

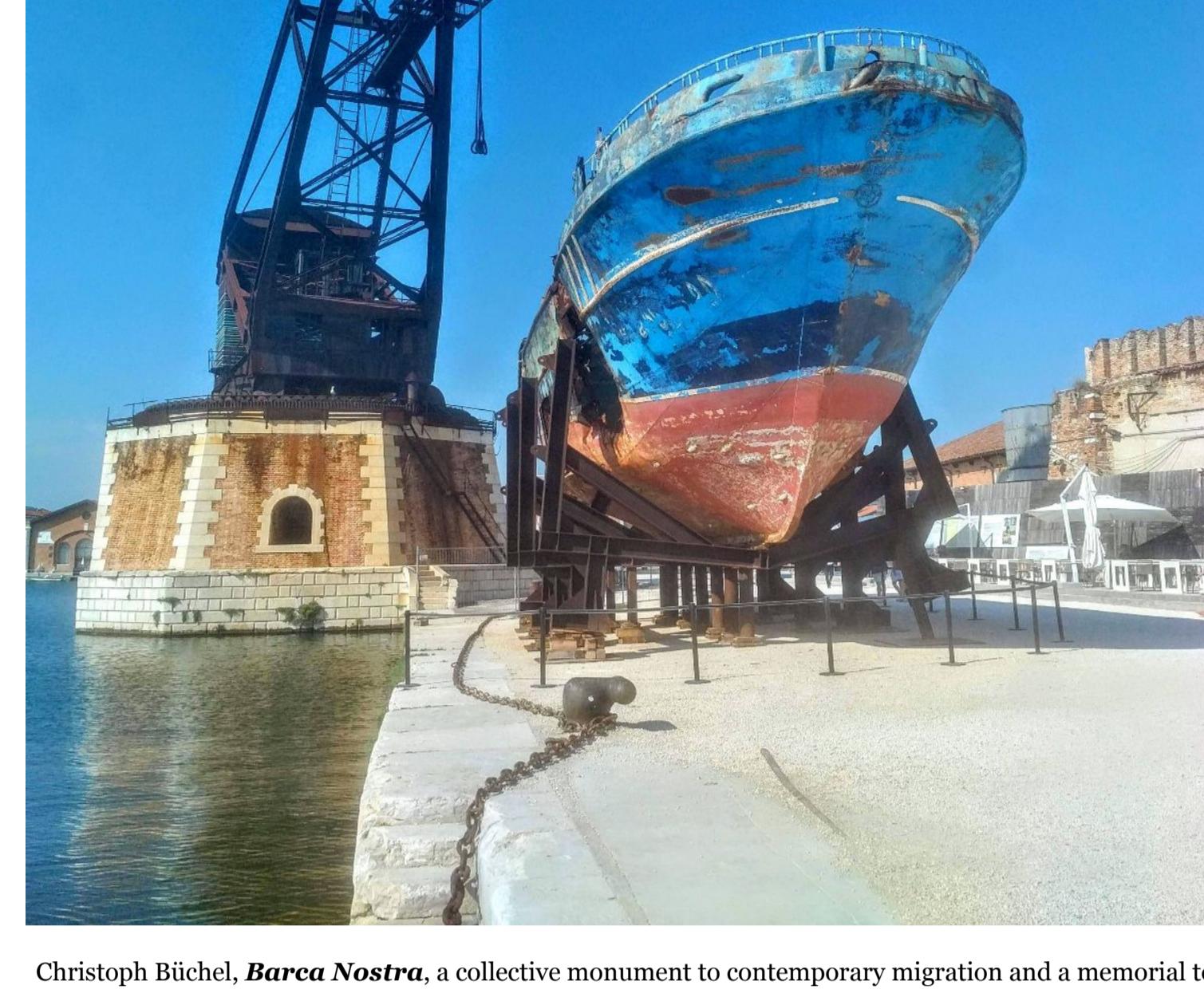
# C.G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

27 October 2020

"May you live in interesting times!" was the title of last year's 58th Venice Biennale. Its curator, Ralph Rugoff, was surely aware of the ambivalence inherent in this wish. Too obvious are the manifold developments that, in Rugoff's words, have put many of the "key traditions, institutions, and relationships of the post-war order" into question. Nationalist movements and authoritarian governments are on the rise, and Europe especially can no longer ignore the tragic fate of the many refugees at its borders.



Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra*, a collective monument to contemporary migration and a memorial to

the Mediterranean's deadliest shipwreck in living memory; it occurred in the Sicilian Channel on April 18,

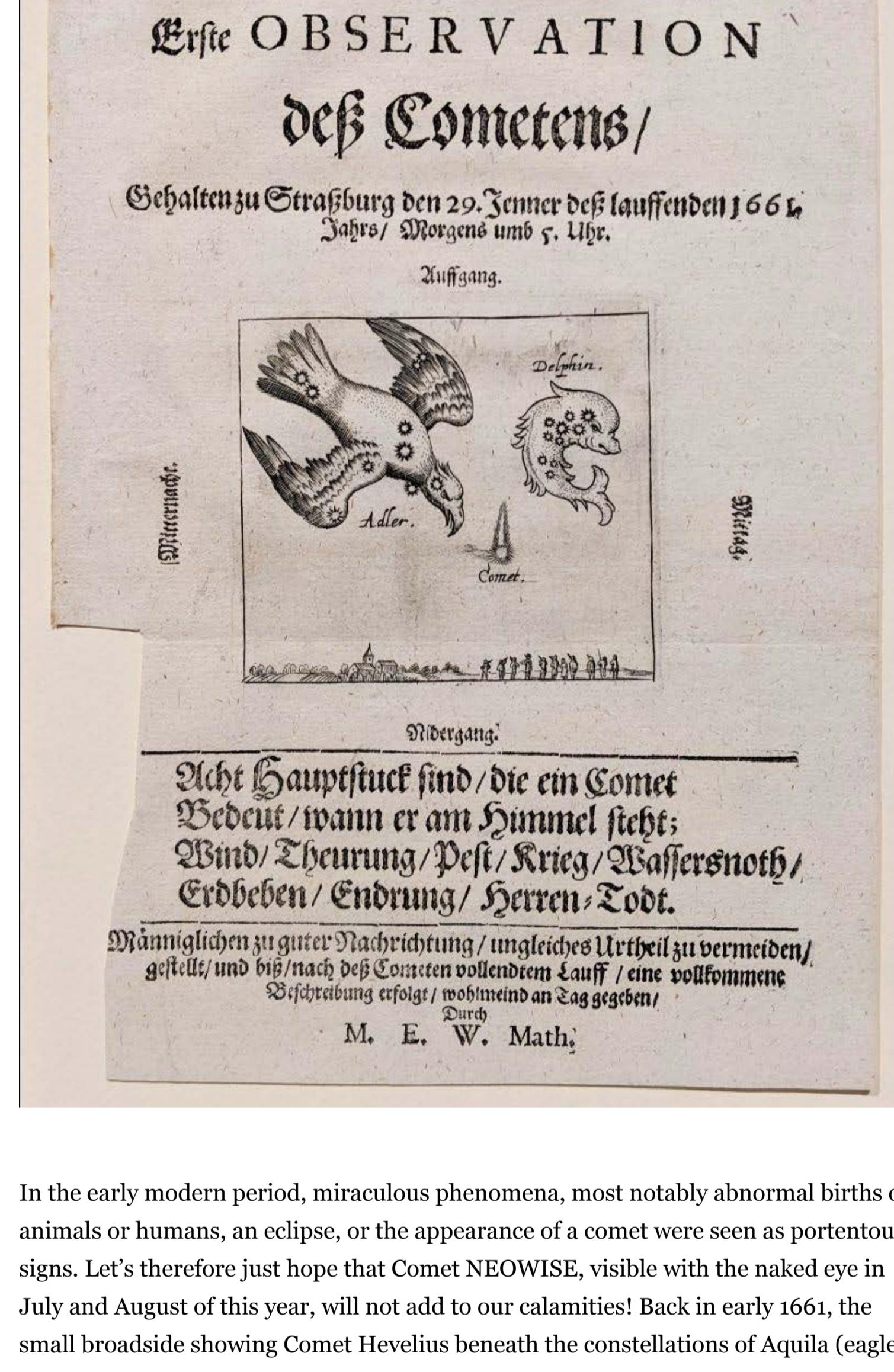
2015, killing anywhere between 700 and 1,100 people; there were only 28 survivors.

Rugoff was also realistic enough to know "that art does not exercise its forces in the domain of politics." Instead, he was counting on its capacity of "entertaining multiple perspectives: of holding in mind seemingly contradictory and incompatible notions, and juggling diverse ways of making sense of the world." Accordingly, the show's long-time president Paolo Baratta wanted the Biennale to be understood as "an invitation to always see and consider the course of human events in their complexity,

an invitation, thus, that appears to be particularly important in times when, too

often, oversimplification seems to prevail, generated by conformism or fear."

Yet, a year ago, nobody could have foreseen just HOW interesting, challenging, even outright menacing those times would be that were, perhaps too-playfully, wished upon us.



In the early modern period, miraculous phenomena, most notably abnormal births of animals or humans, an eclipse, or the appearance of a comet were seen as portentous signs. Let's therefore just hope that Comet NEOWISE, visible with the naked eye in July and August of this year, will not add to our calamities! Back in early 1661, the small broadside showing Comet Hevelius beneath the constellations of Aquila (eagle) and Delphinus warned of storm, inflation, pestilence, war, draught, earthquake, change, and the death of a ruler . . .

The scholarly literature on this subject often likes to remind the modern reader that, back then, those pamphlets had the role of newspapers, that the people did not know any better than to believe in bad omens, and that it took a long time to overcome such superstitious fears. Yet were those beliefs really all that different from the conspiracy theories of today and the media outlets that propagate them, and have they really been overcome? I wonder if the great art historian Aby Warburg was not right when he claimed that there is still an entire handbook to be written entitled *Von der Unfreiheit des abergläubigen modernen Menschen* ("On the Lack of Freedom of the Superstitious Modern Man")?

Warburg also emphatically believed in Art's role as a *Denkraum der Besonnenheit* (space for reflective thought): a space that allows us to step back, that gives us a moment's hesitation to think, and that, as the Biennale's organizers reminded us, can ultimately "challenge all oversimplifying attitudes." The times that we live in are indeed more interesting than we could have ever wished for—it is all the more important, therefore, to know that such *Denkräume* exist and to wonder what promises they might hold.

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