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MA/MFA Art in the Contemporary World

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Themes of Dis-Placement in Contemporary Art.

Palestinians defy 'precursor to mass displacements'

Israel has sent demolition notices to residents of about 100 homes in Silwan, warning their abodes – housing more than 1,500 people – are to be destroyed.

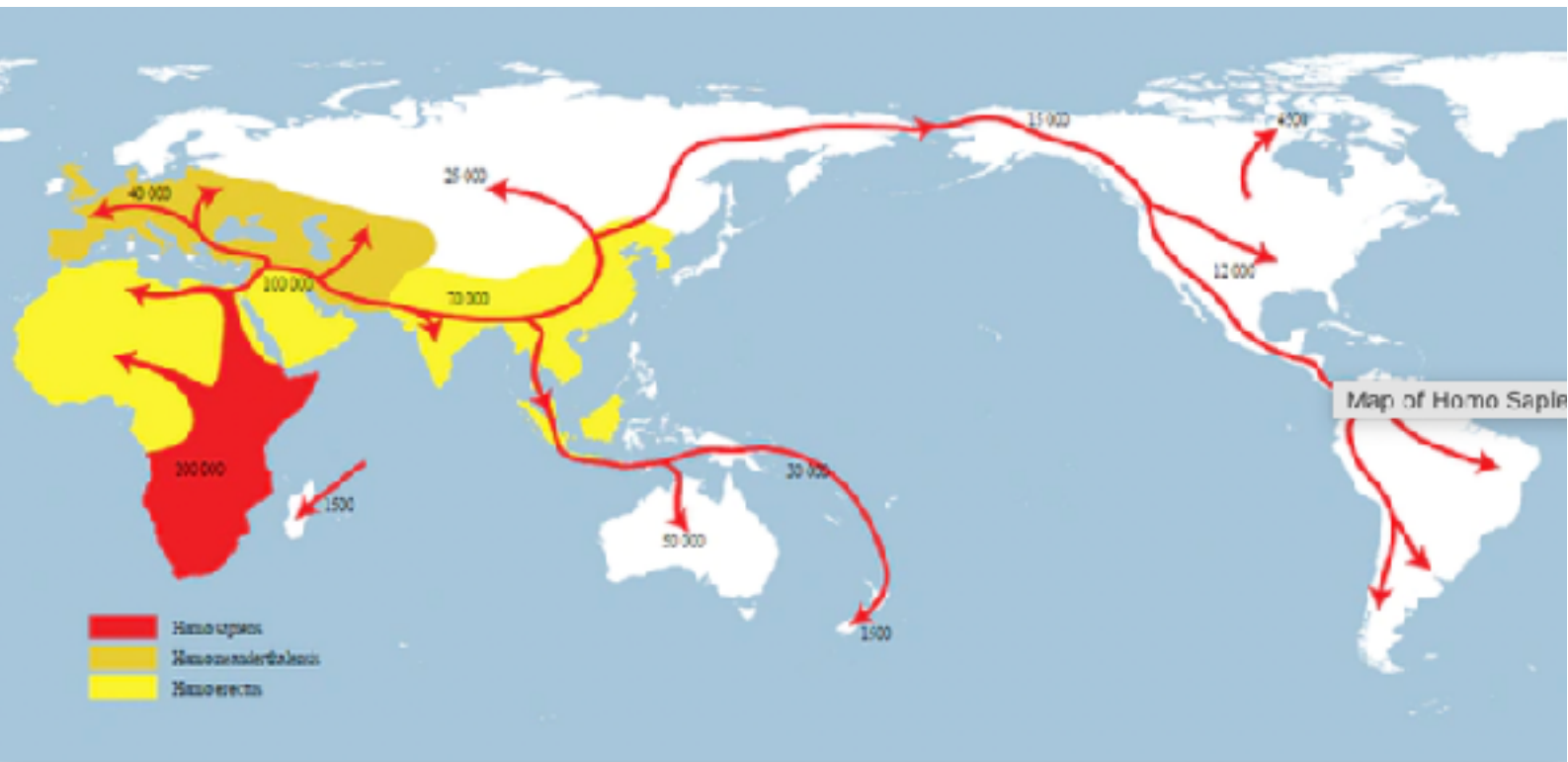
Aljazeera ewspaper, 2nd July 2021.

While the forced displacement of Palestinians by Israeli forces remains the ongoing focus of Western media, tragically, the displacement of people is a rapidly growing global trend for many complex reasons. According to the latest International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report 2020, "The number of international migrants is estimated to be almost 272 million globally, with nearly two-thirds being labour migrants. - This figure remains a very small percentage of the world's population (at 3.5%), meaning that the vast majority of people globally (96.5%) are estimated to be residing in the country in which they were born."

To illustrate the scope and complexity of this displacement, the report goes on to say "The unfortunate reality is that there have been major migration and displacement events during the last two years; events that have caused great hardship and trauma as well as loss of life. Foremost have been the displacements of millions of people due to conflict (such as within and from the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan), extreme violence (such as inflicted upon Rohingya forced to seek safety in Bangladesh) or severe economic and political instability (such as faced by millions of Venezuelans). There has also been growing recognition of the impacts of environmental and climate change on human mobility (such as planned migration/relocation and displacement), including as part of global efforts and international policy mechanisms to address the broader impacts of climate change. Large-scale displacement triggered by climate and weather-related hazards occurred in many parts of the world in 2018 and 2019, including in Mozambique, the Philippines, China, India and the United States of America."¹

Although the IOM report contextualises these stark figures against the 96.5% unaffected by displacement, I imagine this information offers little comfort for displaced Palestinians in Israel, or the 3.5% who are affected by displacement. It is difficult to think of any country not affected in some way by migration and the resulting challenges to peoples' sense of identity that it often brings. Even knowing that migration and displacement are an important part of our prehistoric human story illustrated below, showing clusters of migrations relating to

¹ International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report 2020 (Online)



Homo sapiens and early human migration. khanacademy.org

changes in climate and sea levels during and after the ice age, -offers little guidance in a time where we seem on the brink of environmental disaster, migration and socio-political upheaval.

This shows that displacement is a global phenomenon affecting all aspects of social, cultural and political life. Seeing contemporary art as reflection of this changing landscape, I aim to briefly examine how such a heavily politicised theme helps to identify key questions surrounding identity, agency, ethics, truth and aesthetics. By looking at the idea of the 'artist as activist,' to address these questions, I will begin by drawing on the theoretical writing of Baudelaire, Greenberg, and Danto. Then I will examine some of these themes through specific works by Ai Wei Wei, Edmund De Wall and Richard Mosse. Finally, having discussed a number of practices relevant to the theme of displacement, I will conclude by examining ways that this theme continues to influence post-modern theory through the writing of Giorgio Agamben, Nicolas Bourriaud and Arthur Danto.

In 2019, Lithuania won the prestigious Golden Lion award at the 58th Venice Biennale with a beguiling performance installation titled *Sun and Sea (Marina)*, by artists Isabel Lewis, Himali Singh Soin and Tabita Rezaire. Here, in the Marina Militare, Calle de la Celestia, Castello, the audience looks down on an interior beach scape, complete with sand, bathers of all ages, beach balls, pets and towels. The performers sing or enact various operatic minuets that illustrate various environmental disasters and causes for concern, while joyously bathing under an imaginary sun. As we live our privileged daily lives, largely ignoring various global crises, the parallel socio/political message of this work remains clear.

May You Live In Interesting Times was the theme and of the 58th Venice Biennale curated by Ralph Rugoff, referring to 'interesting times' as being unstable times of unrest, and upheaval. Increasingly there is a trend among international curators and institutions to promote a strong ethical, social and political message. For example, one of the themes in 2007 Documenta was "What is Bare Life?" - a reference to Agamben's theories around displacement,² and the 'camp' as a site for biopolitics to occur, which I will return to later.

Politicised aspects of contemporary curatorial and arts practice are strongly connected to ideas of agency, and the idea of the 'artist as activist'. From the early Renaissance and the writing of Leon Battista Alberti,³ the picture of the artist as a highly educated representative of the the interests of society has been with us. By the 18th and 19th centuries following large economic rural to urban displacement during the industrial revolution, the romantic notion of the 'artist as rebel,' who is so aesthetically aligned to creating works of beauty that they tend to overreact to the injustices of the world is put forward by the writing of Charles Baudelaire. (Images of the animal-headed figures by 19th century French social satirist and illustrator JJ Granville come to mind). Describing the artistic temperament as "Genius irritable," he describes the artist as "refusing to be elbowed by the crowd, and running off to the extreme easterly point when the fireworks are being let off in the west."⁴ Continuing this theme, modernist critic Clement Greenberg's modern artist is described as a dandy who is stoic and courageous but also arrogant and street-smart. ⁵ While Greenberg's formalism is largely rejected by postmodernist theory, replacing aesthetics and ideas of essential truth with semiology and relativism,⁶ this idea of the modern artist as activist has been adopted by the postmodernist writing of Andreas Huyssen, saying "If pop-art has drawn our attention to the imagery of daily life, demanding that separation of high art and low art be eliminated, then today it is the task of the artist to break out of art's ivory tower and contribute to a change in every day life."⁷

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote "philosophy and literary style are not separate as the form mirrors the content."⁸ If we can use artistic license to replace 'literary style' with 'artistic style,' then looking at an artwork can possibly tell us much about the underlying philosophy of the artist.

² Potts, J. (2020). Displacement in contemporary art. In P. Adey, J. C. Bowstead, K. Brickell, V. Desai, M. Dolton, A. Pinkerton, & A. Siddiqi (Eds.), *The handbook of displacement* (pp. 687-700). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47178-1_47

³ Alberti Battista L. *On Painting*. London. Penguin Books. 1991. P. 59.

⁴ Baudelaire C. 'Further Notes on Edgar Poe.' In *Strangeness and Beauty, An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism. 1840-1910*. Ed. Eric Warner & Graham Hough. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press. 1983. p. 187.

⁵ Greenberg C. *Art and Culture*. Boston. Beacon Press, 1961. P.7.

⁶ Holt, David K. "Postmodernism: Anomaly in Art-Critical Theory." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 85-93. Accessed July 5, 2021. doi:10.2307/3333520.

⁷ Huyssen A. *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Post Modernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. pp. 157-58

⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

In Documenta, 2007, Kassel, Germany, Chinese artist and political activist Ai Wei Wei created a work titled *A Fairy Tale of Displacement*. This deals with themes of mass migration, globalisation and the hegemony of the Chinese authoritarian state against the poetic and imaginary backdrop of the 1001 nights of the Scheherazade story. Originally written by the Brothers Grimm who hailed from Kassel, the 1st stage of this installation began by importing 1001 Qing Dynasty chairs from China, forming a connection between China's past and the 1001 Chinese residents who agreed to travel, participate and perform in the exhibition over the course of a month. Spread over four venues and positioned into intimate clusters, this composition encourages groups of civil open society in the performance as a rebellious response to the perceived threat of such free social discourse by the Chinese communist state.

If, as Nicolas Bourriaud says, the artist is a "semionaut", navigating objects as signs and metaphors in an evolving global network of symbols,⁹ then Wei Wei is navigating through a mixture of the semiotic meaning of these chairs with the relativistic personal experiences of the 1001 Chinese performers, many of whom were enjoying the freedom of travelling outside China for the first time. The historical Qing Dynasty chairs also speak to the Maoist regime that restricted international travel and inversely criticise China's relentless pursuit of progress, that has poured more cement in the 3 years between 2011 and 2013 than the US used in the entire 20th century.¹⁰ Wei Wei uses a fine balance between aesthetics and semiotics to explore themes of identity, displacement, and agency.

From the age of 1, Wei Wei's childhood was mostly spent in poverty after his father, a poet, was exiled with his family to a province within China. Continuing themes of displacement and exile, Edmund De Waal created two off-site works at the 58th Venice Biennale; *Library of Exile* and *Psalm*. Placed in the Ateneo Veneto building, a centre for cultural debate since the 15th century, *Library of exile* is a pavilion made from porcelain and gold leaf, housing up to 2000 books by exiled writers from Ovid to Oscar Wilde and other modern authors. Intended to be a contemplative reading and resting place, visitors are invited to list exiled authors that they know from all over the world. Inspired in part by the recent burning of libraries at Mosul, Iraq and Aleppo, Syria, the names of these and other libraries lost to the world are inscribed by de Waal onto the pavilion walls.

Psalm, is de Waal's other site specific response to themes of exile, displacement, and violence. Installed in the Women's Gallery at the Canton Scuola Synagogue and Jewish Museum in the heart of the Venetian Ghetto, de Waal's work takes the form of 12 elegant vitrines containing extremely delicate porcelain vessels. Thin enough to be semi-translucent these vessels ambiguously suggest either religious or domestic ceremony, containing or positioned with sheets of gold leaf. Suggesting the Japanese art of repair, *Kintsugi*, where cracks in ceramic are repaired with gold, de Waal chooses to have agency in the act of repair in both of these works. The synagogue itself is a wonder of engineering, made from

⁹ Potts, J. (2020). Displacement in contemporary art. In P. Adey, J. C. Bowstead, K. Brickell, V. Desai, M. Dolton, A. Pinkerton, & A. Siddiqi (Eds.), *The handbook of displacement* (pp. 687-700). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47178-1_47

¹⁰ Swanson A. Washington Post. How China used more cement in 3 years than the US did in the entire 20th century. March 24th, 2015.

limited resources within unevenly made tenement buildings where floors have been removed to give the double height space, - the Venetian Ghetto was the first Jewish Ghetto in Europe. Through the symbolic meaning of these vessel forms and precious materials within this building within the Ghetto, de Waal performatively engages the viewer in both works to contemplate this history of prejudice and displacement and also our role and responsibility in the act of agency through repair. De Waal says, "You can't erase damage, but you can show the fault line."¹¹

While de Waal shows a keen sensitivity to themes of displacement, violence and exile through his exquisite use of materials, and semiotics of knowledge, culture and identity; he allows room for the relative and subjective experience of the viewer to give meaning to the work. Highlighting those silenced by oppression and exile in two very different but related ways, the agency of this work could also simply rest in the idea that the 2000 collected books could be donated to build new libraries at Mosul and Aleppo.

Continuing with the theme of displacement but in gritty contrast to the above examples, *Incoming* by Richard Mosse uses real world video footage of displaced refugees at various locations around the Mediterranean. Using a military grade thermal drone camera from distances of up to 30 km, Mosse films migrant families battling rough seas and attempting to land or be boarded in various overloaded boats, mixed with other related hard to watch live scenes of human suffering, death and autopsy. Mosse hopes to communicate the "harsh, disparate, unpredictable, and frequently tragic narratives of migration and displacement" to gallery audiences.

Filmed in six countries across three continents, in collaboration with composer Ben Frost and cinematographer Trevor Tweeten, it is Mosse's aim "to implicate the viewer within the work's gaze, to force the viewer to confront their own participation on many levels." He also says "I wanted to use the technology against itself to create an immersive, humanist art form." Shown on three large screens side by side, the thermal imagery creates a ghostly quality to the figures, whose eyes appear dark and skeletal and whose heat signature and handprints can be seen left on hypothermic family members.

The interstitial holding space of the camps that Mosse depicts is what Agamben calls the "hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity". For Agamben, the camp is "the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space" as it is "founded solely on the state of exception." Here, human rights are suspended, such as in the concentration camps of the second world war, political camps such as Guantanamo Bay and today's refugee camps. These conditions of exception and 'bare life' are for Agamben "the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living."¹²

Mosse has shown this work across the world and has received much critical acclaim since highlighting the Congolese conflict with his film *Enclave*, representing Ireland in Venice in

¹¹ https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/01/19/video-interview-artist-artist-edmund-de-waal-and-theaster-gates/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Social

¹² AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

2013. Dealing with the dehumanising aspect of displacement through a mixture of thermal military grade film and shock tactics, Mosse spans the grey space between photo journalism and art. However, *Incoming's* ambitious attempt to push this grey space by “weaponising aesthetics,”¹³ using tactical imagery to dehumanise his subjects in order to present the plight of refugees in art galleries across the world, has inadvertently commodified the death and suffering of the people Mosse has filmed. More concerning, by filming the drowning and death of people in real time and choosing to be an objective observer or bystander even from 30km away, (similar to the observational role of a wildlife photographer), Mosse prioritises his agency as an artist over the lives of the people he films by remaining behind the camera. The most uncomfortable thing about *incoming* is not only our collective implication with the tragic events it depicts, (which we are already familiar with from news headlines), but also in our implication as being as removed from these scenes as the person behind the military grade camera. While Mosse has pioneered this aesthetic to make his subjects appear ghostly and unidentifiable human ‘objects’, his ethics and motives also remain questionable. That Mosse’s elusive values could be mirrored by his aesthetic raises the question, was Wittgenstein right in saying “Ethics and aesthetics are one.”?¹⁴

These examples show three very different postmodern explorations of displacement, pushing boundaries and rejecting the aesthetics and ‘essential truths’ of modernism. Generally, we see modernist aesthetics being replaced with semiotics and truth with relativism.¹⁵ Perhaps this is based on the belief that by placing meaning over aesthetic object-hood, and subjectivity of that meaning over the idea of a fixed single truth, that artworks can then become instruments of agency for the viewer. But is not the idea of there being ‘no single truth,’ also a single truth? While Mosse himself doesn’t consider himself an activist, he is still appealing to the political activist genre of the international art institution by highlighting the plight of the refugee crisis. Arthur Danto questions whether art can even be a political instrument of change in the first place, saying “it rarely changes attitudes but mirrors them, memorialising causes but not converting new recruits.”¹⁶ As we face a period that will see global displacement of people and the biopolitical challenges it will bring, whether art can be an effective tool for change remains to be seen, but it will no doubt continue to be heavily informed by the shifting socio-political landscape. Rex Butler suggests that the “new style or movement of art that comes after postmodernism” should be called *Globalism*, and Bourriaud calls *Altermodernity* the styles and techniques of modernity as “one phenomenon among others”, to be explored in a “globalised culture busy with new syntheses.”¹⁷

¹³ Tipton, G. Richard Mosse: ‘The idea of the artist going it alone is bogus’ Mosse ‘weaponises the aesthetics’ of military-grade film to force us not to look away Irish Times. Sat, Jun 5, 2021, 05:00

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

¹⁵ Bruno Gonçalves Rosi Some problems with postmodernism 03/31/2017 Liberty, PhilosophyC.S. Lewis, postmodernism, truth

¹⁶ Danto, Arthur C. "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art." *Grand Street* 4, no. 3 (1985): 171-89. Accessed July 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/25006747.

¹⁷ Potts, J. (2020). Displacement in contemporary art. In P. Adey, J. C. Bowstead, K. Brickell, V. Desai, M. Dolton, A. Pinkerton, & A. Siddiqi (Eds.), *The handbook of displacement* (pp. 687-700). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47178-1_47

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