

A Questionnaire on Diaspora and the Modern

The twentieth century was deeply grooved with the trodden pathways of mass migrations. These journeys were propelled by violence and historical cataclysm: pogroms and genocides; natural and unnatural famines and disasters; land dispossession, regimes of apartheid and forced labor; revolution, war, and occupation; colonization and decolonization; and the realignments that followed in their wake. The pioneering sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois may have been the first to herald the character of the new century: Already in 1903, in his treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*, he situated “the color line” as the defining “problem of the twentieth century” in relation to diaspora.

Theorists and writers as diverse as Georg Simmel, Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, Kobena Mercer, Tony Judt, Brent Hayes Edwards, Fred Moten, Krista Thompson, Huey Copeland, and Saidiya Hartman have offered frameworks for understanding diaspora as a cultural formation inextricable from modernity itself. As their work suggests, diasporic thinking puts pressure on the ways that we have understood—and often continue to understand—both modernism and the modern. It counters linear narratives of time, geography, and memory; identities defined by national boundaries; the absence of concerns about race and the complicity that modernisms have had with regimes of power; and a vision of the modern severed from heritage or tradition.

Yet despite the diasporic displacements that define the modern period, modernist studies within art history have often favored bounded narrative formations still fundamentally shaped by ideas of the individual and the nation-state as well as taxonomic categorizations according to style, movement, medium, and period. In part, these narrative choices both produce and are symptomatic of a deeply siloed field, cleaved into regional micro-domains (Americanists, Mexicanists); medium specialists (photo people and print people); and the imagined ruptures between the modern and the contemporary, the modern and the postmodern, and the Western and the non-Western. Departmental structures, journals, job markets, museums, and galleries are still siloed by race, siphoned into forms of intellectual segregation that are normalized to an extraordinary degree. Art history, in other words, is divided.

Given this, what should we do with the modern? The questions are many: How does attention to diasporic thinking shift our understanding of the modern—or

does such thinking invalidate its historical and epistemological claims? How do we create space for the unseen and unthought? How do we write history in a mode skeptical of grand narratives that takes account of darkness as well as light? Or, following Fred Moten's explorations regarding a Black avant-garde: How do notions of avant-gardism put pressure on the ways in which we continue to understand modernism? Does the term "modernism" itself have continued viability and usefulness? If so, to what degree is diaspora—the propulsive vectors and cultural effects of multiple mass migrations—integral to it? Or are modernism and the interests of diaspora antithetical frameworks for the history of art, given what the former has historically enabled and repressed? And, finally, what methodological approaches might reveal its structuring forces in our approach to the cultural objects of the modern period?

—Leah Dickerman for the Editors

KISHWAR RIZVI

The countries I can return to are fewer every day, as borders shut down more tightly and the travel advisory moves from inadvisable to dangerous.¹ I am an expatriate, a naturalized citizen, a dual-passport holder. The spaces I write about are often temporally distant and always physically far away. Fieldwork requires crossing multiple time zones, leaving on a Monday and arriving on a Wednesday, Tuesday sacrificed to the demons of time/travel.

The displacement is echoed in the artifacts I study, removed from their original spaces (mosques, libraries, private collections), to be bartered in auction houses in New York and London. Works of art gather dust in off-site storage across Europe and the United States, where “masterpieces” are trotted out in museum galleries like prisoners of war, enclosed in vitrines, de-ritualized, and often inactivated. Their didactic signification remains powerful, however, most importantly for those who find their own histories within them. They, like the objects, are exiles and castaways, required to find meaning in foreign contexts—creating their own diaspora of the dispersed and misplaced.

The museum, with its roots in colonial regimes of subjugation and extraction, is linked to what are often considered its cognates: modernity, progress, and culture. In its institutional logic is contained the simultaneous enactment of exclusion, racism, and diaspora. For example, in the case of Islamic art, works from the so-called Middle East were given the inferior status of being “decorative” (rather than “fine”) and viewed solely through their formal and aesthetic appeal.² Agency, authorship, and history were deemed unnecessary for appreciating the objects, which were displayed in colonial fairs, commercial salons, or—in the case of Persian art—national exhibitions. Without roots, these fugitive objects were circulated as commodities in search of monetary and cultural value.

Such mobility is an essential condition of modernity, whether the temporality includes early-modern maritime trade in the service of imperial and colonial ambitions or focuses on the pogroms of purification that continue to define the twenty-first century. In all cases, the cost in human life has been profound, even as the descriptions for those people change and morph—slave, migrant, refugee. In contrast, there is a stability to those who define the seemingly fixed, unmovable center from which these people are sent afloat. They are the rulers and the nationalists, the clergy and the army; the settlers and the occupiers; they define the rules of the game.

1. As I write this, another brutal and murderous siege is unfolding in Gaza: The Palestinian struggle for liberation continues under relentless Israeli bombardment, with full military support from the United States government.

2. M. Dimand's *A Handbook of Mohammedan Decorative Arts* (1930) was foundational for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Islamic-art collection. Much has been written on the problematic roots of the term “Middle East” within the context of European expansion into West Asia. In the context of this essay, see S. Isenstadt and K. Rizvi, “Introduction: Representing the Middle East,” in *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

Unlike the hostage objects and the canon-forming monuments created by the elite, the material life of those on the move is generic—it is the refugee camp, the detention center, the airport lounge. It is the bundle of clothes hastily packed, the SIM card furtively acquired, the list of contacts waiting on the other side. The aesthetic, if one may call it that, is one of muted colors and mass production, of corporate investment and political expediency. Seldom are these spaces for architects to consider, seldom would they qualify for a mention in the glossy trade magazines where the profession resides or the bounded volumes produced for university presses.³ And yet, these seemingly banal spaces provide the transitions from one life to another, from a state of being (in transit) to one of becoming (resident).

In such cases, the diaspora is a result of not just migrations but of being in this world itself. It is a vacillation between states of unraveling and recreating, of losing the past and coming to terms with the present. It manifests itself in equally unstable ways, for each diasporic community is at a relative distance from the past and a different stage of negotiating its present. Even as diaspora is, by its very definition, a collective identity, a coming together after being broken apart, no one person experiences it in the same way, given the scattering that is at its very core. Diaspora is not the effect of modernity but a characteristic; that is to say, modernity and modernism are, in their transience, in their movement towards progress, precarious and unresolved.

Diaspora is a privilege for those who arrive, however unsettled. But what of those still en route? How to account for the recent migrant or the refugee who carries with them the weight of memorializing those lost along the way? Before creating the present, they must remember the journey that brought them to these new shores.

Today, roughly one quarter of the world's population, approximately two billion people, live in conflict zones;⁴ war, economic apartheid, and environmental degradation have forced 300 million people, about four percent of the world, to leave their homes.⁵ The scale of precarity is unimaginable and is what sets the twenty-first century apart from the preceding one. By 2050, approximately 1.2 billion people will be displaced owing to natural disasters, not to mention the continuing upsurge of political conflict globally.⁶

3. Kishwar Rizvi, "The Other Side of Paradise, or 'Islamic' Architectures of Containment and Erasure," *Platform* (June 2019), www.platformspace.net/home/the-other-side-of-paradise-or-islamic-architectures-of-containment-and-erasure.

4. According to the United Nations' data from 2022: www.npr.org/2022/03/31/1089884798/united-nations-conflict-covid-19-ukraine-myanmar-sudan-syria-yemen#:~:text=Two%20billion%20people%2C%20or%20a,according%20to%20the%20United%20Nations.

5. The latest numbers are for 2020, from the World Migration report: <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive>.

6. According to the Institute for Economic Peace, as reported in September 2020 on Earth.org, <https://earth.org/climate-crisis-could-displace-1-2-billion-people-by-2050>.

West and South Asia are among the most affected by both war and natural disasters, where millions have been displaced internally and internationally. More than 8.2 million of those are refugees from Afghanistan, a country shattered through decades of proxy wars since the Russian invasion of 1979. Syria, a country sliced out from the former Ottoman Empire, with artificial borders imposed by European mandates, has suffered border wars since its independence in 1946 and, since 2011, a devastating civil war, which continues to this day. Although the catalysts and affective responses are different, it is necessary to note that the causes of the ongoing conflicts lead back to early-twentieth-century ideologies of modernity and statehood, predicated on Euro-American geopolitical priorities.

Thus, laying claim on the world at large as a zone of reoccupation, the diaspora of the continuously displaced pushes back against the creating of borders, be they national or religious, disciplinary or aesthetic. In the context of this essay, it necessitates the question of how to practice an art history of exile with care and empathy. Is the discipline itself a refuge or an incarceration? And is it enough to insist on representation without also advocating for justice?

Am I to mediate? Or become the spokesperson? Or the informant? No option is fulfilling, nor true either to the subjects I write about (people, buildings, histories) or to myself. As productive as diasporic thinking is for those generations removed from the exodus, for those on that journey it is a condition of deep loss. To mitigate it in scholarship is to perform a rootedness that often evades the newly exiled.

So let me turn towards an experiment in realignment and recognition by writing about two artists practicing in New Haven, Connecticut. Work and educational opportunities brought the fellow immigrants to this small “sanctuary city” we call home.

Mohamad Hafez’s practice took shape as the Syrian civil war began, foreclosing the possibility of a return to his birthplace, Damascus. Because he grew up in Saudi Arabia and moved to the United States for college, Syria had already been a home removed. But with the war, there was an urgency to his need to memorialize and record the past. Making models of the old city in painstaking and loving detail was not enough. The representations are mediated by time; the scenes depict buildings and spaces that are emptied of life, abandoned after the stories within them have been abruptly ended. Just as the ongoing war destroyed everyday life in Syria, the maquettes are distressed and on the verge of collapse.

In *Baggage Series #4* (2016), a tall structure emerges from a half-opened suitcase.⁷ The façades have been ripped off, exposing the interior space. In one room stands a table with four chairs, above which a bare bulb swings listlessly; the candles on the birthday cake below have been extinguished but the cake remains untouched. The surfaces of the room are covered in dust and debris, as though the windows had been shattered by a massive blast outside. Red blossoms grow from the corners of the house, creeping in through the crevices, a burst of color in an otherwise drab organism.

7. See also Frauke V. Josenhans, “(Re)defining the ‘I’ in Exile,” in *Artists in Exile: Expressions of Loss and Hope*, F. V. Josenhans, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 205.



Mohamad Hafez.
Baggage Series # 4. 2016.

Baggage Series is a body of work in which Hafez utilized the suitcase “to explore both the politics and personal losses of compulsory departure.”⁸ The spaces that he constructs are devoid of human occupation, yet their presence is tangible, as though in an unreal, distorted memory.

The Lebanese-American poet-painter Etel Adan, writing during the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, described the trauma of exile in times of war, of the experience of waiting for news and remembering home when return is an impossibility:

To see the amputated like vases set on shelves. To hear shouts and press one’s hands over one’s ears. To shout. To answer the phone which inadvertently stops the nightmare. To make tea. To find out that the water is tepid and the hour is sour. To thank the sky for having stopped the snow. To think of Beirut, dream of Palestine, miss Baghdad, be reminded of the impossibility to be ever totally where one is.⁹

Moving between the anxiety provoked by the invasion and the banality of her everyday life in San Francisco, Adnan is caught in her own waking dream. That haunting is captured in Hafez’s installations—the dust still suspended in the air, with no sign of those left behind.

8. <https://www.mohamadhafez.com/Baggage-Series>.

9. Etel Adnan, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005), p. 109.



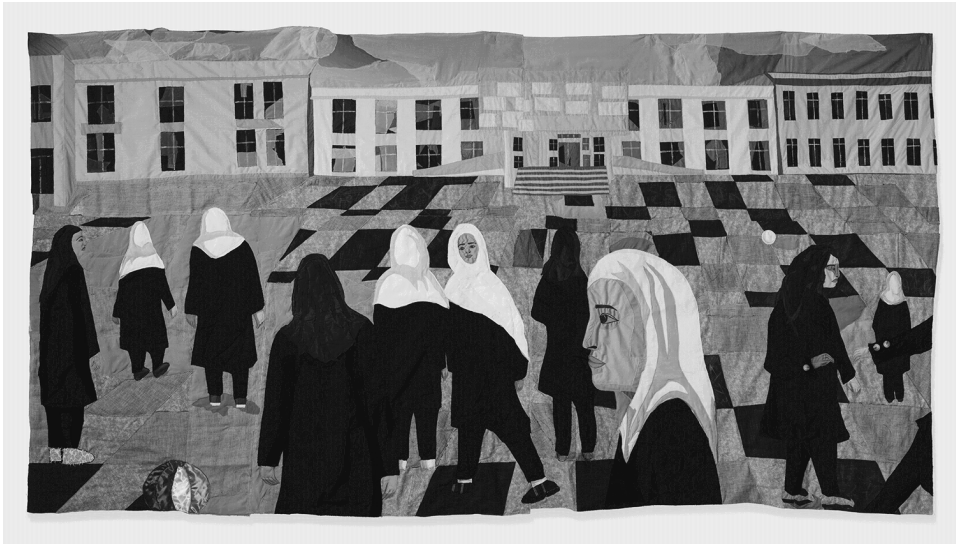
Hafez, Baggage Series # 4 (detail). 2016.

Such empty spaces occupy the imagination of another artist, in large-scale textile installations that are also mnemonic in their provocation. Hangama Amiri's family left Afghanistan in 1996 when the Taliban took over Kabul, becoming refugees in Pakistan and Tajikistan for a decade before settling in Canada. She arrived in New Haven in 2015, first on a Fulbright scholarship and then to complete an MFA at the Yale School of Art.

Amiri sews large, brightly colored vignettes of quotidian spaces that range from a beauty parlor to a neonatal intensive-care unit in the hospital. The most textured and detailed of these are of the fabric sellers' shops, the stacks of artfully unraveled reams of cloth rendered in vibrant colors and textures. As Amiri says, through these textile constructions she is "pinning and sewing [her] identity," tied as it is to memories of a home long lost.¹⁰

But the seemingly exuberant nostalgia is cut through with loss, especially that of women's freedom. In *Recess* (2022), a large textile hanging, Amiri depicts a vast courtyard separating the austere school buildings in the background and a group of young girls staring back at them. The only face depicted in detail is shown in profile, the

10. Ted Loos, "An Artist Puts Kabul in a New Light (With Lipstick and Manicure)," *New York Times*, February 23, 2023.



Hangama Amiri. *Recess*. 2022.
 Photograph by Chris Gardner.

girl's lips downturned, her eyes blank. A colorful ball lies untouched on the ground, a sign of lost childhood for the thousands of girls and young women barred from education in Afghanistan over the past quarter-century.¹¹

A new work at the Sharjah Biennial 15 in the United Arab Emirates is equally searing in its critique of women's subjugation. In *Thresholds* (2022), Amiri collected black school uniforms (such as shown in *Recess*) and hung them from the ceiling of the Kalba Kindergarten, one of the Biennial's off-site venues. The same black strings attach the *shalwar* and *kameez* (pants and tunics) to each other, like a tapestry of shredded rags. Shiny wooden desks are arranged just below, awaiting the students. The clothing is contorted and haphazardly arranged, evoking bodies blasted by a cannon and suddenly frozen in time and space. The violence is unambiguous, the black clothing referring at once to school uniforms and mourning shrouds.

The setting of the installation in the Kalba Kindergarten was unambiguous, in contrast to the subtler messages embedded in much of Amiri's work. The proximity of Afghanistan to the UAE gave the work a particular urgency; as the Biennial was opening in Sharjah in February 2023, young women were gathering outside Kabul University, demanding access. But Amiri's critique can also be directed more locally; the clothing hanging from the kindergarten ceiling was not unlike the black abayas and scarves worn by Emirati women, who are expected to dress modestly in public

11. "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," UNESCO report, January 18, 2023.



Amiri. *Thresholds*. 2022.

and conform to strict social norms, a reality that undermines the outward progressiveness of the UAE. Indeed, Amiri's work calls for justice more broadly, including in her new home, where women are fighting for reproductive rights and gun violence is the leading cause of death for young children.

Even as the loss of home brings heartache and anger, the work that emerges from this displacement can stitch the wounds, one stroke of the needle at a time. For both Hafez and Amiri, an embodied relationship with their art counters the anguish of perpetual war. Their installations not only document precarious spaces but serve as acts of resistance against brutal regimes of destruction and the cruel loss of collective memory. Graffiti on a wall, the sound of prayer from the neighborhood mosque, an embroidered wedding dress—all are traces of lives that insist that they matter, even as anonymous drone operators sit thousands of miles away, at military bases around the globe, attempting to erase them.

In the face of such relentless violence, where reality is warped and reframed, material life remains a touchstone for a fading humanity. Under such circumstances, art and history both have a role to play. But it can't be through exclusion

(passed off as “the canon”) or individualism (the cult of “genius”). Rather, it requires moving forward with humility, recognizing those who pay the price for our modernity and making a distinction between privilege and complicity, whether disciplinary or ideological. It means allowing diasporic thinking to be a condition of the here and now as well as an ethical imperative; it means writing art history with empathy and affinity, allowing the local to define not only the communities we describe but those we create and inhabit.

KISHWAR RIZVI is the Robert Lehman Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at Yale University.