

EMBARKATION FOR CHIOS:  
KALLIOPI LEMOS'S TRILOGY WITH BROKEN  
BOATS.

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Kalliopi Lemos's *At Crossroads* is the third of three outdoor installations, each a configuration of wooden boats, all of which have sustained damages that render them unseaworthy. It is dedicated to the legions that, in each quarter of the planet, seek better lives for themselves by sailing, often in dilapidated and chancy vessels, from a place they find oppressive and thwarting, to one they hope will be more open to their vision of an acceptable life. As symbols, the boats have two levels of meaning, one more universal than the other. They represent the boat as a means of passage from one state of being to another, but in this work they also have a more specific reference. All of these boats were collected by Lemos herself on the shores of Chios, a Greek island off the coast of Turkey, and they bear witness to a particular site of crossing. Their wounds, if we may speak of them so, testify to certain conditions specific to this crossing, which I will describe in a moment. The wounds are traces of cruelty and inhumanity.

There are nine of these no longer viable boats in *At Crossroads*, all displayed upside down. Five of them are regimented into a pagoda-like tower in which their prows serve as eaves. Four more rest at the base of the tower, on a platform in the form of a Greek cross. The cross represents a crossroad.- a symbol of forced choice, to use a term from William James' essay, "The Will to Believe." The curved prows contrast with the open scaffolding that holds the boats in position, and these together make a structure of singular architectural grace. The discrepancy between the materials of the piece – essentially the battered boats - and the soaring symmetry of the edifice that integrates them into a quasi-ornamental array that somehow preserves the hard times the boats have been through, is a striking piece of moral and political art. No longer able to stay afloat in the element they were designed for, the boats seem to sail in formation as if through the air, like the spirits of boats.

The Turkish identity of these once working vessels is implied by their still visible names: Ugur (Luck), Buket (Bouquet), Umut (Hope), Askim (My Love), and so on. In each case, their final voyage consisted in the transport of Asiatic refugees in quest of a new life in Europe, since the lives they have left behind are no longer supportable. They have turned their backs on everything that gave meaning to their lives in the communities whose languages they spoke, whose customs they

understood, whose form of life they had internalized. They have decided, as if at a cross-road in their lives, to seek a livable future under foreign skies, and among people whose ways are not theirs. They have already made immense sacrifices to reach the point of embarkation, but they are sustained by the hope that a new life awaits them, free of whatever horrors drove them forth. Here they become passengers, thirty to forty to a boatload, and are victims of a racket, run by Turkish profiteers among others, who have acquired decrepit boats, and sold passages at \$3000 to \$4000 dollars per person. The profiteers do not sail in the same boat with the refugees, but rather guide them from swift boats, and leave them to fend for themselves in Greek, and hence in European waters. The crossing is short. Boats leave shore in the black of night on waters as black as the night itself. If their voyage is intercepted by Greek coast guards, they are forced to turn around. But even if they avoid this encounter, there is one final ordeal. The boats are not allowed to deposit their human cargo on dry land. In each case, the boat must deliberately be stoven, and put into a state of distress, as it begins to ship water just offshore of its destination. With luck, the passengers are rescued by the local coast guard before their vessel sinks. But in many cases it is necessary that, leaving their paltry possessions behind, they have to find their way to

shore – swimming, wading, floundering, swept in by surf. And an indeterminate number of them drown.

The boats themselves, at the mercy of the tides, get washed ashore in due time as marine refuse– sodden, bleached, breeched, splintered, mere wooden carcasses beyond repair. By the time they lie cast onto the rockbound islands they had been headed for, Chios in this particular case, the survivors, their worldly possessions reduced to the clothes on their backs, exhausted, hungry, cold, will have been taken up as illegal immigrants without means, without papers, at the threshold of new if reduced lives, having to begin all over again with only their humanity in common with the resident population, and the hope that they have, for all their suffering, found themselves free of whatever intolerable circumstances had driven them to seek new lives.. Each of the boats in Lemos’s trilogy implies a story of agony and hope, written in the language of shattered beams and broken boards. As far as we can tell, the stories are much alike. They are eloquent narratives of displacement, and of loss. Like its two earlier predecessor, *At Crossroads* is a memorial to the victims that crossed inhospitable waters to make their way in hardly more hospitable lands

Lemos “discovered” these sea-wrecked vessels in 2004 on the shore of Chios. It is striking that her earlier sculptural works were

boat-like in form. But formal affinities do not explain her appropriation of these boats – or of what remains of these boats. The earlier sculptures evoked vegetable – or in some cases vaginal – associations, but hardly the tragic upheavals that her installations of broken boats in fact convey. Lemos was born on Oineusses, a tiny island off the northeast coast of Chios, in 1951. She now lives in London, but returns to Chios for summer vacations. What impressed her in 2004 was the relatively large number of ravaged boats that had suddenly begun to turn up on Chios' shores, forming a kind of *cimetiere marin* of exposed ribs and cracked wooden spines, sculpted by natural forces. (The traffic in refugees began in 2000.) She learned the sad narratives that explained their presence from a boatyard keeper who was supposed to cut them up, but, moved by the stories, she managed to acquire them for her own artistic purposes. For the stories reminded her the plight of her own grandparents, Greek nationals, living in Smyrna in Turkey, who became refugees in their own country in 1922 as a result of the Graeco-Turkish War. "They had to abandon their home, their land, and all they had, " she writes, "to flee to mainland Greece where they were received with suspicion, heartlessness, and at best indifference. I was embracing in those boats the hurt human dignity, the injured pride, and the recognition that there was no way anyone would have embarked [on] such a journey without the desperate need for survival.

It was the very first time that I adopted a ready-made as my work, and I felt as if I had made those boats myself. "{December 14, 2009)

The term "readymade" is a little bit inexact, and it is worth a brief digression to explain why. Marcel Duchamp, who first encountered the term – it contrasts with "made to order" – when he visited New York in 1915, restricted it to works of his that consisted of pre-existing objects, industrially manufactured, which he selected entirely for their lack of aesthetic interest. They were, as he once said, "anaesthetic" objects, in part to protest the way that modern art had restricted itself to the production of what he disparaged as retinal pleasure. Lemos had no such agenda, she was gripped by the human meaning that she read in these sea-worn timbers, and she benefited by an art movement that doubtless owed itself to Duchamp's appropriation of objects from everyday life. She was taking advantage of the immense liberation brought about by the Post-Modernism revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that allowed artists to make art out of any materials, and of any objects whatever. She seized upon the damaged hulls because of the powerful ideas and feelings they produced in her. In this respect I think of her as much closer to an artist like Joseph Beuys, who used fat and felt in his art, to connote nourishment and warmth, which are connected with deep human needs. The broken

boats were connected in her mind to violent ethnic cleansing to which Greeks in Anatolia had been subjected, forcing them to flee, but also and more generally, to the pursuit of freedom from oppression and the right to choose how one wanted to live, which they symbolize in her installations. The sunken boats weathered by sun, wind, and rain, were infused for her with the mood of sorrow, hope, and loss. She used the broken boats as her medium, through which she sought to make vivid the epics of desperation lived by seekers of new lives.

The encounter on Chios was a sort of awakening for Lemos. Her sculpture before that point embodied a certain celebration of living matter. The boat-like forms she had been making as a sculptor suggested opened pods, revealing seed-like elements, which in turn suggested growth, nourishment, fecundity, and the sustainability of life. Her sculptures of that period abstractly imply seeds, fruits, vegetables, and the organs of generation. In her first distinctive phase, she might have defined the subject of her work as life, in the romanticized biological sense of the term. In this second phase, she was still concerned with life, but this time it was life as a human right, as it is considered in the trinity of inalienable rights – Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – that Jefferson construed as self-evident in the Declaration of Independence. It was natural that she would attempt to combine these philosophical concepts in her new work

Although I think the message of her trilogy is primarily concerned with the politics of forced migration, it must be conceded that in her first installation Limos did make an effort to connect the politics with the metaphysics of life, which is the animating vision of the first phase of her work. The first installation, *Crossing*, shown in 2006, was her contribution to the Aeschyleia of that year - a cultural festival held at Eleusis since 1975, which related itself to the autumnal Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient times. Though little is known about what went on in the Mysteries, it is clear that they celebrated the reunion of Demeter, the Goddess of Agriculture and Bringer of Seasons, with her daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by Hades, God of the Underworld. The myth held that Demeter was so bereft by the loss of Persephone that she neglected her agricultural functions and searched for her daughter instead. That meant prolonged drought and barren fields. During the period of Demeter's dereliction, humans starved and the gods were deprived of sacrifice. Order was restored once it was arranged that Persephone was allowed to remain with her mother for part of the year, from sowing to harvesting seasons. After that Persephone returned to the dark realms of Hades. The emphasis on planting and in time on eating forms the nexus between *Crossing*, which deals with the boats and their cruel transporting. "I decided to



place this installation...in Eleusis very close to the archeological site, where the cult of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone was worshipped...symbolizing the cycle of life, the transition from life to death and the opposite.

In truth, I was not sensitive to either of these overarching ideas when I was first attracted to her work by a photograph that had been sent me. It showed an assemblage of large and badly damaged boats, which she had made to stand upright and to lean against one another, like surrealist human figures huddled together to mitigate their agony. The exposed wooden ribs of the hulls suggested partly flayed human bodies with their skeletons exposed. "I wanted them to stand like human beings would stand" she writes, "bearing the wounds in their chest for everyone to see. As if these boats were declaring a tragedy." There were in fact seven of these boats, all badly beaten. It took little imagination to see them as victims of something too terrible to imagine. I felt that it was great art - a wonderful piece of contemporary sculpture by an artist I had never heard of, using "ready-made" sea wrecks because she was responsive to their expressive qualities. I was not alive to the meanings that so gripped her, though I suppose one must always suspect tragedy when one sees boats so evidently ravaged by natural forces. One would obviously need to know a lot more about the circumstances to think of

refugees as associated with the tragedy, as she was able to do. I did not at the time see through the aesthetics to the wrenching circumstances of the people that crowded in their holds, or piled on top of one another on the meager decks, as they were carried toward a new life. Once the boats were vested with the meaning the artist intended to convey, they acquired the kind of pathos that an artist like Christian Boltansky found in cheap garments, left behind by victims who entered naked into death camps. Somehow the power generated by crowding the boats together made one thing of creatures of great dignity and nobility, like the Trojan women transfigured into an expression of collective grief. I thought it was more compelling than the Burghers of Calais because more abstract and more terrifying.

The boats, at least in the venue at Eleusis, were treated as ritual objects. "What I tried to do," Kalliopi says, "[is] to keep the people who embark on such journeys fresh in our minds, and to sanctify their passage [and] by putting beeswax inside thee same boats, to heal their wounds." In her letter to me of December 14, Lemos wrote that she "anointed the interior of the boats with beeswax...to purify and heal that huge wound that was the opening of the boat, and as the wax was melting with the heat of the sun one could see the wound oozing, being still raw." In *Crossing*, the septette of upended wounded boats were metaphoric transfigurations of wounded survivors of the

actual crossings, but it was only part of the installation: Lemos built a wooden encampment around the boats, and painted the first names only of the refugees, which she obtained from the port authority, and she then painted human figures, again using beeswax, *Crossing* was a kind of *Gesamptkundwerk* , with the sculpture as its focus.

After letting the sculpture stand for three years, she decided to “cremate” the increasingly worn and weathered boat-personages, in a ritual cremation that one cannot dissociate from the atmosphere of the Eleusinian Mysteries. She invited seven women, corresponding to the number of boats in the installation, to participate in a performance, reciting poetry, culminating in a funeral pyre, in which the boats were set fire to, and “sent back to the spiritual world where [they] came from.” The use of real boats, the collaboration of the natural forces of the sea, the wind, and the sun, and the recitation and fire at the end, constituted a remarkable performance that exploited the power that Post-Modernism has made available to contemporary artists. It constituted, as one writer put it, “a dramatic change in [Lemos’s] means.” {Round Voyage, p.33} Taken as a temporal ensemble that embraced, in addition to sculpture and painting, singing, dancing, ritual healing, recitation, and finally a spectacular fire that reminds us of Achilles’ fiery funeral of his great friend, Patroclus, *Crossing* flagrantly defies the injunctions of Modernism which, according to

Clement Greenberg, consisted in purging the medium of anything that does not belong to its essence. The meaning of the work is in no sense the medium of its genre, but rather the tragedy of the boats' passengers, and their spiritual needs. Greenberg's essay, published in 1960, took no account of installation and performance, which are distinctive expressions of Post-Modernism as a movement.

In contrast with *Crossing*, with its dense networks of ritual, its enlistment of nature – earth, air, water, and fire interwoven with poetry, painting, and sculpture -Lemos's second work dedicated to the refugee question was activist and political. It was as if she had decided to do something about the abuses that had been the real subject of *Crossing*. It was an effort to raise Turkish consciousness of the problem, and was titled *Round Voyage*, since it literally brought two of the abandoned boats back to the shores they had had left, carrying their human cargo from Turkey to Greece. It consists of just two boats, their Turkish identity clear from their names and port number<sup>1</sup> – "Dogan 1" and "Yunus E.," both of which are suspended by cables from a bridge-like steel structure, composed of seven segments, each painted a different color. Dogan 1 is hung upside down, its deck facing the deck of Yunus E. It is as if they are sailing past one another, each in a different element, one sailing east as the other sails west. It was sited in Santralistanbul, a cultural complex in Istanbul, at the tip of

long estuary that penetrates the city, and it remained on view from October 10, 2007 to 31 March 2008. The boats themselves really look like boats. They do not look like human beings transformed into boats. The boats in *Crossing* have, one might say, lost their national identity. No one could point to them and think – “Turkish boats!”

How successful was *Round Voyage* in its mission of raising Turkish consciousness? The idea of “raising” consciousness implies an antecedent degree of lower awareness. It was as if the people in Istanbul were conscious of the practice the boats were part of, but had not thought about it from a moral point of view. It did not concern them. Were the installation to have travelled to New York and been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, there would have been no consciousness of a meaning that was local to Turkey, though wall text would doubtless have been informative. But one could not imagine that wall text would instill a level of awareness equal to that Lemos underwent on the shores of Chios when confronted by her sudden perception of the increase in wrecked Turkish boats, which she translated into feelings dependent upon family history. In Istanbul, there would have been newspaper reports of the conference on *Migration: Art and History*, which would have deepened understanding of the meanings of the installation. But I think art can work in a different way, holding, as Shakespeare said, a mirror in which we see

ourselves. The classical example of this is the play "The Death of Gonzago," that Hamlet got an itinerant group of actors to put on in the palace. In that play, a king's brother poisons him. But that in fact is what happened to Hamlet's father. Hamlet knows that his father was poisoned by Claudius, the King's brother, who now sits on the throne, married to Gertrude, the King's widow and Hamlet's mother. Claudius had thought that nobody knew of his crime, but when he sees that crime mirrored in the play, he suddenly learns that his deed is known, indeed known by Hamlet to whom it had been communicated by his father's ghost. "The play's the thing wherein to catch the conscience of the King." The Turks would recognize the boats as theirs. In bringing the boats back to Turkey, it is as if their spirits had returned as ghosts. They recognize that the artist know the story of treachery. If she knows, others know – for how would she have found out otherwise? Suddenly, consciousness dawns that in knowing about the crime, the Turks feel complicit in the crime. They are accessories. They have to "do something." Through the medium of consciousness, art can change history. That makes *Round Voyage* a brilliant stroke. Lemos has brought knowledge and responsibility to the consciousness of the Turkish people.

Let us now return to the circumstances of *At Crossroad's* placement in Berlin. It was there as part of the twentieth anniversary celebration of the falling of the Wall, which of course emblemized the Cold War, with its own tales of displacement, suffering, and death. For about a month, the installation was perched on the erased but remembered boundary which the Berlin Wall defined, a few meters behind the Brandenburg Gate. The great Gate is stylistically based on the Propylaea, the gate to the Acropolis in Athens, and was intended to express the concept of peace by King Frederick William II, though since Napoleon it has been treated as a triumphal arch for parades along Unter den Linden, the famous avenue that led to the palace of Prussian monarchs. If one had stood in front of the Gate, under the Quadriga, one would see, through the central arch, the odd, pagoda-shaped structure, perched - or poised- since it is forbidden to break the surface of the soil in that symbolic area. For the period of its tenure, the Gate served as propylaea to it as temple. For a month tourists turned their backs to *Unter den Linden* and the memory of drums and marching feet, to gaze at, to take photographs of, the tower of broken wooden boats that drew attention to the crossroad below. The boats pointed in a direction at right angles to the famous and somewhat frightening avenue of linden trees.

For its month of residence, Berliners flocked to visit the strange structure. Standing there, behind the Gate, *At Crossroads* was some steps away from the present site of the Akademie der Kunste, which sponsored it for the occasion, and housed an exhibition of photographs of earlier installations. Berliners of a certain age are able to reflect on those few steps, that could not have been taken in the period of the Wall's domination of the area: the Wall made it impossible for thirty years to stroll through the arches from one part of Berlin to another. In East Berlin, Communist theorists believed that history moved in an inevitable direction, governed by law of iron necessity, to the end of the form of life in West Berlin, as capitalism succumbed through violent revolution to the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was not a matter of choice. History knew no crossroad. There was only one way. The future was on one side; the past was on the other. Why would those being swept by history toward the future care to move back to the past? In any case the Wall would not allow such a passage – until the pressure of wanting to live in the present burst the Wall. *At Crossroads* carries nine boats, of voyagers who were forced to take terrible risks to live the way they wanted to live – who may have died for the life they wanted in preference to some other life forced upon them. They were distant cousins to those who took their chances to



get through the Wall whose collapse nobody can regret. The Wall was one of history's worst ideas. Everyone sees that now.

Her intention in erecting *At Crossroads* was, Kalliopi Lemos writes,

To urge the public to think of ways to resolve the problem of people needing to abandon their own countries because they can't live there any more, and seek a new life elsewhere, as we always do when we stand at crossroads contemplating which direction to choose.  
[December 19, 2009.]

Lemos began her career in art through the study of ikebana – the ancient Japanese art of flower arrangement. She went on to become a sculptor, and her early work made use of plant forms. Plants must be gathered, as Demeter understood, but uprooting is not the way to treat them. Nor is it the way to treat human beings. The formula for a fully human life is to navigate crossroads without being uprooted. Hecate is the goddess of crossroads. Hecate and Demeter were after all both earth goddesses, and Hecate was involved in reuniting Demeter and Persephone. They were sisters under the skin.

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