aesthetics" of *Drowning Sorrows*, and the growing liquidity of the floor. This part will closely engage with Umberto Eco's conceptualization of "open work" aesthetics, which posits that certain artworks are open to multiple interpretations that evolve over time depending on the historical contexts of their creation and reception, thereby rejecting any fixed interpretation.[110] I contend that understanding the difficulty of landing a definitive interpretation of Hatoum's works is crucial for grasping their unsettling effect—their therapeutic reversals. *Drowning Sorrows* is unsettling because of its ambivalence (the bottles both float and drown), its uncanniness (the bottles are familiar yet strange objects) and its openness (it deliberately avoids delivering a permanent message). But its therapeutic reversal, the chapter will show, lies in its prevailing liquidity—its imagined spread into *our* space. This profound sense of insecurity experienced by the viewer initiates what I propose as a therapeutic reversal: an affective remedy to the always-ambivalent pharmakon of migrant sea crossing.

1. The Uncanny

The core significance of Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* is conveyed through an unsettling feeling evoked by the reconfiguration of the bottles that are cut to appear both floating on and sinking into the floor—a reconfiguration explored to disorient the viewer. This eerie feeling

[110] Eco, *The Open Work*, x.

triggered by an encounter with an ordinary object made strange encapsulates what Sigmund Freud describes as uncanny.[111] For the psychoanalyst, the uncanny derives from something once familiar which has become strange, eerie, unsettling, occult, and *unheimlich*.[112] In his investigation of the uncanny, Freud begins by examining the various etymological definitions of *heimlich* in German, in relation to its counterpart *unheimlich*. Prior to his conceptualization of the term, Freud clarifies his approach by borrowing from but also revising German philosopher F.W.J. Schelling's definition of the uncanny developed in his 1842 series of lectures on the philosophy of mythology, published as the *Historical Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*. Schelling describes the uncanny as "something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open."[113] Freud, however, argues that the uncanny goes beyond a mere encounter with the occult. He asserts that the uncanny is not just the revelation of something hidden or concealed, but the unsettling realization that this hidden aspect was always embedded within the familiar.[114] This paradox—the coexistence of the familiar with the hidden—is crucial to Freud's theorization of the uncanny.[115] Let us be more precise. Freud begins by outlining the dual meanings of heimlich: the term refers to something belonging to the house, something friendly, familiar, tamed (as in animals), intimate, comfortable, or secure; but it also refers to something concealed, secret, hidden from sight, or private, which can also be deceitful.[116] According to Freud, this duality engenders an intrinsic contradiction: it embodies both the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and unknown, the safe and concealed, order and disorder. What works ostensibly as a source of comfort and familiarity paradoxically harbours an undercurrent of the hidden or repressed. This is to say

[111] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David Mitlock, (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 134.
[112] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 134.
[113] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 148.
[114] Freud, *The Uncanny*,150-151.
[115] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 126.
[116] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150-151.

that the uncanny arises from the realization that the latent exists with the familiar. The paradoxical concomitance of the seemingly familiar with the unfamiliar exposes this disturbing intersection. The uncanny is precisely this troubling realization that the familiar has always been intertwined with the unfamiliar.

The exposure of what is hidden or repressed carries the potential to disturb and unsettle. This leads Freud to assert, "Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with unheimlich. The uncanny (das Unheimliche, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (das Heimliche, 'the homely')."[117] This inherent paradox is what enables the heimlich to be experienced as uncanny.[118] It reveals how closely comfort and discomfort, familiarity, and strangeness rest together. Freud posits that this transition is not a simple opposition but a complex interdependency where the unfamiliar and familiar can give rise to unease and estrangement.

Echoing Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny, *Drowning Sorrows* rests on a similar coexistence of the familiar with the unfamiliar—ordinary bottles cut to appear floating and sinking; bottles recognized as bottles yet displayed as broken; liquid content both contained and uncontained by the bottles; bodies balanced and unbalanced. This paradoxical and ambivalent concomitance is inherent to *Drowning Sorrows*: the work triggers the experience of the uncanny because of that concomitance, between recognition and estrangement.

2. Surrealism's Uncanny and its Return in Contemporary Art

The notion of the uncanny, while widely disseminated through Freud's psychoanalytical interpretation after 1919, traces its origins to earlier formulations in Gothic literature in the 18th century before *Das Heimliche* and continues to recur through contemporary artworks—evolving

[117] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 134.
[118] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132, 134.

considerably beyond its earlier manifestations in surrealism as the return of repressed desires, fears, and memories. Art historian Hal Foster, in his major study of surrealism (*Compulsive Beauty*, 1993), has convincingly shown that the experience of the uncanny was known to the surrealist artists, even though André Breton, surrealism's main theorist, could not begin reading Freud's works in translation until 1922 and *Das Unheimleiche* until 1933—well into the peak of the movement.[119] Foster posits that the surrealists reworked the manifestations of the uncanny through their recurring focus on themes such as the return of the repressed, the dream-like, and the irrational.[120] In the 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," for example, André Breton defines surrealism to be "based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."[121] The Breton-inspired definition of the movement emphasizes the movement's interest in cultivating a dreamlike realm while exhibiting a pronounced disinterest in the constraints of rational thought. This detachment from rational thought, as articulated by Breton, creates a fertile ground in which repressed, overlooked, and unacknowledged associations of the mind can emerge into consciousness, thereby resonating with Freud's interpretation of the uncanny. In other words, surrealism yearns for "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak."[122] This ambition for an "absolute reality" or "surreality" suggests an alternative mode of existence where the dissolution of the boundaries of the imagined and tangible reveals a commitment to

[119] Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 3.
[120] Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xv.
[121] André Breton, excerpt from "First Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Art Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 438.
[122] André Breton, excerpt from "First Manifesto of Surrealism," 436.

unearth hidden dimensions of the human psyche and the unconscious states of minds that shape reality.

Hence, surrealism, as Breton proposes in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), rests on a paradox where "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions."[123] Surrealism à la Breton is itself a pharmakon! As Foster maintains, the experience of the uncanny emerges from this ambivalent convergence of opposites, which also includes the incongruous encounter of internal and external, endogenous and exogenous, fantasmatic and real.[124] Echoing Foster's findings, art historian Rosalind Krauss—in her famous book *The Optical Unconscious* from 1994—confirms surrealism's attempt to collapse imagination and reality and specifies that Freud interpreted that convergence as the resurgence of archaic beliefs in magic, animism, and the narcissistic sense of omnipotence.[125] This reactivation of primitive thought, Krauss contends, triggers a "metaphysical shudder" that brings the unsettling experience of the uncanny to the forefront.[126] Examples of this collision of the imagined and the real include Leonora Carrington's painting of a *Self Portrait* (1937-1938), with her figure poised on the edge of a chair, features her hand extended towards a hyena—a fantastical creature—while a white horse appears through the window. Carrington's muddled facial expression communicates a sense of bewilderment regarding her surroundings, wherein a familiar domestic space is accompanied by fantastical elements such as the hyena.[127]

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[123] André Breton, "Second manifeste du surréalisme," *La Révolution surréaliste* 12 (December 15, 1929), translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 123-24, referenced in Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 219, footnote 21.
[124] Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xviii—xix, 61.
[125] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 178.
[126] Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 178.
[127] *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, "Leonora Carrington. Self-Portrait. 1937-38," accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492697.

Similarly, Max Ernst's *Gala Éluard* (1924) delves into the enigmatic realms of the unconscious, as the eye of Gala bisects the canvas, dividing it into two distinct yet interconnected territories.[128]

These surrealist explorations of the uncanny establish a foundational context for its subsequent evolution within contemporary art, wherein the deployment of this notion assumes a markedly different direction, veering away from the obviously surreal towards the mundane. While surrealism, as defined by Breton and analyzed by Foster and Krauss, focuses on the dissolution of boundaries between dream and reality to reveal repressed thoughts and associations within the mind, contemporary artists approach the uncanny by unsettling everyday life without necessarily relying on dreamlike representations. Instead, contemporary art emphasizes latent fears and contradictions, as well as the fragility of the perceived or assumed stability, often through challenging the viewer's assumptions of quotidian life. The exploration of the uncanny within contemporary art indulges in a nuanced exploration of the complexities of current experience. For example, it manipulates scale, material, context, display, and assemblage to trouble assumptions of familiarity. The reconceptualization of the uncanny is often explored to address pressing societal issues and reflect upon the anxieties inherent in and arising from everyday life. Among the themes investigated in contemporary explorations of the uncanny are the effects of consumer culture, the experience of alienation, domesticity, surveillance mechanisms, memory and the conditions of exile and displacement. By subverting the essential or designated features or functionality of ordinary items—such as kitchen utensils or household furniture—into features and forms that have the capacity to unsettle or even harm, artists like Claes Oldenburg, Hito Steyerl, and Mona Hatoum have redefined and continue to rework the notion of the uncanny. Their work destabilizes the

[128] *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, "Max Ernst. Gala Éluard. 1924," accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/490182

familiar to challenge perceptions of comfort and security, conjuring the uncanny to expose the underlying fragility and unsteadiness within the systems that form everyday lives.

Earlier examples include Claes Oldenburg's 1962 seminal work entitled *The Store* through which the artist altered a Lower East Side space into a bodega store that sold sculptures made to look like food and clothing.[129] His *Floor Burger* (1962), a large-scale soft sculpture exhibited in *The Store*, evokes the uncanny with its particularly soft texture and its unusually large size. Composed of vinyl and foam, this artwork presents itself as a direct commentary within the Pop Art movement, addressing the increasing prevalence of fast food and consumer culture in North America during the late 20th century.[130] By distorting the scale and tactile quality of such commonplace goods, Oldenburg disrupted the experience of encountering a hamburger to engage in a critical commentary on consumer culture; he likewise transformed a ubiquitous fast-food item into an artwork, challenging conventional notions of value, taste, and consumption. The work prompts a questioning of the connection individuals hold with consumer goods of the rapid commodification culture—often associated with convenience and uniformity—that infiltrates personal and public spaces. A more recent example of the deployment of the uncanny in contemporary art is Hito Steyerl's multi-panel installation with four hyperreal digital video projections of plants that do not yet exist and were rendered by neural works—artificial intelligence systems designed to simulate the functioning of the human brain and nervous system.[131] The uncanny in *Power Plants* (2019) emerges from the familiar plant forms troubled by their synthetic recreation generated through non-human digital processes: it presents an eerie

[129] "Claes Oldenburg: The Store," The Collector, accessed September 23, 2024, https://www.thecollector.com/claes-oldenburg-the-store/.
[130] "Claes Oldenburg: The Store," MoMA, accessed September 23, 2024, https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/270/3504.
[131] Hito Steyerl, "Power Plants," Serpentine Galleries, accessed September 24, 2024, https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/hito-steyerl-power-plants/.

dissonance of organic forms that are recognizable specimens of natural flora that do not exist yet. Their transformation into speculative creations leaves the viewer with an uncanny sentiment: what looks like nature is, in fact, a product of technology. The plants are not rooted in the past or present but are predicted to exist 0.04 seconds in the future.[132] This minor temporal shift leaves the viewer to reckon with something that is out of reach—familiar yet not fully knowable; it engenders a profound sense of unease, compelling the viewer to grapple with the idea that the natural world, as conventionally understood, may be vulnerable to transformation by non-human entities.

These contemporary examples, I propose, establish a foundational basis from which we can start to understand Mona Hatoum's aesthetics of ambivalence—that is, the uncanniness that emerges from her works. The main objective of Part 3 is the examination of that redefined uncanniness, typical of her performance and video work of the 1980s and later installation-based and sculptural works since the late 1980s.

3. Ambivalence in Hatoum's Works

The persistent motif of uncanniness is elicited by Mona Hatoum's works through subtly distorted bodies, objects, and spaces that engender an aesthetics of ambivalence: it is, however, not merely the spectator's encounter with these altered forms that unsettles; it is their lingering resemblance to what they once were that makes their transformation ambivalent and hence, even more disturbing. This paradoxical concurrence, recurrent through Hatoum's works for over three decades, emerges in her earlier performance and video pieces from the 1980s and persists as she transitions to installation-based and conceptual sculptural works from the late 1980s to the present.[133]

[132] Hito Steyerl, "Power Plants."
[133] Guy Brett, "Survey," in *Mona Hatoum*, (London; New York: Phaidon Press), 36.

Her earlier works, which centred on the body—particularly the female body, were more overtly confrontational and explicit. This "obviously rhetorical attitude,"[134] as Hatoum herself describes it, embodied "a sense of demonstrating or delivering a message to the viewer,"[135] which was also a common aesthetic strategy deployed by the preceding generation of feminist artists from the 1970s. Hatoum notes in an interview with scholar Fereshteh Daftari that Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) was a significant influence on her early artistic practice wherein Rosler, appearing in an apron, names and presents the kitchen utensils alphabetically.[136] Through her gestures of hacking and stabbing, Rosler transforms these familiar and domestic items into threatening, almost weaponized objects.[137] In this encounter, the viewer witnesses the uncanny transformation of the everyday into menacing: objects traditionally associated with nurture and care are now wielded as instruments of violence. Similar to Rosler, Hatoum's early performances, such as *The Negotiating Table* (1983) and *Roadworks* (1985), confront the viewer with the unsettling notion that seemingly commonplace activities or prospects of normalcy—the act of walking or reconciliation—are fraught with tension and unease.

Hatoum's 1983 performance, *The Negotiating Table*—later documented as a twenty-minute-long video—was originally performed during her year-long residency at the Western Front in Vancouver, Canada.[138] The negotiation table, an object commonly associated with diplomacy and conflict resolution, is transformed into a haunting site of unresolved violence as the artist's body is encountered lying over the table, encased in a clear plastic sheet, smeared with dark animal

[134] Mona Hatoum, "Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni," by Janine Antoni, *BOMB Magazine*, April 1, 1998, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1998/04/01/mona-hatoum/.
[135] Mona Hatoum, "Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni."
[136] Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Mona Hatoum," by Fereshteh Daftari, The Museum of Modern Art, 2003, https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_134_300160796.pdf.
[137] Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Mona Hatoum," by Fereshteh Daftari.
[138] Sarah Milroy, "Fought Through Women's Bodies: Mona Hatoum's Early Performances," *Momus*, June 2, 2016, https://momus.ca/fought-through-womens-bodies-mona-hatoums-early-performances/.

blood, draped in viscera, and her face obscured with a surgical gaze. This hauntingly grotesque and disfigured configuration of Hatoum's body evokes an uncanniness that stimulates an immediately visceral response of repulsion, what scholar Julia Kristeva characterizes as the abject.[139] In her 1980 seminal book called *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva describes the abject as a condition or state in which a breakdown of meaning occurs due to the dissolution or loss of the distinction between self and other, object or subject.[140] It can therefore be understood as an extreme form of uncanniness—an intensification which I will come back to in my analysis of *Drowning Sorrows*. Suffice it to say for now that the abject body, in Hatoum's *The Negotiating Table*, renders itself uncanny as it hovers at the edge of human recognition. Progressively, however, it elicits horror in its capacity to appear both animate and inanimate, flesh and grotesque. In this abjection, the viewer recoils from the ultimate Other: death. The confrontation with potential death (of oneself) destabilizes subjectivity, as the presence of the abject threatens the boundaries that sustain the self. The psychological lurching away from Hatoum's body, in effect, stems from one's awareness of the fragility of the boundaries between self and the other. Along with the empty chairs surrounding the table, the dim lighting, and the hollow echoes of peace discourses pronounced by Western leaders emitting from the soundtrack, Hatoum's *The Negotiating Table* evokes a haunting sense of the failure and absence of systems of negotiation and resolution.

This rhetorical tone of *The Negotiating Table* can likewise be seen in Hatoum's performance of *Roadworks* (1985), where the artist walks the streets of Brixton in London, a predominantly working-class and black London borough, barefoot with a pair of Dr. Martens boots

[139] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.
[140] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 40.

tied onto her ankles—worn by police officers and radical white supremacist group skinheads at the time.[141] Later condensed into a 6-minute and 45-second video, the performance responded to the violent policing in Brixton: the disproportionate application of "stop and search" procedures by the police in the area, which led to a riot of its inhabitants in 1981 and the murder of a local black woman in 1985 by the police.[142] Given the political climate of the borough, the boots became a potent symbol of control and oppression. Hatoum recounts the public's immediate recognition of this symbolism to stress the ingrained association between the boots and everyday surveillance in the community. As she describes, "One guy came up to me and said: Excuse me. Do you know you're being followed?"[143] The observation reflects the work's unsettling resonance with the lived experiences of the inhabitants, who were all too familiar with the constant policing and oppressive tactics embedded in their environment. The latent distress embedded within the seemingly public environment is made physical through her performance. The mundane act of walking with the menacing symbolism of the boots becomes laden with anxiety; viewers are confronted with the disquieting implications of surveillance and the often-overlooked violence embedded in the aspects of the routine. The viewer, confronted with this altered reality, becomes hyper-aware of the fragility of safety in public spaces (their reality as pharmakons) and the constant, unseen forces of control that loom over marginalized communities.

Towards the late 1980s, Hatoum purposefully began withdrawing her body from the immediate focus of her works; this intentional shift sought to implicate the viewer in the process of embodied interaction rather than merely witnessing as a spectator.[144] This marks a significant

[141] Mona Hatoum, *Roadworks*, Sammlung Goetz, accessed October 15, 2024, https://online.sammlung-goetz.de/en/work/roadworks-mona-hatoum/.
[142] Mona Hatoum, *Roadworks*, Sammlung Goetz.
[143] Capucine Perrot, "Mona Hatoum Born 1952 *Performance Still* 1985-95," *Tate Modern*, accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/mona-hatoum.
[144] Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Mona Hatoum," by Fereshteh Daftari.

transition where the viewer's uncanny experience is no longer triggered through specific contextual or personal references but is engendered through the material and spatial conditions of the work itself. To be more precise, her later works are less anchored in explicit socio-political narratives.[145] Hatoum's installations, as critic Rebecca Fulleylove describes, transcend "local and personal issues and make them universal."[146] In these phenomenologically driven encounters, the viewer is asked to become actively involved in the process of perceiving, interpreting, contextualizing, and experiencing.

Here are two examples of that singular shift. In *Light Sentence* (1992), originally exhibited at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Hatoum arranges a single light bulb suspended between two sets of galvanized wire mesh lockers, which projects and duplicates their shadows across the gallery walls.[147] The geometric form of the lockers, reminiscent of the rigid structures of twentieth-century minimalism, takes on a repressive dimension through illumination within the installation.[148] As the light bulb slowly shifts and moves, it casts disorienting, overlapping shadows that alter the viewer's perception of the space. The familiar, orderly grid of the lockers becomes unsettling, rendering the gallery claustrophobic and destabilizing. The uncanny emerges here as the familiar form of the lockers—symbols of order and containment—are visually multiplied and distorted, creating a sense of confinement and anxiety. The appeal to the uncanny through the material and object can also be exemplified by Hatoum's *Homebound* (1999) wherein the artist further amplifies

[145] Samantha K. R. W. Sweeney, "A Spectral Universality: Mona Hatoum's Biopolitics," *October* 171 (2021): 61-83, https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00003.
[146] Rebecca Fulleylove, "Mona Hatoum: A Retrospective at Tate Modern," It's Nice That, May 5, 2016, https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/mona-hatoum-retrospective-tate-modern-050516.
[147] Hannah D. O'Leary, "Mona Hatoum: Poetic and Political at Tate Modern, London," *Aesthetica*, April 27, 2016, https://aestheticamagazine.com/mona-hatoum-poetic-political-tate-modern-london/.
[148] Mona Hatoum, "Michel Archer in Conversation with Mona Hatoum," by Michel Archer, *Mona Hatoum*, (London; New York: Phaidon Press), 17.

feelings of unease by wiring domestic furniture and objects with an active electric current.[149] The installation presents an array of household objects—tables and chairs, cots, toys, kitchen utensils, lights and a birdcage—separated by a taut barrier of steel wire.[150] The room reverberates with an electric current that resonates throughout the gallery. Domestic objects, conventionally associated with comforts and safety, are here transmuted into potential sources of danger. These later sculptural and installation works demonstrate an aesthetic shift toward abstraction—often founded on the exclusion and departure from a specific social or historical context. Hatoum's desire to implicate the viewer in the uncanniness and abjectness of the work emerges through her repositioning aesthetic strategies toward what Umberto Eco describes as "open work" aesthetics, a strategy that invites multiple interpretations and resists fixed meaning—which, I will further explore in the following section. In short, in Hatoum's installations, public spaces, the home and certain objects (light bulbs, for example) are disclosed as pharmakons—the materialization of both life and death. But, as my analysis of *Drowning Sorrows* will show, the installations are more than pharmakons insofar as they seek a therapeutic reversal. They unsettle viewers and invite them, in this very process, to care about pharmakons.

4. The Ambivalent Aesthetics of *Drowning Sorrows*

I set forth this chapter by suggesting that the uncanniness evoked by the paradoxical concomitance of the bottles is fundamental to *Drowning Sorrows*'s aesthetics of ambivalence, which arises from the coexistence and irreconcilability of what is familiar with the estranged. This ambivalence, in turn, is continuously perpetuated by this uncanny experience itself, which retains the viewers in a paradoxical and unresolved state of incongruous concurrent responses. To

[149] Jonathan Jones, "Mona Hatoum Review – Electrified by Fright," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/03/mona-hatoum-review-tate-modern-electrified.
[150] Jonathan Jones, "Mona Hatoum Review – Electrified by Fright."

substantiate this argument, I engaged with Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny to establish that the paradoxical and ambivalent concomitance present in *Drowning Sorrows*—marked by recognition and estrangement evoked by the bottles, is, in fact, a manifestation of the uncanny itself. I then examined the evolution of the uncanny, from its earlier manifestations in Surrealism—where it operated to dissolve the distinction between the imagined and the tangible through otherworldly configurations that sought to reveal repressed thoughts and associations—to its contemporary deployment, which engages with unsettling assumptions of the everyday and the familiar without necessarily drawing on the overtly surreal to produce unsettling effects. By tracing the evolution of the uncanny, particularly through its contemporary examples, I was able to tease out the aesthetics of ambivalence in Hatoum's works—revealing not only their uncanniness but also the artist's redefinition of the notion with a shift in aesthetic strategies toward minimalism and abstraction. I suggested that this shift amplifies the uncanniness of her works: the viewer is no longer limited to simply discerning whether the encountered elements are familiar or unfamiliar; likewise, they must reckon with the inability to choose among the multiplicity of interpretations that her "open" work evokes, in line with Eco's conceptualization. In order to better apprehend the aesthetics of ambivalence of *Drowning Sorrows*, I want to explore further this revised understanding of the uncanny typical of Hatoum's later sculptural and installation works. In so doing, I will be responding to the following questions: How is the uncanny set off by the work? How is the uncanny productive? Engaging with these questions, I want to argue that *Drowning Sorrows*' uncanny concomitance of floating and drowning bottles works to raise awareness of the migration crisis.

My argumentation in this section will be as follows: the strange transformation of the materiality, form, and setting of ordinary bottles in *Drowning Sorrows* triggers a sensation of

uncanniness which gradually transforms—when the viewer circulates long enough around the installation, becomes aware that s/he shares the same unstable ground as the bottles and accepts the open aesthetics of the work—into an abject experience. More on this further down. Suffice it to say for now that Hatoum's abstraction of the bottles—stripped of any specific message, ownership, recipient, or geographic context—renders them open to multiple interpretations; the viewer navigates the work without a fixed or imposed narrative or meaning. This openness allows the bottles to be read as more than mere objects—they can be seen as fragmented bodies when viewed within the socio-political context of the ongoing migration crisis. Viewed through this lens and through encountering the destabilizing effect of the bottles for a prolonged time, I propose that the experience of the uncanny grows into an encounter with the abject. The evolving—progressive—effect of *Drowning Sorrows* gradually inflicts a visceral sense of repulsion in the viewer, as the encounter with the Other—here signifying the possibility of death—unfolds through the growing liquidity and, hence, the instability of the ground. This destabilization, perpetrating fear, disrupts the viewer's capacity to uphold clear boundaries between the self and Other, the real and unease. I propose that the productivity of *Drowning Sorrows* resides within this singular aesthetics of ambivalence. My argumentation will unfold by addressing the three main material strategies shaping that aesthetics: the ordinary object gone wrong, the installation's "openness" and the growing "liquidity" of the floor.

- The Ordinary Object Gone Wrong

Typical everyday items, the transparent bottles that compose Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* have gone wrong by departing from their expected, familiar, intact, and functional form. These bottles, while still recognizable as such, are displayed as bisected; they are no longer readily available for use (fig. 12). The sharpness of the broken glass induces a threat of danger: they are

exposed on the gallery floor, inviting the viewer into an uncomfortable proximity to potential harm (fig. 13). The fragmentation of the bottles not only disrupts their primary function as containers but undermines their purpose altogether: it prevents them from holding or protecting what they are meant to retain. The broken bottles suggest both containment and uncontainment: the liquid seems to be simultaneously within and spilling out of them. Cut slightly with a slanted angle, they suggest a bobbing motion: it is as if they are floating and sinking at once. The severed, bisected bottles are stripped of their capacity to carry any message—an act traditionally associated with castaways, seeking to communicate distress to an unknown recipient. Their dysfunctionality is compounded by the absence of any identifying markers—no message, no ownership, no clear origin, no sender, no receiver, no geography, no history, no particular narrative that would anchor the bottles in a particular context.

The bottles have gone wrong because of their unsettling duality: on the one hand, they maintain their recognizable shape; and on the other, the fractured and dysfunctional form challenges their intended use. The viewer is intertwined in a paradox: they are compelled to grapple with the impossibility of reconciling what these objects once were with what they have now become. Hence, the ordinary is estranged, and the familiar becomes destabilized. The Freudian understanding of the uncanny comes to the fore: the uncanny arises from the realization that the unfamiliar exists with the familiar, that latent danger has always been intertwined with the ordinary. Form *and* formlessness, life *and* death drives, Eros *and* Thanatos. The experience of the pharmakon substance of the uncanny, sustained by the unresolved tensions within the work, situates the viewer in a state of profound uneasiness—one that mirrors the disquieting paradox of the bottles resting on the gallery floor.

- *Drowning Sorrows*'s "open work" Aesthetics

The absence of identifying markers also prevents any single permanent interpretation from being imposed, nourishing the ambivalence of the work and the uncanniness of its reception. I suggest that this is the way in which Hatoum conjures "open work" aesthetics in *Drowning Sorrows* and enables the bottles to be interpreted as migrating bodies. In other words, Hatoum's resistance to anchoring *Drowning Sorrows* to any specific contextual reference through its minimalist aesthetics invites the viewer to actively engage in the interpretative process in relation to the historical context in which it is exhibited and perceived. *Drowning Sorrows*'s ever-evolving character resonates with what Umberto Eco presents as the "open work" in his 1962 seminal book *The Open Work*.[151] According to Eco, in an "open work," there is no singular reading of the work that is prescribed by the artist; instead, the interpretation is never permanent and generated through and in combination with the viewer's participation.[152] While Eco asserts that the interpretation arises through a continuous interplay between the stimulus and the viewer's response,[153] the essence of the work still adheres "to the world intended by the author."[154] As stipulated above, *Drowning Sorrows*'s bottles are displayed and perceived ambivalently, as floating and sinking, unbalanced and balanced, containing and uncontaining. The paradoxical concomitance—generating uncanniness—remains consistent, anchoring the work within the artist's intended aesthetic strategies. According to Eco, even in openness, the work is not random or chaotic but carefully orchestrated by the artist and is still tethered to the artist's intentions. The work's evolving meanings, hence, still adhere to the core tension the artist conveys through the aesthetic strategies. Yet—and this is key to "open works"—*Drowning Sorrows* embodies openness by

[151] Eco, *The Open Work*, 3.
[152] Eco, *The Open Work*, 5.
[153] Eco, *The Open Work*, 3.
[154] Eco, *The Open Work*, 19.

resisting fixed interpretation through its minimalist materiality; it invites viewers to an interpretative process while upholding the ambivalence that underpins the work.

This is to say that the work's openness relies fundamentally on the absence of identity anchors—be they geographical, cultural or historical. This absence deprives the installation of a narrative specificity. In his remarks on the openness of an artwork, Eco claims that each viewer, as they react to stimuli within the work, brings their own existential framework—compromising cultural background, personal tastes, inclinations, and biases—into the interpretative process.[155] The viewer's perspective keeps the interpretative process inherently subjective and "unfinished."[156] It changes across different cultural, geographic, or historical situations. The bottles-gone-wrong will evoke alternative associations when viewed in the Venezuelan social and political context (the context in which they were first made and shown in 2002) and any other exhibition of the *Drowning Sorrows* held subsequently within the context of the migration crisis. They suggest bodies displaced by migration.[157] The geopolitical and social context in Venezuela during Hatoum's residency in Caracas, Venezuela, between 2001 and 2002 was marked by rising political tensions sparked by the 1999 Bolivarian Revolution and was compounded by economic turmoil under the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, which would later culminate in widespread displacement as the country further descended into political unrest.[158] When considered in the context of the ever-evolving Venezuelan and globalized migration crisis, the floating yet sinking bottles in *Drowning Sorrows* mirror the ambivalence of navigating the treacherous waters while resisting the necropolitics of the sea; they embody the struggle of staying

[155] Eco, *The Open Work*, 3.
[156] Eco, *The Open Work*, 4.
[157] "Drowning Sorrows," in *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence* (Doha: Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 46.
[158] "Persistence of the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis," Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified January 31, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/persistence-venezuelan-migrant-and-refugee-crisis.

afloat and drowning, the struggle of bodies staying balanced and unbalanced, the reality of succeeding and failing. The bottles can thus be understood not only as revealing sea crossing as a pharmakon but also as opening the possibility of multiple—context-based—interpretations of the work, potentializing therapeutic reversals. To interpret-and-reinterpret as an open process is to care.

- The Growing "liquidity" of the Floor

The evolving uncanniness set into play by *Drowning Sorrows* progressively draws the viewer into the growing instability of the floor: this is when the uncanny slowly develops into an encounter with the abject. As theorized by Julia Kristeva, the abject emerges when a breakdown of meaning occurs due to the dissolution or loss of the distinction between self and other. For Kristeva, it is the inability to maintain distinctions—between the self and Other, life and death, inside and outside—that protects or separates oneself from what is considered dangerous, threatening, or alien. Drawing on Kristeva's conceptualization, *Drowning Sorrows*'s uncanniness can be said to evolve into an experience of abjecthood insofar as the bottles' paradoxical and unstable "behavior"—they seem to both bob and sink following an ambivalence that is reminiscent of the precarious fate of migrants in treacherous waters—imbues the floor with liquidity akin to water. This sense of the abject comes from the viewer's growing awareness of the unframed installation, the loss of distinction between the inside and the outside of the work, of the self and the other. The viewer no longer merely experiences uncanniness from afar at a safe distance but becomes implicated in the instability and liquidity of the work. We—the viewers who stay long enough in the exhibition room to be affected by the evolving effects of *Drowning Sorrows*—are invited to experience the ground as an extension of the liquidity of the work. The installation's floor ceases to be a neutral support to become a potential site of insecurity and injury—much like

the waters migrants must navigate. The growing instability of the ground brings along a visceral response; it is no longer simply a recognition of something familiarly strange but an encounter with what repulses and horrifies, what threatens the coherence of the self: the looming possibility of suffering, violence, and death.[159] The abject becomes a means of therapeutic reversal, from other to self to other to self. The anxiety and fear of losing one's ground, both metaphorically and literally, evoke a profound sense of insecurity, particularly in relation to the migrants' bodies suggested by the work.[160]

5. Conclusion: How is the Uncanny Productive?

The ultimate productivity of *Drowning Sorrows*'s aesthetics of ambivalence lies in its evolving nature, which permeates the viewer's experience as it progressively unfolds on the level of the abject without losing sight of its uncanniness. The encounter intensifies the viewer's awareness of the looming threat, implicating them in the harsh reality of necropolitics—the governance of life and death: floating and sinking, succeeding and failing, unbalanced and balanced migrant bodies. This is to say that *Drowning Sorrows* creates a continually evolving and unending experience of unease for the viewer, from the uncanny to the abject, twisting ambivalence as much as it can. As the uncanniness of the broken bottles grows into an encounter with the abject, the viewer is drawn into the disorienting space of uncertainty and vulnerability, where the familiar floor dissolves into the threatening instability of the floor. *Drowning Sorrows* leaves open the potential for continuous engagement as it refuses to anchor itself into a specific meaning and context. The aesthetics of ambivalence will continue to resonate and evolve across various crises, particularly (for now) those marked by the perilous journeys of migrant bodies.

[159] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 9-10.
[160] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1.

Building on the questions raised in the introduction—"How is the uncanny set off by the work? How is the uncanny productive?"—this chapter has argued that *Drowning Sorrows* does not offer a resolution to the migrant crisis but it invites the viewer to uneasy experience the uncanny to prompt a continuous and renewed reflection on that crisis. Hatoum's work taps into deep-seated fears and anxieties associated with the precariousness of security, challenging us to confront the uncomfortable reality that our assumed stability—our sense of security and place in the world—may, at any moment, fracture or dissolve. Drawing us closer to Stiegler's theorization of the pharmakon, Eco suggests that it is only through active engagement art can bring change by prompting a re-evaluation of the systems and structures. Hence, the profound sense of insecurity experienced by the viewer initiates and draws us closer to Stiegler's conceptualization, that is, a therapeutic reversal: an affective remedy to the always-ambivalent pharmakon of the migrant sea crossing. Ultimately, the work's productivity lies in its refusal to resolve the issue and instead, in its invitation to navigate discomfort and the potential dissolution of the distinction between self and other. The migrating other could indeed be *me*. Ambivalence, uncanniness and openness slowly shift into the experience of the abject. The therapeutics of *Drowning Sorrows*—the requirement to turn the pharmakon into care or the requirement to care for the pharmakon—ultimately relies on the viewer's realization that the distinction between the other "out there" and the self "out here" is a chimera, an illusion. It is the becoming-aware of their interchangeability that compels us to envision the broader complexities of migration without settling into simplified, reductive, stable, and resolved narratives.

CONCLUSION

Responding to the persistent violence and calamities that have come to define—and continue to shape—twenty-first-century migration and cross-border movement, contemporary artists convey the urgent life-and-death stakes of sea crossings: an arduous task that requires sustained attentiveness to how life might emerge from within the very necro-conditions that underpin the migrant crisis. Sea crossings often remain unacknowledged, overshadowed until they strike with abrupt finality: a life lost to unforgiving waters, a family uprooted from their homeland, and the profound grief that ripples through communities. In this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate that contemporary artists have explored aesthetic strategies to raise public awareness while resisting to portrayal of migration merely as an exposure to danger, injury, and death—despite the persistence of violence. Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, Doris Salcedo and Mona Hatoum, thus, do not rescue us from the "crisis" but compel us to confront discomfort, navigate disturbance, and engage with a multiplicity of possibilities—carving out the ways through which countermeasures can emerge. I have contended that, across their works, the predominant aesthetic strategy is ambivalence to disclose the coexistence of life and death lived by the migrants of the 21st century.

Each work, I posited, uniquely embodies the aesthetics of ambivalence, differing in its therapeutic modalities and effects. I suggested that Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed's *Purple Sea* (2020) engage with the sea as pharmakon—both poison and remedy—to propose a conduit through which the possibility of care can emerge from within the necropolitics of the Mediterranean Sea. Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013-2017), on the other hand, submits that the act of mourning must remain active through naming and remembering to make the absence of lost lives present and not irreversibly confined to the past. Finally, I proposed that *Drowning Sorrows*

(2001-2002) by Mona Hatoum adopts an open work aesthetics to produce an uncanny effect that gradually evolves into an encounter with the abject. The increasing instability of the ground elicits a visceral response—an acute insecurity—that is no longer merely experienced migrants but also by the viewer.

While each artwork articulates ambivalence in its own distinct manner, similar affective experiences are shared among the three works. These affective parallels among these works articulate the overarching ambivalence that permeates the various analyses discussed throughout this thesis: at various thematic and affective junctures, these works both meet and differentiate. The encounter with the abject in Hatoum's work does not preclude its emergence in *Purple Sea*; rather, a common thread of ambivalence interlaces through both works, sustaining the multiple layers of contradiction and duality inherent to each. These works leave room for ambivalence to be reinterpreted and encountered in its evolving forms. In light of this, I would like to conclude by highlighting what they have in common.

First, water and liquidity are recurring motifs in the three works: *Palimpsest* conducts the act of mourning through the inscription and re-inscription of water droplets on the ground, *Purple Sea*'s footage predominantly shifting between above and below the sea currents is where the storytelling unfolds, and *Drowning Sorrows* evokes the uncanny as well as the abject as the liquified floor is experienced by the spectator. The water and liquidity thus serve as aesthetic motifs imbued with transformative, therapeutic potential.

Second, the same must be said about the life-and-death ambivalence produced by *Purple Sea* and *Drowning Sorrows*. Despite its seemingly inert objects, *Drowning Sorrows* conveys a sense of movement that resonates with the striking and nausea-inducing footage of *Purple Sea*. This movement appears in the repeated appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of names in

Palimpsest to portray the unrelenting occurrence of life and death in mourning. *Palimpsest* delivers a duality inherent to mourning whereas Hatoum's work conjures the image of bodies that appear to both float and sink, succeed and fail, much like the dialectical montage in *Purple Sea* which captures migrant bodies from above and from below the water surface. The experience of the abject that characterizes Hatoum's work—the disquieting yet visceral encounter with instability—can be likened to the feeling of intense nausea elicited by *Purple Sea*.

Thirdly, the three case studies show a similar transformative prospect inherent in the aesthetics of ambivalence, particularly when examined through the lens of the pharmakon. Despite the unrelenting sense of violence delivered through the dialectics of montage, the storytelling in *Purple Sea* situates the viewer in a care entanglement that manifests itself in the form of collective mourning in Salcedo's work. The viewer's engagement and attendance at the rite of mourning conducted by *Palimpsest* resists allowing the lives lost during the sea crossing to disappear in vain, just as the storytelling in *Purple Sea* ensures that Alzakout's perspective is heard and acknowledged. *Drowning Sorrows* confronts the viewer with the vulnerability of life to devise awareness. None of these works attempt to convey the complete narratives of lost lives they address—their stories remain elusive and will never be fully told. Instead, they encourage us to listen attentively, reflect deeply, and engage in a process of revisiting and re-telling. Although we may grasp fragments of the stories of lost migrants in *Palimpsest* and recognize that we do not possess the entirety of Alzakout's narrative, alongside the tragic losses implicated in *Drowning Sorrows* anonymously, these works persistently urge us to confront and witness the complexities of sea crossings. They compel us to engage with a profound sense of incompleteness and incomprehensibility that accompanies each story to remind us that understanding is not solely about resolution or closure. Rather, it requires an ongoing commitment to bear witness to the pain

and loss that pervade these narratives and carry the weight of these losses, injuries, and deaths through engaging in a continuous act of remembrance. *Purple Sea*, *Palimpsest*, and *Drowning* Sorrows beckon that the realities of migration, and specifically sea crossings, cannot be transferred completely as absence and presence intertwine, and knowing and unknowing always remain together and resonate perpetually.

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FIGURES

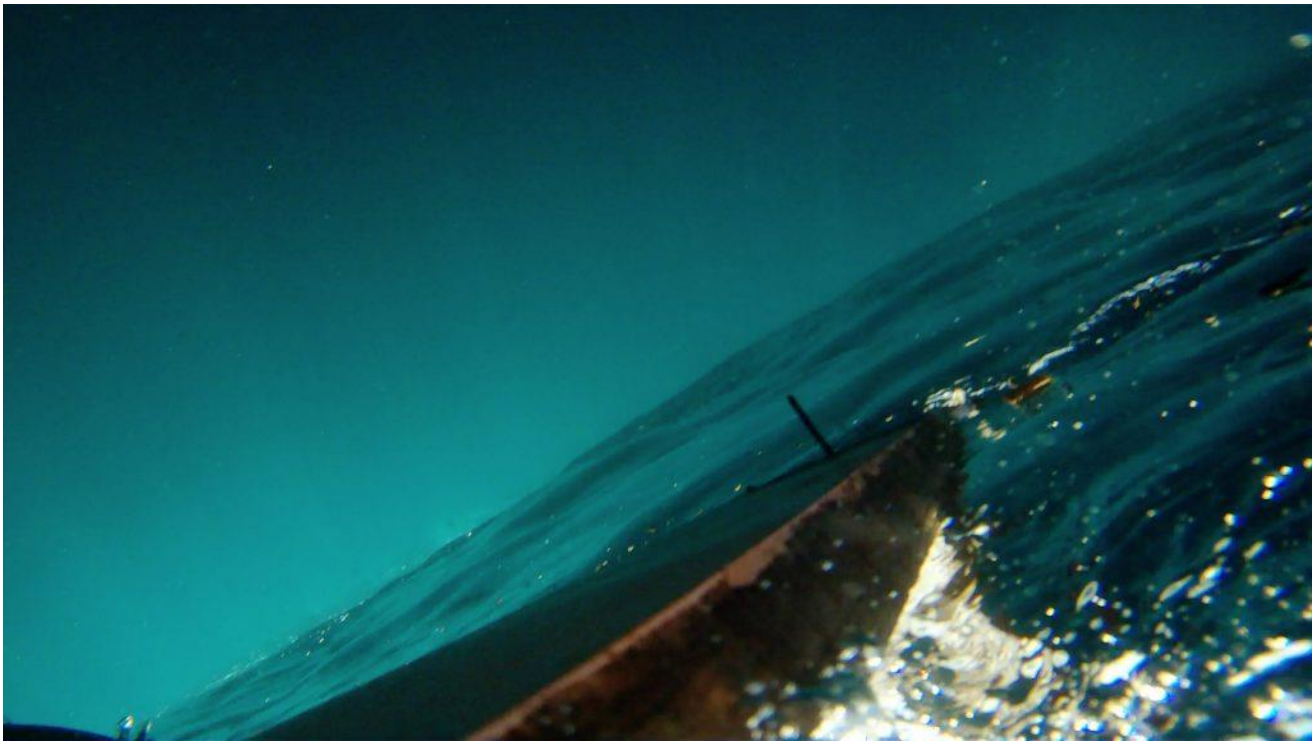
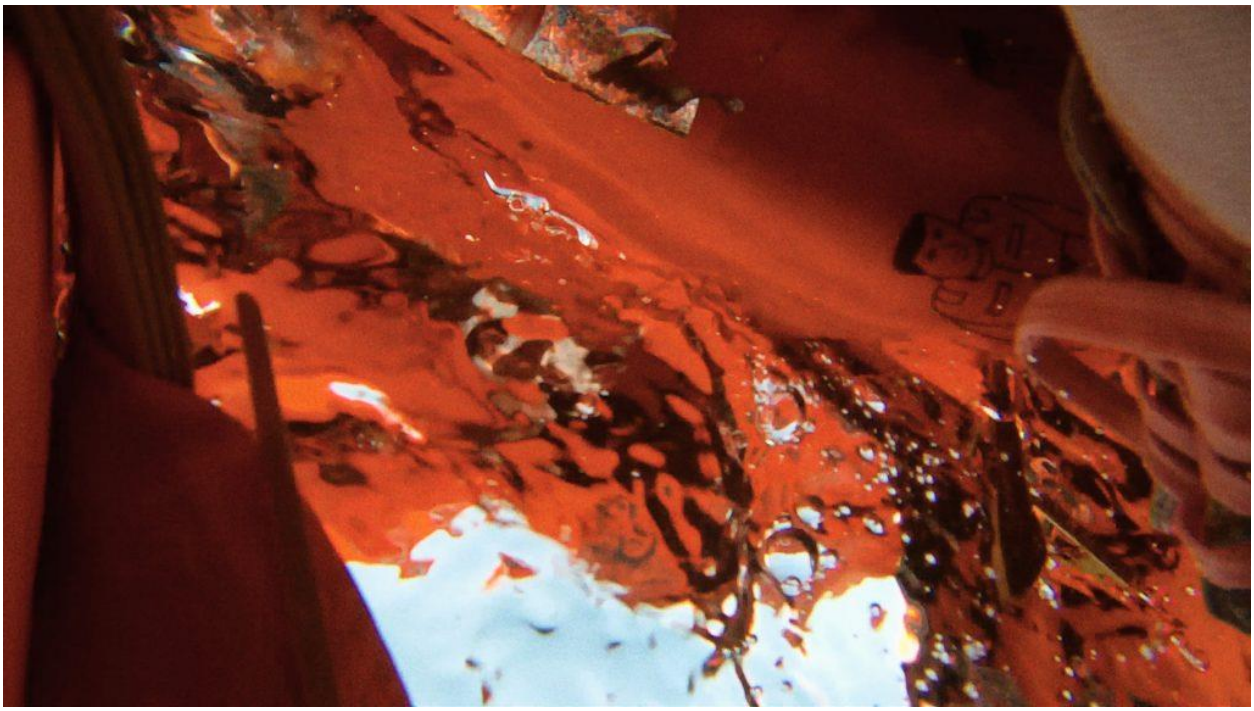


Figure 1. Still from *Purple Sea*, directed by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, 2020. Digital image. © Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed; Courtesy of the filmmakers.



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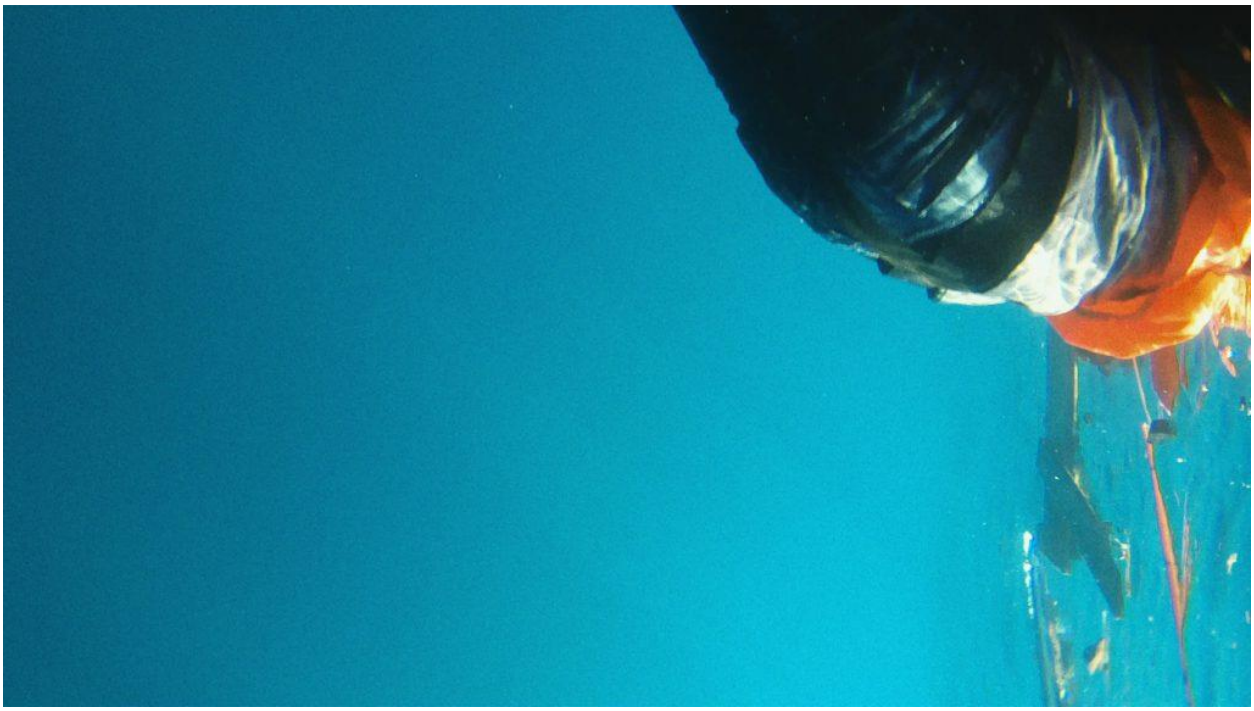

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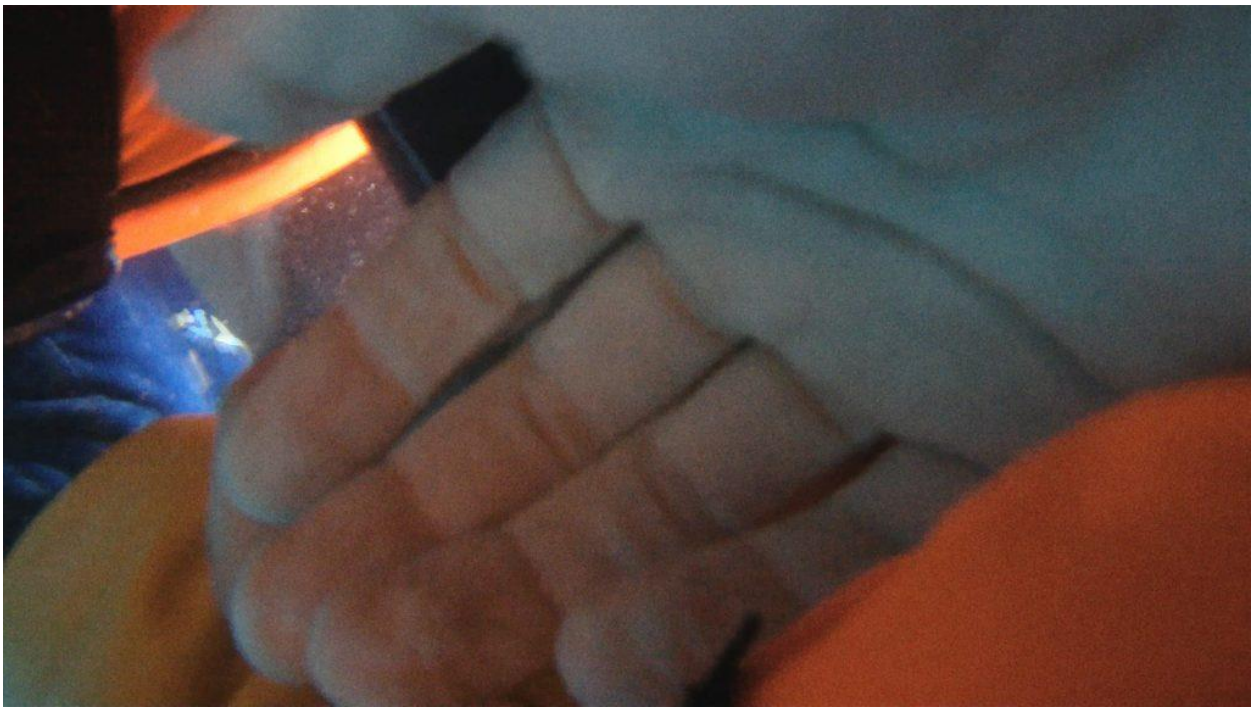

Figure 4. Still from *Purple Sea*, directed by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, 2020. Digital image. © Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed; Courtesy of the filmmakers.

Figure 5. Still from *Purple Sea*, directed by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, 2020. Digital image. © Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed; Courtesy of the filmmakers.

Figure 6. Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsest*, 2013-2017, Installation view, Fondation Beyeler, Basel/Rihen, 2022. Hydraulic equipment, ground marble, resin, corundum, sand and water, dimensions variable. © Doris Salcedo; courtesy of the artist and White Cube. Photograph by Mark Niedermann; Exhibition Fondation Beyeler, Riehen.

Figure 7. Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsest*, 2013-2017, Fondation Beyeler, Basel/Rihen, 2022. Hydraulic equipment, ground marble, resin, corundum, sand and water, dimensions variable. © Doris Salcedo; courtesy of the artist and White Cube. Photography by Juan Fernando Castro.

Figure 8. Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsest*, 2013-2017, Fondation Beyeler, Basel/Rihen, 2022. Hydraulic equipment, ground marble, resin, corundum, sand and water, dimensions variable. © Doris Salcedo; courtesy of the artist and White Cube. Still from *Doris Salcedo: « Palimpsest »*, November 28, 2022, YouTube.

Figure 9. Mona Hatoum, *Drowning Sorrows*, 2001–02. Glass bottles, 4 x 98 1/2 x 98 1/2 inches. San José Museum of Art. Gift of Wanda Kownacki, 2017.16.05. © Mona Hatoum. Courtesy Galerie René Blouin, Montreal. Photo by Richard-Max Trembley.

Figure 10. Mona Hatoum, *Drowning Sorrows*, 2001–02. Glass bottles, 4 x 98 1/2 x 98 1/2 inches. San José Museum of Art. Gift of Wanda Kownacki, 2017.16.05. © Mona Hatoum. Still from *3 to 1: Mona Hatoum, glass, bottles, and migration*, August 20, 2021, YouTube.

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Figure 12. Mona Hatoum, *Drowning Sorrows*, 2001–02. Glass bottles, 4 x 98 1/2 x 98 1/2 inches. San José Museum of Art. Gift of Wanda Kownacki, 2017.16.05. © Mona Hatoum. Still from *3 to 1: Mona Hatoum, glass, bottles, and migration*, August 20, 2021, YouTube.

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