Imagining Europe’s Borders: Visual arts and public commemoration of migrant tragedies

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This paper draws on theorization of the border and the practice of bordering in connection to two publicly displayed art works that touch on undocumented migration by boat in the context of European southern sea borders. The notion of the border is examined by following Étienne Balibar’s (2002) thinking on European citizenship and difference and Edward Casey’s (2011) work on place and space. The first artwork, *At Crossroads* by Kalliopi Lemos, was exhibited at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin during the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009. This installation of damaged migrant boats situated at the financial center of Europe in Berlin reminds the celebrating public that exclusions and borderings of a different kind exist in Europe. Moreover, the work visualizes and re-territorializes “the border zone” to the imagined center of Europe. The second is the *Porta d’Europa/ Gateway to Europe* a memorial monument by Mimmo Paladino, which was created on the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2008. In the form of a gate, this more permanent artwork rises from the rugged landscape by the sea to commemorate the migrants who died in their attempted crossing from North Africa to European Union territory. It serves as a memory site on an island that has become mediatized as ‘border zone’. The gate evokes visual imagination of a wall within which the gate offers an opening - making visible the border that exists, but is invisible for (most) Europeans. Both works leave the spectator with questions about humanity and humanitarianism, and the ethical treatment of people who fall in liminal spaces between categories. However, migrant tragedies are not in the past but very much in the present which makes commemorative practices even more political and complex in Europe. Contemporary art creates openings for moral meditation, but also spaces for conflict and negotiation. These two art works recognise the complexity and injustice that often takes place near border as well as bordering practices in ways that have the critical potential to rethink the migration regimes and border violence in Europe.
Biographic note:

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