

William Brereton, “Being Moved: Dan Halter’s *Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo*.”
AmeriQuests 17.1 (2022)

**Being Moved: Dan Halter’s *Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo* (Refugee Map of the World)
Catalyzes Community-Building**
William Brereton



Standing in front of a large textile work at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery¹ in Buffalo, New York, I experienced one of those ah-ha moments. Or, more specifically, I was humbled – yet grateful – to recognize how this artwork alone can invite me into the conversation on how an art museum can use works from its permanent collection to mobilize and engage in community-building with refugees and migrants. Embedding historical and contemporary discourses on migration topics, displaying works of refugee and migrant artists becomes vital for upholding values of cultural pluralism – and it proves to be meaningful when the work achieves mass resonance among museum visitors.

Heading across the Canada/US border from Toronto to Buffalo, I ventured over to see *We the People: New Art from the Collection* (2018-2019), the Albright-Knox’s feature exhibition at the time. Being amazed at the diversity of works on display – ranging across artistic mediums – one showing a likeness of a large-scale world map stood out to me among those in the central exhibition space. Zimbabwe-born/South Africa-based Dan Halter applied new and used plastic-weave shopping bags to produce a series of works called [*Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo* \(Refugee Map of the World\)](#). Looking for my place on the map, the Albright-Knox’s edition from 2016 moved me deeply. Contrasting other maps that many of us often encounter, bag handles dangle from *Refugee Map of the World* - a visual cue that signifies a personal connection to the material. As many refugees carry these plastic-mesh bags on migratory journeys, the work

¹ Currently completing an extensive renovation of its campus facilities since late 2019, its name has changed to the Buffalo AKG Art Museum upon expected completion in 2023. The AKG acronym refers to “Albright-Knox-Gundlach.”

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implies poverty (the socio-economic identity of many forced to flee their homes). The wears and tears of these bags witnessed many of the trails and tribulations of human migration.

While the patchwork façade of the work subtly distinguishes cool and warm tones, it also indicates a variance in migration patterns (i.e. where migrants depart vs. where migrants arrive). Having begun the series as early as 2011, Halter writes in the artist statement on the *Refugee Map of the World* that “Map of the world loosely based on infographics showing areas according to immigration and emigration statistics. Areas and routes with increased emigration are more worn than the destination countries, constructed out of new and used plastic-weave bags. This work was stitched together by Sibongile Chinjonjo, a Zimbabwean refugee currently living in South Africa.” While looking at the Albright-Knox’s edition, for instance, one discovers a distinct discolouration over much of the Global South. Upon closer looking of the map – for instance, as I consider a frequent discussion topic such as mass migration from Central America to the United States – it appears that Central America has blended into the background (‘ocean plane’) of Halter’s piece. Although it does not seem intentional that Halter tailored this edition to a ‘U.S. perspective,’ the worn-out look of countries with higher emigration rates nevertheless signifies a comment on global inequality and, in turn, how geographic regions become overlooked.

According to the Albright-Knox’s information on the work, Halter produced eight editions (in total) of *Refugee Map of the World* in the series, as each copy contains a unique look. In further detail, the Albright-Knox’s wall label notes that “unlike traditional political maps, in which each country is differentiated by color and sharply outlined boundaries, Halter’s map foregrounds the arbitrariness of borders and the ubiquity and similarity of the immigrant experience the world over. The patchwork map also suggests that identity is defined not by one country but by a combination of memories and experiences” (*We the People*). Reflecting on the universality of migrants’ stories and how memories and experiences inform identity (and not necessarily stemming from constructed identities such as nationality), Halter’s map effectively deconstructs traditional cartography and place-making. The work instead champions a marginalized vantage point of navigating the globe. Elevating a tension between high art and mass production, the piece challenges bureaucratic thinking.

Regarding art historical precedents, one finds a compelling thread between Halter and Italian conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti. According to an artist interview conducted by Lucrezia Costa of *Juliet Art Magazine*, Halter takes direct inspiration from Boetti and other artists associated with *Arte Povera* (Costa), an Italian arts movement emerging in the 1960s that advocated for an anti-capitalist, utilitarian approach in allowing anyone to source everyday materials to produce art. He later references the context in which everyday objects, such as cheap plastic-weave bags, embed heavy socio-political meanings - most often derogatory.

During Boetti’s career, he produced the iconic [Mappa](#) series on tapestry. The comparisons between his and Halter’s series are evident, yet distinctive of their key aesthetic symbols. While Boetti utilized each country’s flag to signify their placement on the world map, Halter’s work differs in mimicking the types of world maps we encounter in an atlas. However, both artists employed textiles and collaborated with weavers (Boetti collaborated with Afghani embroiders, while Halter connected with a Zimbabwean sewer as noted earlier). Despite distinct decades in which these artists produced their world maps, they each critically shift the discussion through their modes of production to focus on labour patterns and how the latter often affects one’s displacement (forced or chosen). And more aptly, revealing the materials that labourers have needed to utilize to conduct their informal work.

Providing a curatorial framework for Halter’s piece at the Albright-Knox, *We the People* also included many works recently acquired by the museum for its permanent collection.² The exhibition highlighted a multitude of identity perspectives and, as a survey of global contemporary art, it also affirmed contemporary art’s resonance to all of our lives. Placed opposite the map, an abstract wood painting produced by Burundi-born/South Africa-based Serge Alain Nitegeka entitled *BLACK SUBJECTS: Still II* (2014) also triggered a conversation on migratory journeys. It also served as equally monumental in terms of being a large-scale work. As one sees the silhouettes of figures attempting to navigate multiple obstacles (pieces of sculpture inhibiting free movement), one cannot deny the physical and emotional metaphors signifying the burden of those living precariously.

According to the adjacent wall label, the Albright-Knox states, “The experience of being in exile and seeking asylum is central to Nitegeka’s identity and to his artistic practice. As he has described it, ‘You arrive in a strange place, and you have to use what you’ve got at hand, use your resources and the space available to you, to survive.’” (*We the People*) The text later explains the artist’s reasoning for using wood, as the material is akin to “informal housing” – another subtle complement to how artists like Halter and Nitegeka provide direct commentary on many migratory experiences around the globe (often in the fringes and unaccounted for). It is also noteworthy that both artists – residing on the African continent – amplify issues from the Global South to a Global North audience.

While museums and galleries around the globe look into their permanent collections to address topics of migration and exile through their holdings,³ the Albright-Knox’s acquisition of these artworks – and many others that equally address migrants’ lived experience – sets an important precedent for future curatorial programming that provides new insights on the discussion of migration. For instance, *We the People* also featured artworks by contemporary artists such as Danh Võ and Sopheap Pich, two artists who also faced forced migration from Vietnam and Cambodia, respectively. Their individual sculptural works also address materiality (e.g. copper and bamboo). Simply put, the exhibition only scratched the surface regarding the discussion of migration in art.

With increased attention towards the communities that museums and galleries serve, it becomes crucial to incorporate multiple voices in the exhibition planning. As expected with such a visceral and approachable work, visitors’ reactions and thoughts on Halter’s piece resonated and extended into their own experiences of migration. From an arts education/interpretation standpoint, *We the People* stood out for inviting museum staff and community members to contribute to complementary wall labels called “We the Community.” In the case of Halter’s map, Morgan Law–Security Supervisor at the Albright-Knox–writes:

Every time I look at *Refugee Map of the World*, it reminds me of how we refugees travel country to country. I look at Africa and I look at Asia and I look at America. I went to all these places. And I start thinking about my own journey [...] When I look at this map I know now that I’m lucky. Right at this moment I have family members and friends traveling. Some of them won’t make it. Some of them will get raped and stolen from and

² As the Albright-Knox Art Gallery presented *We the People* from October 2018 to July 2019, the exhibition defined recent acquisitions five years before its presentation (i.e. 2013-2018).

³ For instance, see Maria Lind and Cecilia Widenheim, eds., *Migration: Traces in an Art Collection*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2021.

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put in prison. Jumping from country to country—I'm one of the luckiest ones, because I made it. (*We the People*)

Despite the trauma and pain surrounding one's migration stories, Law's story particularly demonstrates the power of art for sparking a necessary dialogue on lived migration experience. His personal testimony also infers how artworks can initiate accessible discussion (non-academic perspectives). As the Albright-Knox is fortunate to have the piece in its permanent collection, one hopes these conversations continue to happen in subsequent iterations (whether through curated exhibitions or public programs).

To further elaborate on visitor anecdotes upon seeing *Refugee Map of the World*, Maureen Ann Milligan (another member of the Albright-Knox's security team) recalled in *The Buffalo News* a story of how Halter's work immediately resonated with this particular visitor's journey to the United States. Milligan says that "[...] she knew immediately that it was made from the large bags refugees use to pack all the personal belongings they could carry, just like she did 25 years ago when she left Russia for the United States. She continued telling the story of seeing people with these very oversized bags on the street, leaving, and as many personal possessions as possible stuffed into these bags. She added it turned out well for her" (Milligan).

From an empathetic standpoint, it is heartening to witness Halter's work serve as a conduit for a more nuanced and less archaic conversation on migration topics. It is through the power of art that museums and galleries can mobilize and build community for refugees and migrants. After all, the patchwork map encapsulates both the artist's personal memories and experiences and our own collective memories and experiences (multifold and diverse).

The acquisition of artworks like Halter's *Refugee Map of the World* into the Albright-Knox's permanent collection demonstrates how an art museum can take meaningful steps to address migration topics from a constructive stance. The piece sparks necessary conversations, as museums and galleries produce more inclusive programming representative of broad cultural perspectives and seeking to tell historical narratives previously silenced/ignored. A revamped dialogue on migration topics in the museum realm stems primarily from the types of objects found in its permanent collection. It also serves as a testament to asserting a more pluralistic framework in museum programming while addressing the needs of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As I am grateful to cross paths with *Refugee Map of the World* during what would become the start of a formative time in my life: I was (and still am) moved then, and I hope the map will move you too.

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