Museum of Nonhumanity
Laura Gustafsson, Terike Haapoja

Published by Punctum Books
Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja.
Museum of Nonhumanity.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75653

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2620536
Thanks to the Mayor, thanks to the Art Direction of the Festival and to the Art Direction of the project being inaugurated today, the Museum of Non Humanity, for inviting me here.

Your invitation made me very glad. I am glad to be here to remember an era that is luckily gone: the times when our country saw me being nominated as the first black minister in the history of the republic. Back then, some people reacted with disbelief. They could not accept that a black woman might represent Italy, and compared that woman to an animal. They threw banana peels and toy animals at that woman.

Those episodes, chronicled in this exhibition as a past example of discrimination that eventually disappeared, bring to mind the discrimination between human and non-human, between human and animal, as a way to indicate someone’s unfounded inferiority and to encourage racial hate.

Incredibly, one of the people who most vehemently gave a voice to hate speech, comparing a minister to a sub-human, was the then Vice President of the Senate. Even more incredibly, he was allowed to keep his role, and the Senate itself protected him from trial. Luckily the trial did eventually take place thanks to the Constitutional Court, and that politician got the conviction he deserved.

That historical judgement, together with the endless fight by all the anti-racist movements, allowed us to get to where we are today. All these things that happened at the beginning of this century would be impossible today: any person representing an institution and promoting racial hate would have to resign, because of popular indignation, even before legal intervention.

Today, at last, in our institutions, anyone, whatever their skin colour, their history and background, Italian-born or not, can represent our country.

Those political movements which stoked that season of hate against diversity (seen as a sub-human category) have petered out, and now belong to the pages of history books. Today, for example, we could never revive the dramatic massacre that we accepted for many long years at the beginning of the century on our very own Mediterranean. For years, tens of thousands of migrants from Africa – we will never really know how many – died while trying to flee to Europe, to escape wars, terrorism, hunger; looking for a future and hoping for a better life, as all living beings have always done for as long as the Earth has existed: very simply, moving to find a better life. Back then, Europe turned a blind eye, forgetting the millions of Europeans who moved to the Americas for centuries, simply looking for hope.

For years, Europe and the whole world just passively looked on as the genocide in the Mediterranean took place, because, in short, nobody thought those were actual human lives, deserving to be rescued, one by one. During those years, xenophobic movements were revived, based on sheer hate of diversity, hate towards those who come from a distant place, towards migrants and refugees, who were blamed as the cause of all the evils in our society.

Tens of thousands of migrants were left to drown in the Mediterranean. Walls and barriers were erected in Europe and in the United States, in an attempt to stop what was perceived as an invasion – but those walls, as has always happened in Earth’s history, could not stop migrations. They only trapped the wall builders in their own tall fears – and no future was ever born from fear. Finally, in the third decade of the 21st century, Europe understood that the only viable solution was cooperation and brotherhood between European and African people. Thanks to this new outlook, today we are here, remembering the age of fear as a thing of the past.

It is precisely that cooperation and brotherhood that, as we know, finally allowed us to overcome all forms of racial discrimination based on the human/non-human dichotomy, as described in this museum.

Today, as you know, young Europeans move to Africa to embrace its thousands and thousands of opportunities, and at the same time young Africans move to Europe. This kind of mobility does not generate xenophobia any longer. On the contrary, any xenophobic episode based on the discrimination between human and non-human would be condemned by the citizens first and foremost, even quicker than by laws, and it would have no consensus, because today we are all perfectly aware that a new flare-up of this divergence would doom our planet to self-destruction.