

OPPOSING CAMPS

What can mass migration teach us about museums?

BY NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF

Western museums are currently experiencing a wave of controversy: from board scrutiny to demands to repatriate artefacts and refuse sponsorship from oil and pharmaceutical companies. For some, this might portend the end of the museum as we know it. Yet, what if that isn't such a bad thing? How should a 21st-century museum be?

Founded predominantly during the imperialist expansions of the 19th-century, major national museums tend to assert a 'universal' status, meaning no one group can claim precedence over any of the items in a collection. This holds true even for those whose ancestors made the objects in question or, worse – as in the case of Hoa Hakananai'a, a first-century CE Moai figure from Rapa Nui, held since 1869 at the British Museum in London – when the object itself is considered an ancestor.

Such 'universal' institutions are infrastructures of collection, display and storage. Their locations in well-connected (because formerly imperial)

cities are likewise spun as advantageous. Further, these institutions tend to assert that they are the only places with the resources and skills to look after these artefacts. The British Museum alone has a collection of eight million items. But, as its director Hartwig Fischer told the *New York Times* in 2018, 'the collections have to be preserved as whole', meaning no repatriations, only loans.

The Pitt Rivers Museum – founded in 1884 by Augustus Pitt Rivers, who bequeathed his personal collection to the University of Oxford – is another prototypical institutional example of how collecting became intrinsic to the 19th-century imperialist colonial project of ordering and governing. Its 500,000 ethnographic objects from formerly colonized regions of the world are ordered by form – regardless of origin – in packed, dusty showcases. Yet, from this unlikely venue has evolved an exhibition project that, despite its small scale, provokes a reconsideration of the function of museums altogether.

The impetus for 'Lande: The Calais "Jungle" and Beyond' stemmed from a statement made by Fabienne Buccio, the prefect of Pas-de-Calais, on 27 October 2016, in relation to the notorious clearing of the camp created by asylum seekers and refugees near the ferry port: 'The humanitarian dismantling operation is over.' *Lande* (French for 'heath') was the evasive official name for the camp, which was better known as the 'Jungle'. Dedicated to ensuring that the camp is remembered and understood, the exhibition assembles materials loaned by those – whether displaced people, activists or volunteers – who were actually there. The result is an unusual array of items – ranging from commissioned artwork for the exhibition by refugee artist Majid Adin to amateur and professional photographs, graphic art, children's drawings and material objects from the site – that is both profoundly moving and disturbing.

LEFT
Calais 'Jungle'
refugee camp,
2015–16. Courtesy
and photograph:
Caroline Gregory

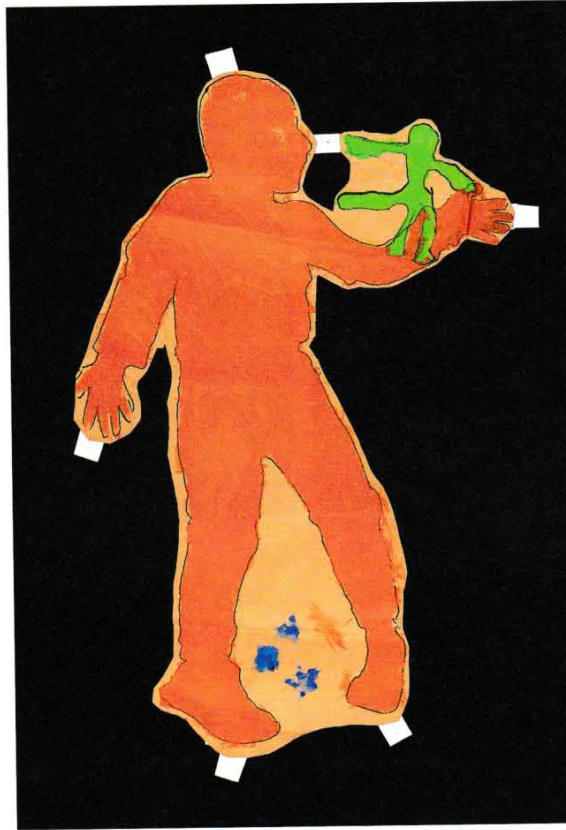
RIGHT
Bruno Serralongue,
*Citrons, 'bidonville
d'État' pour migrants,
Calais, 25 mars 2016*
(Lemons, 'State
Slum' for Migrants,
Calais, 25 March
2016), 2016.
Courtesy: the artist
and Air de Paris

One display case contains tear-gas canisters, found onsite, made by Nobel Sport, a company that manufactures shotgun ammunition. In a nearby drawing, a child has depicted an oversized policeman spraying small, stick-figure children with gas; their caption reads: *'À bas la police!'* (Down with the police!) In the margins of another drawing, the artist explains why they want to get to the UK: 'There are many cultures there and we can work for the Pakistani or Indian but not English.' Far from the welfare-scroungers of tabloid legend, these migrants have an accurate optic on British racism and French police brutality and, yet, such conditions are still preferable to those they have fled.

More telling still were fragments of the 'security fence' that was erected around the camp – not to keep out any potential threat but to keep the camp occupants in. As the exhibition points out, the migrants at Calais were predominantly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan: places where the British Empire operated 'informally' from the 19th century until as recently as 1960, in the case of British Somaliland. The fence epitomizes Fortress Europe, which, it seems, has forgotten its own history of fascism and world dominance.

Writing in their well-researched accompanying book, curators Dan Hicks and Sarah Mallet define the 'Jungle' as a '(post)colonial monument'. They approach it not as a refugee camp but as 'the UK's national border with Schengen'. The camp was an active monument that claimed the right to freedom of movement. It was in the vein of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013), or the Standing Rock encampment, rather than a statue depicting some forgotten general. 'Lande' makes memorable the migrants' daily practice and their will to behave hospitably towards one another: together with activists and volunteers, they created a school, a theatre, even a nightclub. One of the cruelties of the bureaucracies of migration is precisely that it denies people their desire to be hospitable. But, here, migrants set out to perform the open, generous reception that humans ought to have the right to expect from one another.

The camp was typical of the informal housing in which 25 percent of the world's population now live – shanty towns, refugee camps, properties built without permission – which is often defined by its access to infrastructure: sometimes poached,



"The cultural sphere has its part to play in the rise of the political right."

sometimes official, always precarious. As the recent water crises in Flint, Cape Town and São Paulo have shown, this precarity is leaching from informal dwellings to formal ones. Nonetheless, despite its name, the 'Jungle' was not an example of the 'nasty, brutish and short' existence described by Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651), as being the lot of those outside the embrace of the state. In the absence of services, the camp was sometimes a mess, as the photographs show, but it was not chaos.

To think of the migrant settlement as a monument troubles any concept of 'Lande' as a traditional museum exhibition. Instead, 'Lande' makes both the border and the museum visible as what the curators insightfully call 'Victorian technologies of classification'. A range of similar museum-based projects – such as Giorgio de Finis's MACRO Asilo in Rome or the Atlas of Transitions Biennial in Emilia

Romagna – are shifting the nature of museums at a time of mass migration, racism and xenophobia. Rather than display only formal art objects, these projects open spaces for visual politics. Events with local activists, which took place as part of 'Lande', were perhaps the show's most expressive component, acting as laboratories to determine how people might live outside regimes of classification.

The rise of the political right, which has resulted in hostile governments increasingly tightening borders and denying entry to asylum seekers, is widely seen as a response to the 2008 financial crash. Yet, beyond macro-economics, the cultural sphere also has its part to play. In a recent essay for *The Georgetown Journal of Law and Public Policy*, University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax prominently advocated what she terms 'cultural distance nationalism', which deems cultural differences hard to erase. Rather than promote integration, however, Wax's solution is to restrict immigration to ensure the US is a country 'with more whites and fewer non-whites'.

If this sounds wearily familiar, it is. The lesson, though, is not to concentrate solely on refuting racism again. It is, additionally, to find ways to fully implement the refugees' will to hospitality. Museums and galleries can model it, but they will need to do better than to locate a show such as 'Lande' in a bland annex. Why could space not have been made in the main museum – even if that required the temporary removal of some of the permanent collection – so as to highlight the contrast between the 'Jungle' installation and the original, dryly classified exhibits?

Leaving the museum, I passed a homeless encampment on a grass verge that ran up to a barred iron gate. Peeking through, I could see half a dozen University of Oxford students sitting in deckchairs on a broad, manicured lawn. The issues raised by 'Lande' are not particular to the migrants of the Calais 'Jungle'; they are a universal feature of wealthy countries today. The museums and universities in those countries are part of the problem, but they can become part of the solution ●

One of the 291 'Paper People' installed across the Calais 'Jungle' in March 2016 to represent the number of unaccompanied children in the camp. Courtesy: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF is a visual culture theorist and professor in the department of media, culture and communications at New York University, USA.

'Lande: The Calais "Jungle" and Beyond' is on view at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, UK, until 29 November.