

“The Patterns of Displacement”. From “I AM NOT FROM EAST OR WEST... MY PLACE IS PLACELESS” Series

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Abstract

“The Patterns of Displacement” from “I AM NOT FROM EAST OR WEST... MY PLACE IS PLACELESS” Series is an immersive social installation realized with the community of Arbat Refugee Camp, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Focusing on the plight of its youth, this ‘tent’ reveals the names of over 280 children whose identities are largely writ invisible, within a political landscape of ongoing international calamity. As an artwork of testimony, its nature (components in pieces that are put back together randomly each time it is displayed) is representative of a collective cultural body (refugees) with little control over their fate and mobility, reduced to a statistic. Rushdi Anwar reveals the dehumanizing reality of these people, his artwork a beacon of hope in increasing awareness of their fragile existence.

Keywords: displacement, collaborative project, public art, social installation, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, refugee camp, Middle East, installation art

All images by Rushdi Anwar.

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“The Patterns of Displacement”

“I am from there. I am from here.
I am not there and I am not here.
I have two names, which meet and part, and I have two languages.
I forget which of them I dream in.”
- Mahmoud Darwish

(فرمان فهمی ، دیار محسن حسن ، سولین حسن ، سامیه حسن ، لیلی عافو ، هیفا ، سامیه حسکو ، سنأ
محمد نعمان ، خلیل عباس ، جیهان عمر، بریقان حانون ، هیبه عباس محمد ، نازه نعمان ، آیة علی ، سارا
عیسی ، حفیفه عبدالملک ،...)

These are the names of refugees I encountered, and worked with, for a collaborative project in “... one of the most significant features of modernity: the camp”¹ - Arbat Refugee Camp.



Figure 1. The Patterns of Displacement. Paint, UNHCR tent fabric, safety pins, wooden frame and single channel HD video. Dimensions variable. Installation view at MARS Gallery, The Notion of Place and Displacement, solo exhibition, Melbourne, Australia 2017.

¹ Anthony Downey, *Art and Politics Now* (London: Thames Hudson, 2014), 160.



Figure 2 and 3. Installation detail, Patterns of Displacement, UTS University of Technology Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2017.

From September 2016 to February 2017, I worked in several refugee camps in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. I encountered refugees from a diversity of backgrounds (Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, Sunni, Kurdish, Arab, Syrian and other minorities).

“The Patterns of Displacement”



*Figure 4. Repetition of patterns.
Overview of section of Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016.*



*Figure 5. Repetition of patterns.
Overview of section of Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016.*

The projects² that I produced within the camps focused on the daily living conditions of the refugees.

² Project “I AM NOT FROM EAST OR WEST... MY PLACE IS PLACELESS” Series: 1) “We have found in the ashes what we have lost in the fire”, 2) “Reframe “Home” with Patterns of Displacement”, 3) “ONE DAY WE WILL RETURN”, 4) “The Patterns of Displacement”, 5) “The Notion of Place and Displacement”.

For “*The Patterns of Displacement*”, I used a discarded official UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) refugee tent that I found in Arbat refugee camp.



Figure 6. Discarded official UNHCR refugee tent used for the project.

The tent is a common object in everyday life and marks a place of family gathering and living in the camp. A refugee tailor who lived in the camp cut this tent into 285 pieces. On each piece at least one name appears. These are the hand-written names (in Kurdish and Arabic) of children who live, and attend the camp school, in this camp. These pieces of tent are joined together by safety pins, stretched over a wooden frame that returns this material to its original form – a rectangular tent. The audience is invited to walk in to this tent; at its rear is a single channel television with a twenty-minute video showing the production process of making the work. The ambient sound that emits from this video shares the sounds of children talking excitedly about how to write, of people in the background praying or children kicking balls in the dirt. Most of the youth have been in the camp for two to eight years and have been through serious trauma. They hoped for many things, but there is not much for them there.

Organised with the UNHCR, the managers of the camp and the directors of its schools, the process of making the work took almost four weeks. Each stage referenced the communal experience of these refugees, which subsequently revealed the shared nature of their circumstances.

Providing paint, brush and a piece of tent canvas to each child, their unique and exceptional handwriting highlights individual identity and personality, but within the camp such individuality is lost as the context of their lives reduces them to ‘refugee’, regardless of who they are; what their interests may be; what they want to be; what they dream of, and so on.

In some of the refugee detention centers, including in Australia, refugees have often been called by numbers rather than by their names, which in a way dehumanizes them. “The camp is thus a space of exception, and those entering it, such as refugees, are

placed in an exceptional, invariably detrimental relationship to legal procedure and political discourse.”³



Figure 7. Texts repeat patterns of the camp.

The core aim of the project was to expose the names of these youth, whom most of the time, are excluded and invisible, lost in the fog of political conflict. In this regard, Mahmoud Darwish writes “And your visions are your exile in a world where a shadow has no identity, no gravity. You walk as if you were someone else”.⁴

The space that was created inside “The Patterns of Displacement”, references the size of the tents in which refugee families of up to eight members live. For some refugee families, these tents have been their homes for more than five years and replace any sense of a real home. For many, ‘home’ no longer exists—apart from in their memories and imaginations, or through photographs. This work aims to examine and question notions of individuality, communality and the repetition of patterns of displacement in the camp as well as in the context of current refugee situations in the world more

³ Downey, 103.

⁴ Anthony Downey, "The Jerusalem Show " Ibraaz and the Visual Culture in the Middle East Series, accessed 22 July, 2019. <https://www.ibraaz.org/publications/17>.

broadly. “The world of today is dotted with uprooted people who have no state or homeland where they can settle”.⁵



Figure 8 (top). Sharif Rony Hachi holds up his name at the Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016.
 Figure 9 (down). Gulstan Ahmad holds up her name at the Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016.

As a collaborative project working with a refugee community, it was a highly sensitive and critically challenging undertaking. It was crucial to represent the complexities of the camp and the situation of the people with care, I wanted to draw compassion for these lives suspended in uncertainty in various ways, because of the political landscape in the Middle East especially (Syria and Iraq). This political uncertainty has been created, driven and maintained as “Biopolitics”, by neighboring, regional countries and international political power players from east to west.

⁵ Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art : Visual Art after 1980* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 208.

“The Patterns of Displacement”

“The Patterns of Displacement”, evokes modes of circling conflicts, generated by a global political agenda in the region that benefits from weapon manufacturing. Their company agenda is clear; keep conflict ongoing to sustain financial profit.



Figure 10 and 11. Writing names on the fabric, roadside, Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016.

The UNHCR tents are historical objects, distinct realms that should not be separated from the history of conflict in the region. “The Patterns of Displacement”, brings the past and the current traumatic political events together (the war against ISIS and even post ISIS) as a sort of archive; containing layered narratives about refugees, displacement, war and broader histories of conflict, communal memory, revised history and the relationship between east and west, and much more. Such an archive questions our consciousness of the assumption of content and context of war, the tent becoming a document of located communal memory sharing the loss and tragedy of home and loved ones.

Throughout the process of the project, I was working with great concern and awareness to not portray the camp as commonly reflected in dominant media. It was essential to me, to highlight and underline the agony, pain and their struggle, with a

poetic approach, away from looking at their pain through a political or propaganda lens. For me it was a great honor and responsibility, to encounter their lives, to engage and to work with these refugee communities.

“*The Patterns of Displacement*”, evokes issues of loss and invisibility, as well as the degradation of human values. I also wanted to highlight how these political issues overshadow, and thus dehumanize affected minority groups (racial and ethnic groups). I thus wanted this project to give visibility to their existence. The process of producing this installation – taking a found object (the tent) and cutting, adding, re-forming and reassembling into new forms and shapes – is a reflective process which recalls the experiences of these refugees. Like this tent, these refugees will never return to their semblance of ‘home’, the ‘original’ forever lost.

Through the process of deforming and reforming the tent, the purpose and meaning of this tent shifts - from international aid agency; to refuge for the nameless; to a monument as testimony – as a paradoxical object loaded with absence recalled through the names emblazoned on this tent as communal gathering space. A space that clearly indicates the names of children that has become a hub of remembrance in the face of political violence and conflict. The assembling of this collection of written names has an accumulative effect and evokes the notion of collective memory and experience.



Figure 12. *The Patterns of Displacement*. Installation view at MARS Gallery, *The Notion of Place and Displacement*, solo exhibition, Melbourne, Australia 2017.



Figure 13. Installation Patterns of Displacement,
UTS University of Technology Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2017.



Figure 14. Detail of pieces joined together with safety pins.
UTS University of Technology Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2017.

Caterina Albano writes: "... In this context, the object acts as an icon that transitions from individual trauma to collective history, from personal pain to public horror, entangling questions of remembrance and documentation with emotional susceptibility".⁶

The pieces of the reassembled tent are joined together with safety pins, every time the work is installed, the pieces move around and appear in different places. This reflects the fact the work has a fluid quality and not static, moving like the collective flow of people, of refugees whose lives are occupied with uncertainty, their "... life as social being is based on adjusting to shifting context...".⁷ The notion of mobility is an essential quality of the work. In this context of a refugee camp, the tent (as an object that houses but never assumed permanent) is a striking recall of displacement, highlighting the permanent precarity of the condition of their exile.

"*The Patterns of Displacement*" signifies the struggle for 'place'. In this context Edward Said states, "I found myself reliving the narrative quandaries of my early years, my sense of doubt and of being out of place, of always feeling myself standing in the wrong corner, in a place that seemed to be slipping away from me just as I tried to define or describe it".⁸

Working within its class rooms, its 'streets', its little milk bar shops I developed quite an emotional attachment to these people. This attachment returns each time I install this work, recalling the faces of the children, their laughter and dreams. Dreams recalling idols and places that I fear they will never have the chance to explore. Most of the time I question myself and wonder what is their future? And where will they end up?

⁶ Caterina Albano, *Fear and Art in the Contemporary World* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 94.

⁷ Robertson and McDaniel, 50.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 558.



Figure 15. A collaborative public art project done by a group of refugee kids as street art at Arbat Refugee Camp, December 2016. The text in Arabic says ‘ONE DAY WE WILL RETURN’. Rushdi Anwar was not directly involved with this project but found it a powerful statement.

“The Patterns of Displacement”, evokes the dreadfulness of displacement, conflict and violence. Through this work I try to make sense of this nonsensical world.

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