

From private grief to public memory: Visual and participatory practices of resistance across the Mediterranean

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Abstract

In June 2025, families of people who died or disappeared at Europe's maritime borders collaborated with activists, researchers and artist Séverine Sajous to create a public mural in Palermo (Italy). Emerging from a broader transnational process of memory work, advocacy and participatory research, promoted by the NGO Mem.Med, the mural transformed photographs, personal messages and testimonies into a collective visual intervention addressing the ongoing consequences of border violence. This article examines both the mural and the collaborative process through which it was created. Drawing on participatory and arts-based methods, we analyse how relatives of the dead and disappeared actively contributed to the selection, curation and public circulation of visual and textual materials. Rather than treating the mural and its making as a simple commemorative event, we approach it as a form of knowledge production through which private experiences of loss are transformed into public claims for recognition, truth and justice. We argue that the mural functions simultaneously as a counter-archive, a counter-memorial and a reparative practice from below. By making visible lives frequently erased by contemporary border regimes, it challenges institutional forms of forgetting and reaffirms the dignity of those rendered absent in official accounts. The article shows how participatory artistic practices can generate public memory through relationships of care, solidarity and collective action, while contributing to a sociology of dignity centred on recognition, agency and resistance. In doing so, it highlights the potential of collaborative visual interventions to connect research, activism and lived experience in the pursuit of more just forms of social and political belonging.

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Introduction: A visual claim for dignity

In June 2025, eight mothers and sisters of people who died or disappeared crossing the Mediterranean gathered in Palermo with activists, researchers and artist Séverine Sajous to create a public mural, within a larger programme of events and mobilization around the conference *Border Deaths and Disappearances: Between Memory and Oblivion* promoted by the NGO Mem.Med in close collaboration with the relatives, academic partners and other associations.¹ The project emerged from long-standing relationships developed through the work of Mem.Med and from a shared commitment to making visible lives and losses frequently erased by contemporary border regimes. Together, participants selected photographs, composed messages, shared memories and assembled visual materials that transformed a city wall into a collective space of remembrance, testimony and political claim-making. Rather than being produced *for* families, the mural was produced *with* them, through a process in which they acted as authors, curators, witnesses and political subjects.

This article examines both the mural and the collaborative process behind its creation. Through acts of collective selection, narration, writing, pasting and public display, participants created a space where experiences of loss could be transformed into shared knowledge and public memory. The project thus became simultaneously an artistic intervention, a research process and a political action reclaiming dignity against forms of institutional neglect and forgetting that shape the aftermath of Mediterranean border deaths, frequently accompanied by failures of identification, limited access to information, delayed repatriation and inadequate institutional support for families.

Scholars have extensively documented how the Mediterranean has become a paradigmatic space of *state-produced loss* and how contemporary border regimes produce forms of invisibility and exclusion that continue beyond death (Albahari, 2015; Stierl, 2016). Due to the lack of a binding and harmonized legal framework for the search and repatriation of the deceased, procedures for collecting and recording identifying data, including DNA, are not routine, while personal belongings – often crucial for identification – are rarely preserved, contributing to the presence of many unnamed dead in Mediterranean cemeteries.² Underexplored, however, is how families resist these processes through collective action, memory work and transnational forms of public engagement. Across the Mediterranean, relatives increasingly organize to search for the missing, document border violence, preserve memories and demand recognition for those who disappeared or died at Europe's borders (Di Meo, 2026; Horsti, 2023).

Building on these emerging forms of mobilization, we approach dignity not as an abstract principle but as a relational, performative, collective practice enacted through acts of naming, remembering, witnessing and public presence. In this sense, dignity becomes visible in the everyday and political efforts through which families refuse erasure and reclaim the worth of their relatives' lives (Denaro and Boccagni, 2023). The mural offers a powerful example of this process because it translates intimate experiences of mourning into a shared visual language addressed to multiple publics simultaneously (families, European audiences and institutions, researchers and activists). This reframing links dignity to reparations beyond legal frames, where repair emerges through counter-forensic, counter-archival and counter-memorial work led by families, activists and allied cultural practitioners (Kobelinsky and Furri, 2024). These initiatives – such as collecting traces and evidence, organizing commemorations and forging coalitions – expand reparative horizons beyond courtrooms and state programmes.

Methodologically, the article combines qualitative research with participatory and arts-based approaches developed through a sustained collaboration involving relatives, researchers, activists and cultural practitioners. Rather than treating visual materials as illustrations of sociological arguments, we consider the mural itself a mode of knowledge production. The collaborative selection and the public display of photographs, texts and memories generated insights into loss, dignity and resistance beyond the reach of conventional research methods alone. By analysing both the process and the public life of the Palermo mural, we show how participatory artistic practices can function simultaneously as counter-archives, counter-memorials and reparative interventions. In doing so, they challenge institutionalized forgetting, sustain transnational solidarities among families affected by border deaths and disappearances, and contribute to a sociology of dignity centred on recognition, agency and memory (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Collective selection of visual materials for the mural.

Participatory art, care and the politics of memory

The mural emerged from a broader process of collaborative research, memory work and activism involving families affected by border deaths and disappearances and grassroots infrastructures of advocacy and remembrance. This process combined interviews, testimonies and the analysis of digital and physical artefacts with participatory and arts-based approaches.³ The latter culminated in a creative collaborative workshop involving



Figure 2. Composition of the mural by mothers, sisters, activists and researchers.

researchers, activists, artist Séverine Sajous and families of the missing who occurred in Palermo on 14 June 2025. This collective process aimed at producing a mural through a participatory art-based performance co-designed by eight mothers and sisters of people dead or missing in the Mediterranean. Together with the artist, activists and researchers, they co-selected photographs and authored messages that became part of the mural. Rooted in relationships cultivated by Mem.Med across borders over time, the mural reflects a collective effort by families and activists, including several mothers and sisters who are members of the association, to transform memory into an embodied and shared practice of resistance (Figure 2).

The collaboration also drew on and contributed to Mem.Med's *Memorie* archive and Sajous' *Bouteilles à la Mer* project: a participatory artistic platform which gathers photographs, objects and messages that the families of the missing and communities have chosen to share into bottles as material testaments of love and loss.⁴ Therefore, the mural also re-mediated some of these portraits and texts into a large-scale public surface where families were among the main authors, not subjects, of the public performance itself (Figure 3).

In this line, artistic practice is not conceived as a mere visual complement but as a method for generating and disseminating knowledge on the necropolitical logic informing border regimes that systematically deny victims' worth. The multilayered imagery collectively produced on the mural – with its relational, participatory, tactile process of



Figure 3. Mariama Sylla pastes materials from the Memorie archive of Mem.Med and from the project Bouteilles à la Mer by Séverine Sajous.

co-production – not only made visible the richness of the lived experiences of the dead and disappeared but also politicized their identities and stories by reaffirming their presence and claim for recognition and justice in the public scene.

Hence, as researchers engaged with an ethic of care (Tronto, 1993), we approached the artistic encounter as a collaborative process grounded in ongoing relationships of trust and mutual responsibility. The mothers and sisters participating in the project were key protagonists in both the creation of the mural and the construction of its public narrative, exercising agency over the selection, visibility and circulation of photographs, personal messages and other materials, including the images featured in this article. Consent was understood as an ongoing and relational process rather than a one-off procedure: all participants provided informed oral consent to be visually identified and acknowledged as co-creators of the mural while retaining the possibility to discuss and review the ways in which their contribution would be represented and disseminated (Figure 4).

Our reflections on positionality stemmed both from our dual engagement as researchers and activists embedded within the advocacy infrastructures of Mem.Med and from a broader trajectory of research with vulnerable groups that has continuously required us to interrogate our role in processes of knowledge production, representation and public engagement.



Figure 4. Awatef Daoudi, Hamdi's mother, holding the bottle dedicated to her son.

In this context, particular attention was paid to the ethical tensions involved in making grief publicly visible. While the sharing of photographs, memories and personal testimonies can contribute to recognition, truth-seeking and justice claims, it may also reopen painful experiences. Addressing this risk required avoiding extractive forms of representation and ensuring a participant-led curation of what was shared, how it was shared and for what purposes. The photographs included in this article emerged from this process of collective discussion and agreement. Their use was therefore guided by relatives' expressed desire to combat the trauma of erasure. Thus, the process of making becomes inseparable from the meanings ultimately expressed by the visual work itself (Figure 5).

From private grief to counter-memory

The Palermo mural, in our view, offers a concrete instance of how dignity is enacted through practices of recognition, remembrance and collective struggle. By transferring faces, names, poems, personal and political texts onto a public wall, the work interrupts the anonymity imposed by border bureaucracies and makes presence visible where the state has imposed absence. The collaborative selection of materials enabled relatives to move from being positioned as passive mourners to becoming active producers of public knowledge about the consequences of contemporary border regimes. In this sense, the mural functions not only as a material artefact but also as a social process through which



Figure 5. Jalila Taamallah and Hajer Ayachi creating placards for the mural: 'Freedom' and 'where are our children?'.

grief is collectivized, political subjectivities are forged, and claims for truth, justice and accountability are articulated in the public sphere.

Moreover, as a participatory creative product, the mural resists the institutional museification of mourning, as exemplified by artistic manufactures existing in various sites of border deaths. Unlike a sanitized memorial that confines grief to the past, the mural constitutes a living site of encounter, disobedience and address. The wall's composite of portraits, poems and hand-written messages refuses the abstraction of 'flows' and 'numbers', insisting instead on singular lives, relationships and biographies. Hence, the installation extends the intimate scale into a collective tableau that asks passers-by to look back, to learn names, to see faces and to read claims otherwise erased (Figure 6).

The mural also performs a form of counter-memorialization. In contexts where institutions engage in *active forgetting* (Ricoeur, 2004), by failing to identify bodies, restricting data or minimizing accountability, families curate stories, provide evidence, attempt to create durable traces and claim public space. The reparative function of these practices is evident in their attempt to assemble and preserve evidence and testimonies that might otherwise be forgotten or destroyed, thereby contributing to the ongoing work of *repairing* memory. Simultaneously, they restore dignity through recognition and naming while rebuilding relational worlds fractured by death and disappearance. In doing so, the mural creates new social bonds and spaces of solidarity, connecting families across borders and



Figure 6. Adama Barry placing the image of her sister and the texts dedicated to her.

generations and making visible transnational networks of care, activism and resistance that extend to the Mediterranean and Europe (Figure 7).

Reparations from below

Taken together, the mural as a counter-archive and the collaborative process of its making exemplify a form of reparation from below, transforming memory into a public claim for truth and justice. In this regard, reparation is intended as practice, not only policy. Families' initiatives, with the support of activists and other cultural practitioners, enact forms of symbolic and epistemic reparation by reclaiming the *right to truth* through the creation of their own archives; they reclaim the *right to mourn* by establishing public sites of memory; and they also reclaim the *right to belong* and *be recognized* as political subjects by weaving cross-border solidarities that refute the border's ontology of separation. Thus, the Palermo mural helps restore worth, humanity and recognition where bureaucratic systems have failed.

Within this framework, dignity is performative and relational since it is enacted in the choreography of a participatory public performance and in the tactile work of printing, drawing, pasting, sharing and protecting images on a wall. These both intimate and public gestures resist the classification of certain lives as 'ungrievable' (Butler, 2009), while creative practices allow the production of relations, claims and publics.

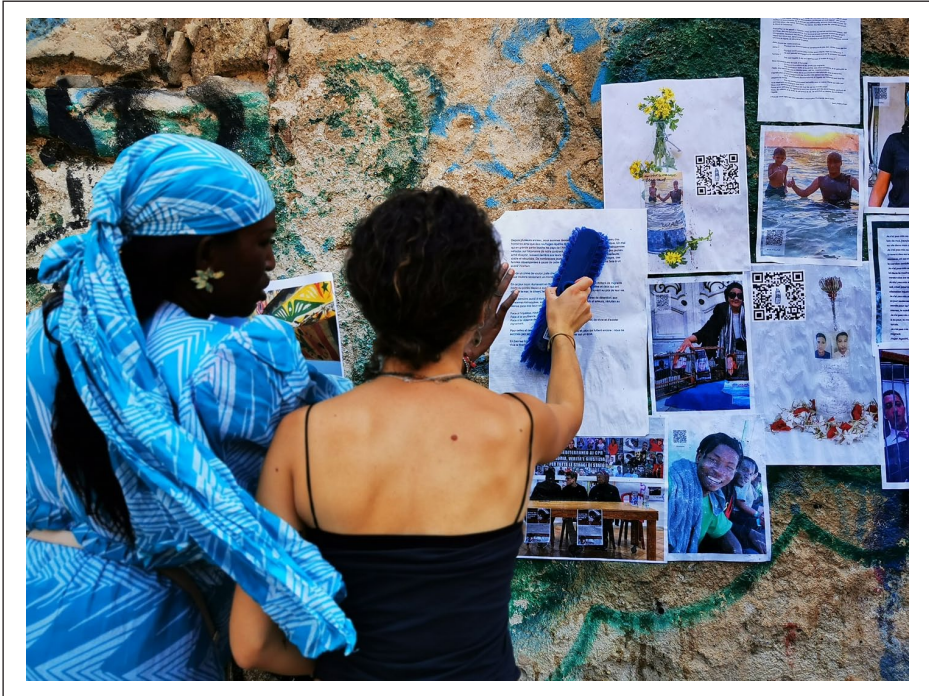


Figure 7. Amina Mboye and Sara Biasci paste images and stories drawn from the archives of Mem.Med and Bouteilles à la Mer.

Finally, counter-archives cultivate a disquieting memory that destabilizes established narratives and audiences (Macdonald, 2013; Olick, 2007; Rothberg, 2009). By anchoring memory in a visible space, the mural speaks simultaneously to multiple publics: families seeking recognition and solidarity; citizens and communities confronted with the human consequences of border regimes; institutions called upon to acknowledge responsibility and accountability; and researchers and activists engaged in documenting, contesting and remembering border violence. By exposing the violence of current border regimes, the mural creates discomfort and compels European publics – and the social sciences as well – towards a self-critical reckoning with shame, guilt and responsibility that institutions and communities would prefer to deny, silence or forget (Azoulay, 2019) (Figure 8).

Concluding remarks: The mural and beyond

This collaboration demonstrates that visual research can do more than illustrate theory; it can advance sociological knowledge by moving from a politics of *pity* towards a politics of *recognition* and *agency*, beyond commemorative minimalism towards forms of counter-memory confronting institutions with their responsibilities and beyond national frameworks towards transnational networks of remembrance, care and resistance. The



Figure 8. Mothers and sisters at the conclusion of the mural, dedicated to sons, brothers, and sisters killed by borders.

mural is therefore not simply an endpoint but an invitation and commitment to see, listen, remember and act otherwise. Hence, the circulation of these images in the academic and public sphere is a way to globalize participants' struggle for truth and justice.

By presenting these materials and the collaborative process that shaped this experience, the article extends the mural beyond its physical location, helping to sustain the *uncomfortable memory* of border deaths as a shared civic responsibility.

The sociological significance of this encounter lies as much in its participatory making as in the mural itself. Bringing together memories, testimonies, archives, artistic practice and activism, it demonstrates how public memory can be collectively produced from below through care and solidarity, becoming a resource for resistance and for imagining more just forms of social and political belonging.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author on request.*

Notes

1. These events were co-conceived and co-organized by Mem.Med in close cooperation with the mothers and sisters who participated in a week of mobilization in Palermo in June 2025: <https://memoriamediterranea.org/a-palermo-una-settimana-di-memoria-lotta-e-giustizia/>.
2. For a detailed analysis of how migrants dead during border crossings are usually managed and identified by Italian authorities, including local mortuary and burial practices, see Stauffacher and Maddrell (2023) and, more recently, Mem.Med, CLEDU (2025).
3. This article is part of a wider research endeavour that involves both authors by combining the activities carried out by the University of Milan in the framework of the project TRAMIGRART with those promoted by Mem.Med, is an NGO composed of families of people who died at the borders, activists and researchers that provides legal and psychosocial support by facilitating access to procedures for the search, identification and repatriation of the deceased and carries out advocacy, reporting, awareness-raising, documentation and active memory initiatives: for more info see <https://www.tramigrart.it/> and <https://memoria-mediterranea.org/en/>.
4. The two initiatives are available at <https://www.boutillesalamer.org/en/> and <https://memoria-mediterranea.org/memorie-persone-migranti/>, respectively.

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Silvia Di Meo is an anthropologist and researcher. She obtained a PhD in social sciences from the University of Genoa in 2023. Her work focuses on borders, migration policies, migrant mobilities and mobilizations, and women's memory practices and forms of resistance. Her research is mainly situated in the Mediterranean area and its borders. She works on border deaths in the Mediterranean and the Maghreb, with a particular focus on search and identification procedures, as well as on collective processes of truth, justice claims and memorialization. She also works with the camera, adopting a participatory approach aimed at documenting women's positions within spaces of rights-claiming and political struggle.