

On Fragments: of Life and Death

Visual essay

Martina Melilli

It's the usual problem: to tell. There are occasions when the words seem to have lost all their weight, they are empty sacks. Respect for the human being, respect for the human being!

Domenico Quirico

I am an artist. My work is research-oriented and inspired by an anthropological and documentary approach, often tackling archival practices. When working with archival materials, you are always confronted with material that is fragmented and partial. The attempt is to examine it in a way that allows you to build a narrative that can give back a story, a life. Knowing that any attempt is always subjective, a personal point of view, an interpretation of given elements and data, of fragments indeed. It can never be considered absolute or complete.

My practice has a strong relational character, mostly involving workshops, group meetings, and interviews, and I often collaborate with other experts and professionals. It was by chance that I discovered the work of Cristina Cattaneo, an Italian forensic scientist and anthropologist, while scrolling through an online magazine. And I remember how I was struck by the article that talked about her methodology and specific purpose. At the time—it was around the winter of 2016 and I was working on my film *My home in Libya*, which is probably how Piera Rossetto came to know my work and my name in the first place—she had yet to publish her now quite famous book *Naufraghi senza volto* (Faceless Castaways), which appeared in 2018. She was the head of an international experimental project that brought together several European universities and institutions, trying to build an online database dedicated to the belongings found on the bodies of dead migrants when they were recovered from the sea. The aim was to make them available to the families and relatives in the countries of origin, who may recognize some of them and thus help identify them. The ultimate goal was to bring about a change in international law, which at the moment

does not consider the collection of DNA and personal items from this type of victims to be mandatory. The decision to do so is entirely up to the prosecutor in charge of the specific case. However, these personal objects are the only elements available to try to identify these people, to give them a proper burial, but also to notify their families and relatives of their death. The experiment reported a very high success rate, but the law has not yet been changed. For the trial project, Cristina Cattaneo worked on the bodies and objects recovered from two of the largest mass drownings ever reported, both off the coast of Lampedusa Island. One on 3 October 2013, when 368 people died, and the other on 18 April 2015 with around 1,000 victims.

For my film *MUM I'M SORRY* I had the chance to work on these objects. The film is a close-up gaze at the details of stories and affections that belong to lifeless bodies. The objects chosen as essential, as ›home‹ to take on a journey with no return, the pictures, the pieces of paper with phone numbers, speak of a past and suggest the hope of new perspectives. The object that struck me the most, and which Cattaneo told me was one of the most frequently found, was a small plastic bag sewn on the inside of their clothes, filled with some powder: the soil of home.

What was important for me was to take a step back from the media narrative of the numbers and get back, get closer to the individual scale, the personal stories, the multitude of individual lives hidden behind those numbers. I wanted the viewers to get to understand the scale of the ongoing tragedy in the Mediterranean and to relate to, to identify with these people. Just as each of us has a mobile phone in our pocket to communicate with our loved ones, perhaps some essential medication, identification documents. Just as each of us, when packing for a trip, knowing it could be our last, would ask themselves »What shall I bring, what will I need, and what will allow me to remember home?«

In preparation for the film, I interviewed several migrants who had survived the long journey as well as Cristina Cattaneo, whose gestures I studied carefully. Eventually, none of the dialogues were included in the films. We thought it was impossible for words to convey what we had collected and felt while working on these objects, with these absent people.

The following words by the Italian journalist Domenico Quirico are the only ones that appear in the film:

It's the usual problem: to tell. There are occasions when the words seem to have lost all their weight, they are empty sacks. Respect for the human being, respect for the human being!

Domenico Quirico

The soundscape is a silence so full and so intense that it becomes almost inaudible towards the end. The film starts with an extreme proximity to the surface of these objects, which makes them not immediately recognizable. There is a beauty to these

surfaces, affected by the salty water and the time spent under it, which I wanted to portray without becoming voyeuristic or purely aesthetic, but remaining connected to their deeper meaning and the story they tell. Then the camera slowly pulls back to contextualize the space in which these objects are seen. Throughout the film, we only see the doctors' hands, carefully and attentively handling the objects, as if it were possible to transfer this attention and care to the lost lives. The objects become a presence in the absence of these people. Extreme closeups and stepbacks alternate over the course of 17 minutes, slowly displaying more elements of the location and the action taking place. Details of bodies are also presented as if they were landscapes, mixed and confused with landscape shots: the landscapes through which these bodies have travelled or in which they have been sought. Towards the end, the visages reveal themselves: cracked, split, fragmented, until they reach a fixed gazed staring at us, right into our eyes: do you see me? Look at me.

Figure 14: *MUM I'M SORRY*, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

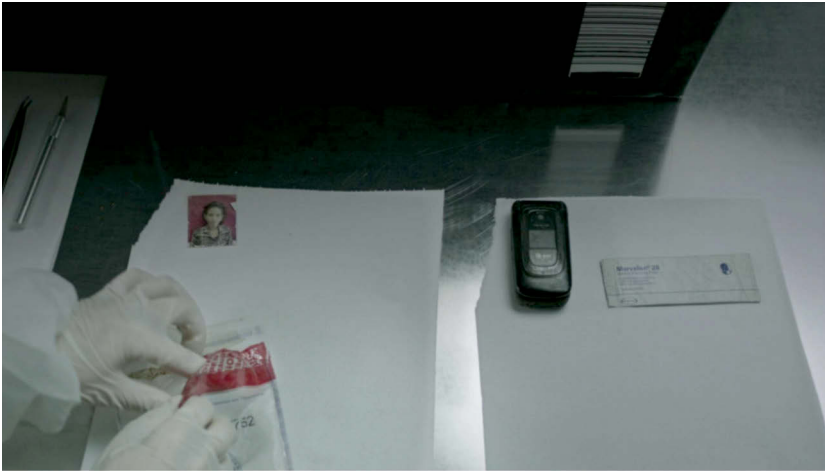


Figure 15: MUM I'M SORRY, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16: MUM I'M SORRY, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

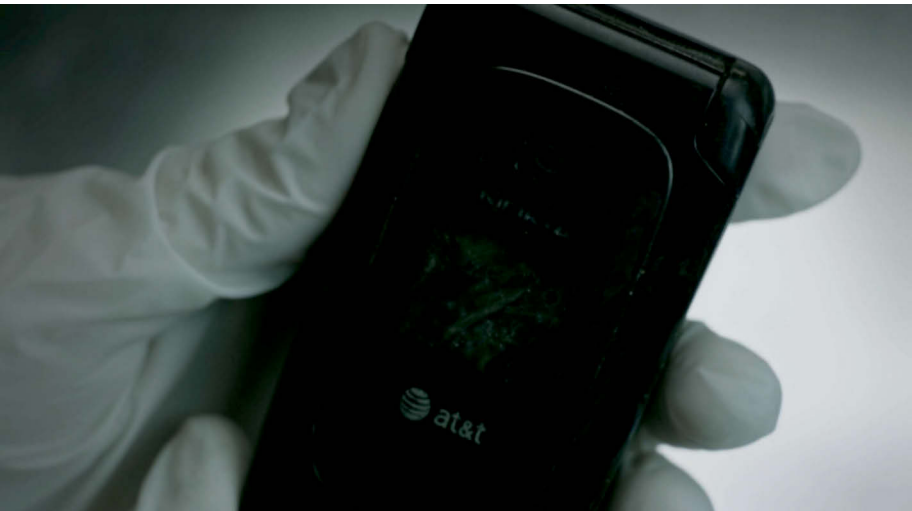


Figure 17: MUM I'M SORRY, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

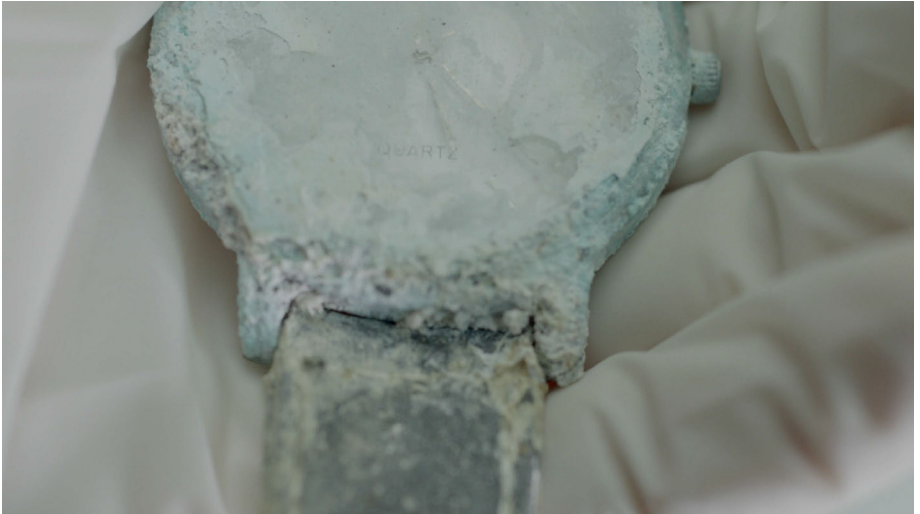


Figure 18: MUM I'M SORRY, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 19: MUM I'M SORRY, Martina Melilli, 2017, Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

