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Counterarchives, Appropriation and the Disobedient Gaze: Archival Structures in Ursula Biemann's *Contained Mobility* and Charles Heller's & Lorenzo Pezzani's *Death by Rescue*

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> *The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.*
> (*Michel Foucault,* The Archaeology of Knowledge)

Introduction

"Migration is a key subject in contemporary art," Miguel Hernández-Navarro writes in his 2011 essay "Out of Synch: Visualizing Migratory Times through Video Art" (196). In the past twenty years, an abundance of video works has emerged that engages with the global crisis of forced migration, many of which employ a critical documentary approach in their negotiation and exploration of these issues. This article will investigate the forms of knowledge that become visible and enunciable in these works by taking the concept of the archive as a venture point – a concept that on the one hand is of crucial importance to the production of knowledge and that, on the other, has coined contemporary art practices to a significant extent, as Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rhame point out (Abbas and Abou-Rhame 345). Engaging with the archive, I analyze two exemplary video artworks: Ursula Biemann's *Contained Mobility* (2004) and Charles Heller's and Lorenzo Pezzani's *Death by Rescue: The Lethal Effects of the EU's Policies of Non-Assistance* (2016), both of which engage with historical moments in the global crisis of forced migration that mark caesuras in EU migration policies.

First shown at the 2004 Liverpool Biennial, *Contained Mobility* is a synchronous two-channel video installation that tells the story of Anatol Kuis-Zimmermann—born into a labor camp in Magadan, he spends his life moving around Russia and Europe, being displaced time and again and denied arrival at any final destination. Concerning the historical situatedness of the installation, the video is framed by two relevant events: on the one hand, the European Union went through its biggest expansion up to date with ten countries joining the EU on May 1st, 2004, granting citizens of these countries the privilege of free EU-internal migration and movement. On the other hand, however, "[i]n a post 9/11

period", the video description on Biemann's official homepage (geobodies.org) states, "[i]n theory, the European countries maintain the human right for Asylum, signed in the Geneva Convention which constitutes one of the basic conventions of a humanist culture. De facto, however, they implement legal and practical measures that make it virtually impossible to access this right" ("geobodies").

Death by Rescue, on the other hand, was published on the public platform *Vimeo* in 2016, in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis. Based on a report produced by the Forensic Oceanography project that examines the connection between EU policies and the death of thousands of migrants, the video reconstructs the capsizing of three boats in the Mediterranean Sea. Barbara Spinelli, member of the European Parliament, states in the foreword to the report from the Forensic Oceanography Project that "2016 will be remembered as the year in which the European Union definitively broke the civilisation pact on which it was founded after the Second World War" (Spinelli). Explicitly exposing the results of EU Policies, Spinelli goes on to point out that "[f]or years, after the great Lampedusa shipwreck on 3 October 2013, the EU has tacitly allowed the deaths at sea of thousands of refugees fleeing towards the European coasts" (ibid). Heller and Pezzani's video illustrates this failure on the part of the EU and offers an artistic representation of three specific cases of capsized boats following the discontinuation of the Operation Mare Nostrum and the respective implementation of Frontex.

In the following, a formal analysis of both videos will investigate how each employs and appropriates archival structures and practices to create tangible new narratives and forms of knowledge. Before conducting the analysis, it is however necessary to define some characteristics of the archive that will serve as guiding principles for the investigation.

On the Archive

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault states that the archive is not "the sum of all texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity" (Foucault 128-129). Neither is it "the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation" (128). Rather, it is "the first law of what can be said" (129) and functions as *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*" (130). Thus, the archive is ascribed a discursive function. It determines (non-)enunciability; it "gives the discourse structure, differentiating discursive formations from one another" (Webb 117), and, in Heath Massey's words, "is [...] that which determines what can be said or written" (Massey 82). Based on these conceptions, I define 'archive' as firstly a *discursive function that determines (non-)enunciability and the organization of knowledge*.

Secondly, the process of *archivization is understood as something that produces reality rather than merely recording it*. In "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz write:

> [T]he archive [...] in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case [...]. No, the

technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event (17).

Whereas both of these characteristics are concerned with the archive as a relevant determinant for knowledge production, it can be also defined as *a collection and a container*; "as a repository and collection of artifacts" (Manoff 10). Tanja Nusser states in this regard: "Archives have to be understood as subjective configurations of existing materials that are housed in a 'container' (it might be a digital storage space, a building, a shelf, a box and so on), which seems to adequately provide the space and room for this subjective configuration" (Nusser 199). Nusser goes on to note that "[t]he archive is at the same time a collection as well as storage place, a generator of reality as well as a form of organizing knowledge and a spatial concept" (ibid.). Both of these conceptions—or archive as determinant and the archives as story space—are relevant to my following analysis, since the works at hand not only engage in knowledge production, but also exist as 'specific subjective configurations of existing materials.'

Control and Subversion: *Contained Mobility*

Ursula Biemann's *Contained Mobility* (2004) is composed of three elements: the two screens that simultaneously show different sets of images are accompanied by a written chronicle inserted via a text box positioned to the bottom right of the right screen, as well as underneath both screens.

Fig. 1. Still from Biemann, *Contained Mobility*, 2:05.

One screen (mainly the right one) shows a shipping container that Kuis-Zimmermann inhabits, sparsely furnished with a bed, a small table and maps on the walls.

The other displays different variations of what Ljudmila Bilkić has identified as "images of unidentified bodies of water, digital navigation simulators, and container traffic information systems" (Bilkić). The viewer furthermore sees aerial surveillance footage of cargo ports as well as maps of an unidentified coastline – which, in contrast to the analogue maps that are hung onto the walls in the container, are digital and supplemented by data that is unidentifiable due to the small scale. Finally, both sets of images are accompanied by written text that is a chronicle of Anatol's life, specifically of his lifelong history of moving throughout Europe. It is, as the last sentence states, "the only existing record of Anatol's itinerary" (*Contained Mobility* 21:40).

The video contrasts two forms of movement: one being the controlled and steered international flux of goods and the other that of the migrant body, which on the one hand is forced into movement, yet on the other evades a systematized or controlled form of it. One screen shows variations of images of cargo ports, which can be read as an index for movement itself, since the port is a place of arrival and departure, of constant transit. However, it is a specific form of movement that is alluded to here, since the image of a cargo port as a symbol for global capitalism condensates the abovementioned external steering and control of the international movement of goods in a globalized market. It therefore manifests a thoroughly systematized, traceable and controlled form of movement in the frame of a global economic system. This notion of systematization and control is also mirrored in three specific sets of images in said screen: the aerial surveillance footage, the images of digital navigation simulators and those of the container traffic information systems. All three variations of images evoke notions of recording, traceability, concretion, systematization. Thus, these images contribute to both the negotiation of different forms of movement as well as for the creation and subversion of archival structures in the installation.

Paul Racicot, Director of the Maritime Simulation and Resource Centre Quebec, Canada describes navigation simulation as "virtually representing *all* existing environmental conditions for any area, adding or modifying buildings or relevant structural elements, and using models identical to the ships that will most likely be calling at the proposed facilities" (Racicot). The goal of the process is ultimately that "[a]ll manoeuvres, ship movements, winds, currents, interaction between ships, the sea and channel banks, squat and so forth *can be quantified, measured and recorded*" (132, italics mine). Quantification, measurement, recording – these are also, as previously mentioned, the functions of both surveillance images and the container traffic information systems. All three sets of images can be described as data that has been brought into image form and, furthermore, as operational: "images without a social goal, not for edification, not for reflection", in the words of Harun Farocki. Volker Pantenburg elaborates on Farocki's concept of operational images, stating that "[w]herever algorithms of pattern recognition are employed, images become part of and merge with a technical operation" (Pantenburg 49). If these definitons and characteristics are taken into account, it becomes questionable whether one can still actually talk of an 'image'. Pantenburg elaborates on this issue in stating that

in many cases 'image' no longer seems to be the adequate term. Indeed, the operational image emulates the look and feel of traditional images, but on closer

inspection, this turns out to be a secondary function […] More accurately, then, operational images in the strictest sense would have to be characterized as visualizations of data that could also take on other, different guises (49-50).

Following these considerations, what is visible on this screen in *Contained Mobility* can indeed be identified as operational images, as data in image form, which could potentially have taken on 'a different guise'. Hence, the images on the left screen are representative of the storage of data that enables gatekeeping, control, and recording of the abovementioned controlled and measurable movements.

As seen on the second screen, Biemann places the protagonist in a shipping container, a structure that not only again alludes to the international transportation of goods, but also to the smuggling and illegal transportation of people, and which becomes the core image for contained mobility. Unable to arrive anywhere, Anatol is quite literally *trapped in movement;* a movement that is implicated to be involuntary, passive and not self-determined: the viewer encounters him placed in a shipping container that is usually moved within a logistic system. In *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten connect such a system to the Atlantic slave trade. They state that "[m]odern logistics is founded with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak. It was founded in the Atlantic slave trade, founded against the Atlantic slave" (Harney and Moten 92). This precise notion of the human being as cargo is evoked in *Contained Mobility* by placing Kuis-Zimmermann in the container; and, furthermore, it is a forced and remote-controlled movement within a logistic system that the migrant body is subjected to. Beyond that, however, and harkening back to the operational images, the installation also inextricably links the concept of logistics to that of surveillance – another connection that Stefano Harney explicates in an interview with Niccólo Cuppini and Mattia Fraportti. He states that "*[i]ndeed what is called* surveillance *might also be called preemptive logistics*. It is possible that all we know of surveillance studies […] could also go under the name preemptive logistics, even predictive logistics, the anticipation not of resistance but of a kind of impenetrability even in the give" (Harney 97). In the direct junction of the surveillance images and the container as an index for logistics, the installation creates precisely this junction of logistics and surveillance – and potentially alludes to an impenetrability of the migrant, which I will revisit shortly.

Returning to archival structures, the archive as collection and storage space becomes evident as structural components of the video, which firstly composes a subjective configuration of knowledge (the chronicle of the protagonist's itinerary that is brought into dialogue with surveillance data). Secondly, it alludes to the archive as container via the storage of data-as-images and the entrapment of the human being in the shipping container which both, read seperately but also together, constitute what one might deem an 'archive of control'. All forms of movement, including that of the disenfranchised individual, as well as the subject itself become encapsulated, knowable and penetrable via their enclosure in the literal and archival container. In this reading, the archive is in fact a hierarchical instance that is imbued with political power, while reenforcing and enabling dominant systems of surveillance and control, into which the subject is integrated.

However, upon taking a closer look at the installation, particularly at the chronicle, a second reading emerges. Here, it becomes clear that Kuis-Zimmermann, while being

denied access, does in fact cross borders many times despite it being illegal; he constantly evades the mechanisms of control that are alluded to via the operational images. Being within the container, he ultimately remains invisible and therefore precisely out of grasp – Harney's referenced "impenetrability" becomes implicit here. In this rather subversive reading, the chronicle functions as a document of subversion, since it traces and records the numerous border crossings rather than merely showing that Kuis-Zimermann is being denied arrival. Here, I would like to return to the operational images that have previously been discussed. As stated, they can – at first glance – be identified as operational. However, by embedding them in the installation and by contrasting them with a second set of images (of Anatol in his container) and the written chronicle of his life, Biemann turns them into what one might call 'images proper': They no longer serve their initial purpose – to surveil, to track, to record – but now become images that are integrated into a production of meaning within the work and that, contrary to Farocki's definition, do in fact take on a social and visual meaning. The mechanisms by which this process occurs are two-fold: Firstly, the data that initially took on the form of an image completely disappears through the embedment into the video. The data sets are no longer comprehensible or accessible for the viewer; they therefore vanish and lose their power to control and record. Therefore (and secondly), what is left is the image itself that is no longer part of a technical operation, but of an operation that is in fact representative and imbued with a social agenda.

Three implications emerge from this: a) through the embedment of the operational images into the installation, the 'archive of control' is suspended: The data used to track people, goods, "*all* existing environmental conditions for any area" (Racicot 132, see above) disappears, which can be read as a suspension of the mechanisms of control; b) by being placed in the container, Kuis-Zimmermann becomes impenetrable via his invisibility, thus evading control and c) his movements expose the mechanisms of control in terms of illegal border crossing as inefficient. In this sense the installation creates a counter-archive that suspends the very archive of control that it sets up according to the first reading.

The chronicle itself functions precisely in accordance with the process of archiving-as-constructing: It does indeed *produce* as much as it *records* the event in that it is 'the only existing itinerary of Anatol's life'. Additionally, by producing (and thereby making visible) the lived experience of the individual, the installation also functions in accordance with the first characteristic of the archive as laid out above (the archive as discursive function), since it is at this point that said discursive function emerges. Kuis-Zimmermann's experience becomes enunciable and visible and therefore enters the realm of "what can be said" (Foucault 129, see above) and becomes part of the "system of the formation and transformation of statements" (130). It is also, however, the subversiveness of Kuis-Zimmermann's movement that is integrated into this system. "The project", according to the video description, "looks at the sophisticated methods and technologies which have been developed […] on the part of the authorities to discipline the movement of goods and people and on the part of the passengers to outwit the restrictions and achieve mobility and security" ("geobodies"). What is ultimately illustrated is "an ongoing struggle between disciplining mobility and the desire for self-determination" (ibid.).

Taking into account the different archival structures that have been laid out thus far, this ongoing struggle is not only portrayed in terms of mobility. By calling upon and creating the archive as a hegemonic concept to dismantle and set it against what one might call a counterarchive, the installation also mirrors a larger ongoing struggle surrounding discursive formations, visibility and enunciability. *Contained Mobility* offers a promise of 'tricking the system' in this dialectic tension. This stands in contrast to *Death by Rescue*, to which I will now turn.

Appropriation and the Disbodient Gaze: *Death by Rescue*

Charles Heller's and Lorenzo Pezzani's *Death by Rescue: The Lethal Effects of the EU's Policies of Non-Assistance* (2016) is an illustration of data from a report produced by Forensic Oceanography[1] (a subdivision of the Forensic Architecture research agency), a research team that "specializes in the use of forensic techniques and cartography to reconstruct deaths at sea […] mobilizing a vast array of methodologies and techniques" (Forensic Oceanography). The report offers, "through a series of visualizations, diagrams and figures, a detailed spatio-temporal reconstruction of various cases of shipwrecks" (ibid.). For the markedly comprehensive report, disparate data has been collected "in an effort to assemble a coherent spatial narrative of the chain of events" (ibid.).

The work produced by Heller and Pezzani reconstructs, narrates and visualizes specific cases of capsized boats and the resulting loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea, arguably a result of the discontinuation of Mare Nostrum and the introduction of the Operation Triton by Frontex. Due to the shift of the operational areas of Mare Nostrum and Triton and the resulting increased geographical distance of rescue ships from the Libyan coast, rescue attempts were privatized in many cases – that is, carried out by vessels unequipped for such operations, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people.

The video takes on the form of a dynamic map displaying Northern Africa, Southern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, upon which the events in question are projected in the form of layered maps, graphics and images as the voice-over narrates them. As the narration reaches the reconstruction of the capsizing of boats, the routes and movements of those boats and the surrounding vessels are visualized by arrows moving across the map (see fig. 2 below).

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[1] In collaboration with WatchTheMed and in the framework of the ESRC-supported *Precarious Trajectories* research project.
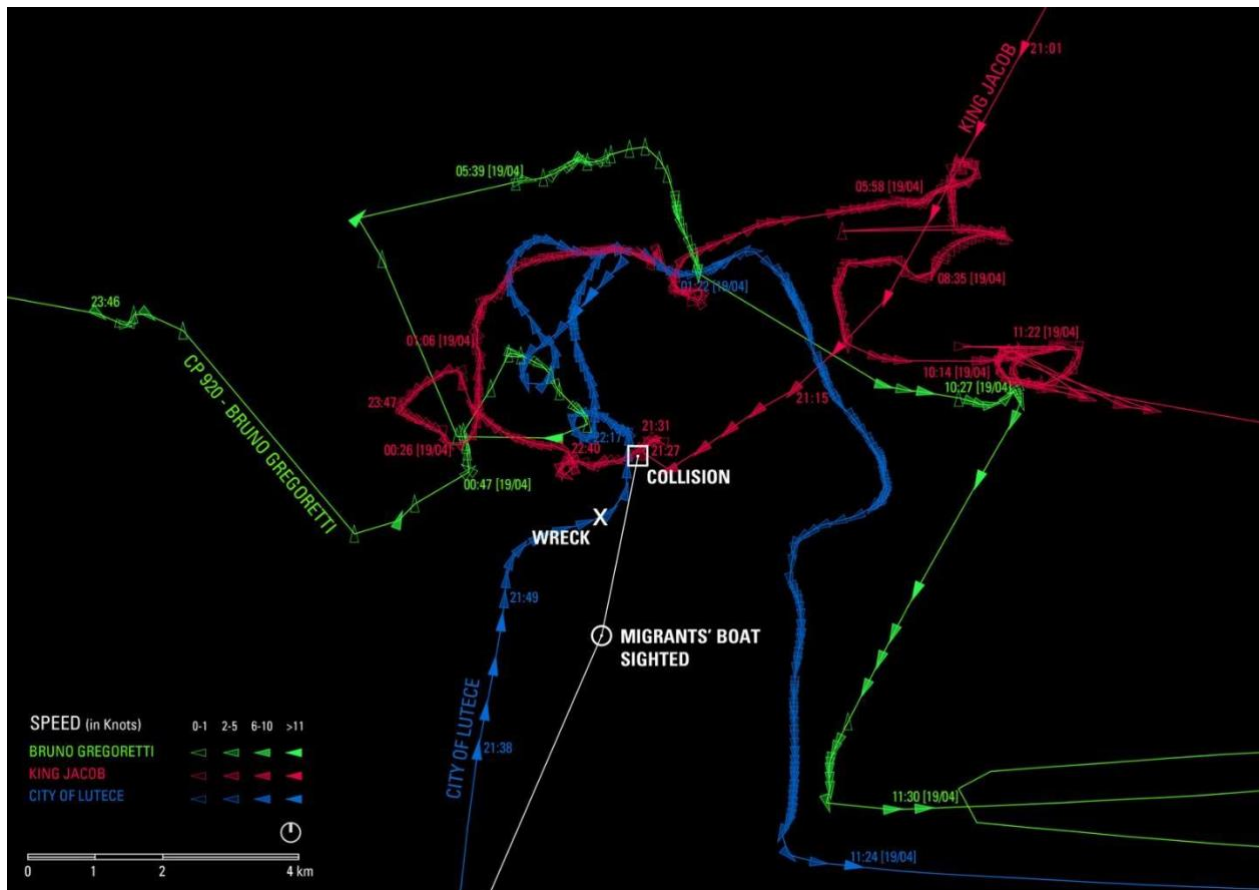
Fig. 2. Forensic Oceanography, "The frantic tangle of Automatic Identification System (AIS) vessel tracks in the Mediterranean following the 18 April shipwreck".

The narration and the map are supplemented by sources (e.g., in the form of quotes, graphics or statistics) that are displayed in the bottom-right corner. The official report summary states that events were reconstructed on the basis of "methodologies and expertise of a variety of disciplines" (Forensic Oceanography). Data was accumulated and analyzed "in collaboration with experts in the relevant fields of geographic information science, vessel tracking technologies, image forensics, oceanography, statistical analysis, EU policy, international law and migration studies" (ibid.).

The voice-over begins by recounting the sinking of a boat near Lampedusa on October 3rd, 2013, and the resulting launch of Mare Nostrum. The borders of the various search-and rescue zones (SAR), as well as Mare Nostrum's and Frontex's operational area, are displayed on the map (see fig. 3).
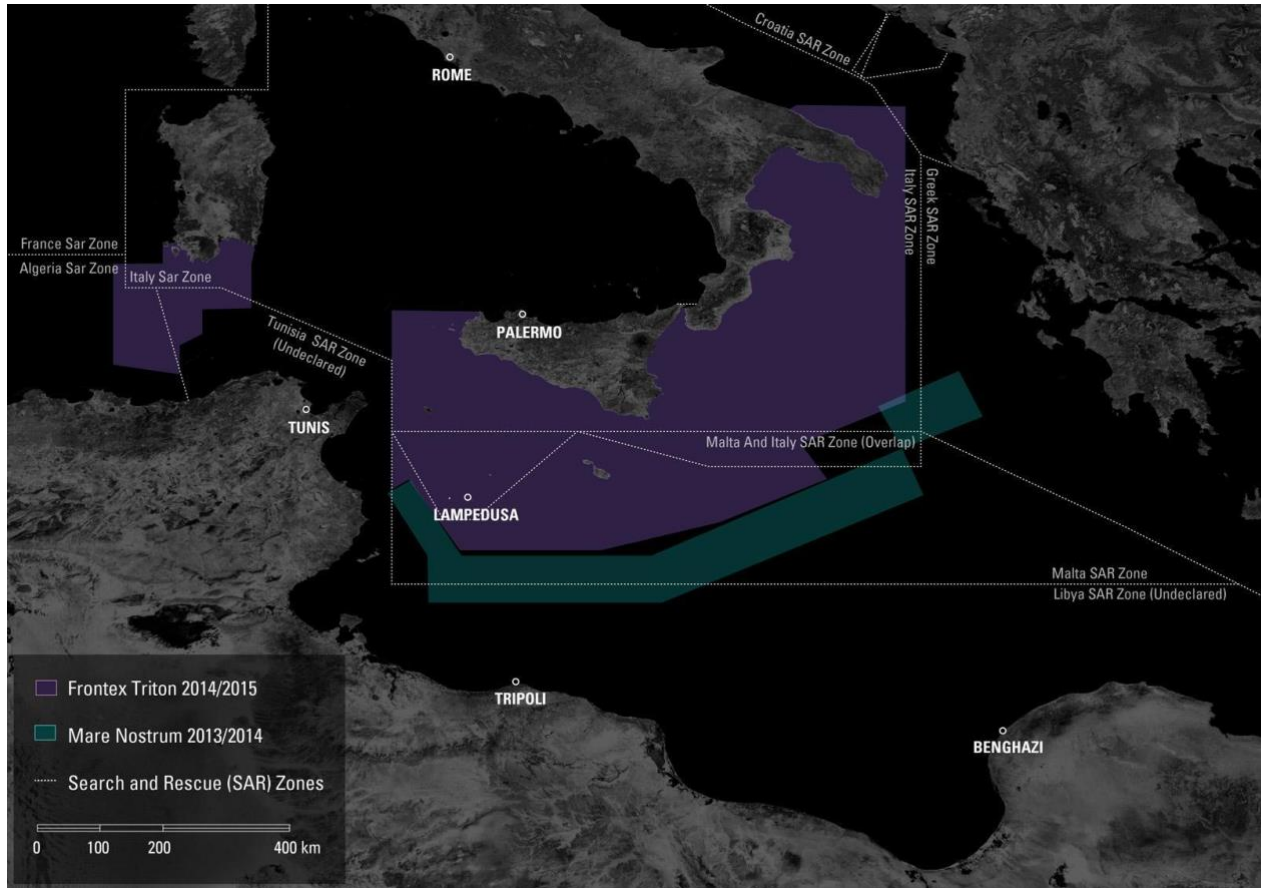
Fig. 3. Forensic Oceanography, "Map comparing the operational zones of Italian Navy Mare Nostrum and Frontex's Triton."

The narration continues to state that "spurred by increasing violence in the region and the hope of being rescued, a record number of people crossed the sea in 2014. However, despite Mare Nostrum, many continued to die" (*Death by Rescue*, 00:59-01:15). Here, a graphic of boats spotted between January 1st and October 31st, 2014, is layered onto the map (see fig. 4).
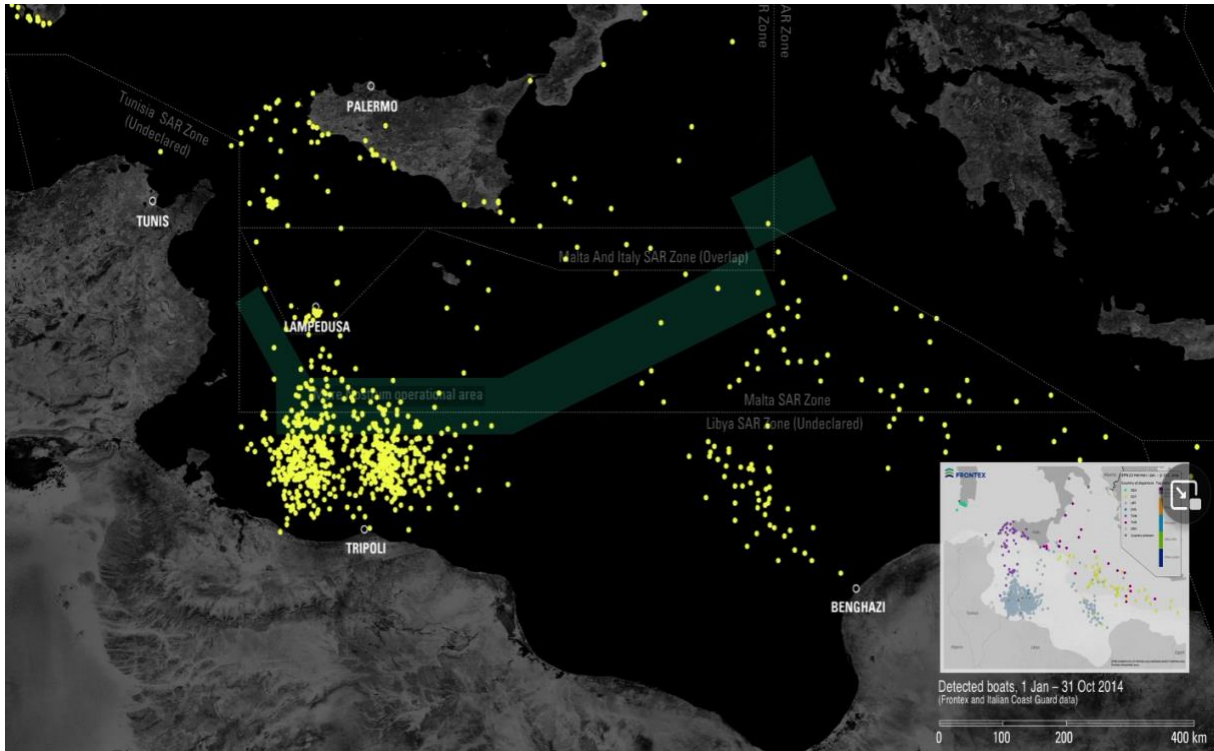
Fig. 4. Still from Heller and Pezzani, *Death by Rescue*, 1:02.

As the discontinuation of Mare Nostrum and the initiation of Operation Triton are reconstructed, the newly defined operational area of the latter is displayed in the map. Once the in-depth reconstruction of the three cases of capsizing begins, the video zooms in on the ocean and merely shows the movements of the boats and the surrounding vessels; the coast lines are no longer visible. (see fig. 2). From here on, the detailed events that led to the capsizings are displayed and narrated.

Returning to the creation of the report and thus the video, it is important to look at the various sources of data and documents that have been compiled:

> The reconstructions provided by the report are in fact based on numerous sources, in particular survivors' testimonies, distress signals, Search and Rescue (SAR) reports provided by Frontex, Automatic Information System (AIS) vessel tracking data, judicial documents obtained from public prosecutors' offices in Sicily investigating these cases, and photographs taken during the events by rescue teams. At times, elements of information were also extracted from secondary sources such as news reports and human rights reports by international organizations such as Amnesty International. (Forensic Oceanography)

The approach taken here parallels the one that was taken in the creation of a different project, namely *Left-To-Die-Boat* (2012), another video that is based on a comprehensive research report. On *Left-To-Die-Boat*, Heller and Pezzani state: "By corroborating survivors' testimonies with information provided by the vast apparatus of remote sensing technologies that have transformed the contemporary ocean into a digital archive, we assembled a composite image of the events" (Heller and Pezzani, "Forensic

Oceanography" 102). They further state that the technologies via which data [for *Left-to-Die-Boat*] were assembled "are often used for the purpose of policing and detecting illegalized migration as well as other 'threats'" (ibid.); however, they "repurposed them to find evidence of the failure to render assistance" (ibid.). At use here, as is also the case for *Contained Mobility*, is data that could be deemed as constituting or belonging to an archive of control. The same, and arguably to an even larger extent, counts for *Death by Rescue*: Whilst technologies that do usually serve the purpose of surveilling, tracking and policing are in use – such as distress signals or vessel tracking data – *Death by Rescue* goes beyond that and employs reports provided by Frontex itself, the very operation that is exposed as deadly and inhumane by the report and the video.

At this point, I would briefly like to return to the definition of archive-as-container, respectively Tanja Nusser's statement that "[a]rchives have to be understood as *subjective configurations* of existing materials that are housed in a 'container' (it might be a digital storage space, a building, a shelf, a box and so on), which seems to adequately provide the space and room for this subjective configuration" (199, italics mine). It is here that the notion of a subjective configuration becomes relevant: By appropriating the materials that have formerly been part of an archive of control and bringing them into context with other sources – such as witness testimonies, legal reports and human rights reports – the data employed is embedded into a new subjective configuration, a new archive. It is one that precisely appropriates said documents and suspends their initial purpose. This reconfiguration of the archive is in accordance with what Heller and Pezzani describe as the disobedient gaze. Referring to Thomas Keenan, they state that "in fact the knowledge of mass atrocities, human rights violations and widespread violence alone does not necessarily trigger any form of political intervention or struggle" (Heller and Pezzani, „A disobedient Gaze" 293) – the reason being that "many of them already happen blatantly in full light; thus exposure becomes at times part of the very violence being perpetrated" (ibid.). Rather than merely 'making visible', their strategy is "to exercise a 'disobedient gaze', which aims *not to disclose what the regime of migration management attempts to unveil—clandestine migration; but unveil that which it attempts to hide—the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome* (Heller and Pezzani, "A disobedient Gaze" 294).

In application, this disobedient gaze with regard to *Death by Rescue* entails the appropriation and subversion of data that both serves the purpose of and originates from the regime of migration management. By using data that does in fact initially serve to unveil clandestine migration and bringing it into a different context – a different subjective configuration and hence a different archival structure – the addressed political violence and human rights violations are exposed. Hence, the disobedient gaze is exercised in the appropriation of such materials, leading to the creation of a new archive.

Lastly, this moment of appropriation is mirrored on the formal level. As previously discussed, the video is based on cartography and mapping. The map is concerned with the structuring and (seemingly objective) representation of space – and, therefore, the production and structuring of knowledge. Both the map and the archive can therefore serve as instruments of power that structure and evoke a certain understanding of the world based on what is included and excluded; both can be hierarchical and structurally violent tools for structuring space and knowledge. Shiloh Krupar precedes her paper on "Map Power and Map Methodologies of Social Justice" with a quote by Yves Lacoste, who states that

"[t]he map, perhaps the central agent of geography, is and has been, fundamentally an instrument of power" (Lacoste qtd. in Krupar 91). Krupar goes on to claim that the ways we map are inherently connected to "violent forms of power: mapping conventions reflect legacies of imperial exploration, resource extraction, colonization and state control" (Krupar 92). The map is a manifestation of fixation, of setting and manifesting territories and their borders, all of which stand in stark contrast to the inherent fluidity of both migration and the ocean as the space where the effects of the EU's inhumane policies unfold. The moment of appropriation is mirrored on a formal level by creating a digital – and dynamic and fluid – map to visualize precisely, to quote Heller and Pezzani again, *"that which [the regime of migration management] attempts to hide – the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome"*.

Conclusion

Returning to the beginning of the article and the definitional criteria laid out, one can argue that both *Contained Mobility* and *Death by Rescue* contribute to the production of an event, to an interruption of the process of knowledge production and to widening discourse on archival practices. Both works do so through questioning processes of such knowledge production, its availability, and the (kind of) knowledge that is preserved. Through this collection of data and their subsequent transformation into a coherent narrative, both works not only reconstruct their respective narratives, but also *construct* them in the first place. Both tell a story that had not been tangible before by composing and organizing the knowledge(s) at hand in their respective forms.

These works engage with 'archives of control' – configurations and assemblages of data that serves purposes of control and surveillance, to manage and obtain border regimes. Furthermore, they both, to different extents, suspend these archives. Whereas Biemann places the controlling archive into a somewhat dialectic *Spannungsverhältnis* – a relationship that is marked by inherent tension – with an archive of subversion and suspension, Heller and Pezzani, through enacting a disobedient gaze, take up an archive of control and reappropriate it by embedding it into a new subjective configuration, namely the video. Whereas *Contained Mobility* in 2004 still examines and exhibits methods on "the part of the passengers [the migrant] to outwit the restrictions and achieve mobility and security" ("geobodies"), *Death by Rescue* in 2016 no longer presents the prospect of such methods. This can be read as a linear progression: The evolution from interplay to appropriation can be read as a development that traces back and correlates to the increasingly precarious situation concerning forced migration in Europe. Both works, however, demonstrate that in employing, appropriating, and negotiating archival structures, it becomes possible to not just 'document' an event, but rather to engage with it, questioning surrounding practices of knowledge production and control.

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