

PRESSBOOK

JR

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JR's Art Installation Saves Immigrants at Sea

When French street artist JR launched a 1,200-foot container ship this summer bearing an enormous photograph, he never imagined that the crew would end up saving refugees at sea.



French artist JR at Le Havre in July AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By INTI LANDAURO

PARIS—When French street artist JR pasted a giant photo on shipping containers and dispatched the picture—part of his “Women Are Heroes” series—on a far-flung voyage this summer, he didn’t expect the ship’s crew to end up as heroes.

The 1,200-foot vessel carrying thousands of containers pasted with the picture was named the Magellan and operated by French shipper CMA CGM. The Magellan was heading home from Malaysia after unloading the containers in Asia. Authorities asked the crew to rescue 213 refugees aboard a fishing boat that was drifting from Libya toward Greek shores, said a spokesman for the shipping company.

The crew fed the refugees and gave up their cabins to the women and children.

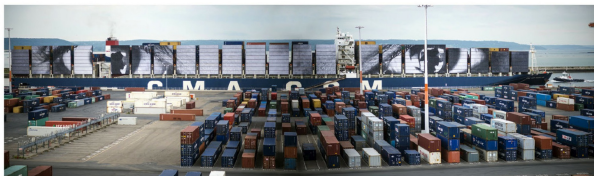


After unloading the cargo in Asia, the crew ended up rescuing refugees, pictured, in September. *JR-ART.NET*

They cared for them for two days and then handed them over to Italian authorities in the port of Taranto.

JR's project involved wrapping more than 150 containers with sections of a black-and-white photo of the eyes of a Kenyan woman. The containers, which set out from Le Havre in July, collectively displayed an enormous image that stretched the length of the Magellan.

The rescue has an eerie resonance with JR's latest project: An exhibit of old photos pasted to abandoned buildings on New York's Ellis Island, the gateway for 12 million immigrants to the U.S. between the late 19th century and 1954.



JR wrapped shipping containers to form a picture of a woman's eyes. *PHILIP POUPIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

JR—his real initials, said the artist, who declined to give his full name—focuses his art on how individuals deal with world events. He is working with Robert De Niro on a short film about the immigrants.

The artist learned about the rescue last week, just days after returning from Lampedusa and Sicily, where thousands of undocumented immigrants land every year. In Italy, JR interviewed immigrants for future projects.

“I was starting an art project on immigrants and another art work of mine was already connecting with it in the middle of the ocean,” he said Thursday. “I will do something on undocumented immigrants, I still don’t know exactly how.”



'Unframed,' a JR installation on Ellis Island *JR-ART.NET*

After working with archives on immigration for the Ellis Island project and thinking about his own family’s experience—his parents left Tunisia and Eastern Europe and settled in France—he wanted to know more about the fate of immigrants today.

“The stories you hear from the people in Sicily are similar to the testimonies in the archives at Ellis Island,” he said. “The story is still about leaving your country with no idea what you will find.”

Conflicts, repression and extreme poverty beyond Europe’s eastern and southern borders have thousands of people each year attempting to cross the Mediterranean in flimsy boats in hopes of a better life.

A recent report by human-rights organization Amnesty International said EU policies drive immigrants to undertake such dangerous sea routes. More than 3,000 migrants and refugees drowned this year in the central Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration.