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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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The Tent-Dweller: Visual Markers of Migration in Art

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In 2017, documenta 14, titled “Learning from Athens,” took as its theme the state of tension between Germany and Greece and, more broadly, the state of the European Union. For the first time in documenta’s history it manifested twice: first in Athens and then its historical home, Kassel, Germany. Many artworks curated for these two art fairs addressed the narratives that have developed through the art museum about the self and the foreigner, the ethnographic fascination with the borders of “civilization,” and how those borders have shifted over time.

The documenta 14 reader includes a new essay by Tony Bennett, who used the occasion to reframe his landmark essay “The Exhibitionary Complex.” In that essay, originally published in 1988, Bennett uses Foucauldian dynamics to describe the historical birth of the idea of the museum and to map the museum against other institutions like prisons and schools that civilize and discipline us. In his new essay for documenta, Bennett points to a key change since he wrote “The Exhibitionary Complex,” that “what has changed decisively is the nature of the connections between art and capital.”¹ Corporate sponsorships, the ever-growing number of international biennials like documenta, and art investment funds have pushed art into the rarified and financialized economy of global capital. As Bennett observes, the biennial art fair lacks the social mission that a 19th century museum would claim, to be a place for people of many classes to mingle and improve themselves. The contemporary biennial exists mainly to serve the cultural and financial elite as well as people for whom art is a professional practice. There seems to be little interest at biennials in bridging any class divide.

For the Greek artistic director of documenta 14, Adam Szymczyk, global capital is a central concern. Greece is suffering from austerity measures in the ongoing government debt crisis that began in 2009, and in recent years Greece has had the added pressure of acting as a landing zone for record numbers of migrants fleeing war, drought, and poverty. In the tensions in the European Union over bailout loans and debt relief, as well as the debates about who will take in refugees and who will close their borders, an economic crisis has developed into an identity crisis.

At the center of the migrant crisis are a series of historically unresolved disagreements about what constitutes a nation state. Borders, the geographical boundaries of a nation state, are zones that filter those who belong inside from those who belong outside, functioning legally and physically the way that the exhibitionary complex works symbolically and visually to determine who is at home there. At stake in both places are our conceptions of belonging and home: can you take them with you?

¹ Tony Bennett, “Exhibition, Truth, Power” in *The documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 349.

Nikhil Chopra, *Drawing a Line Through Landscape*. The tent pitched in Tsarino, Bulgaria, May 18, 2017, photo: Madhavi Gore. Image via documenta 14 website, <https://www.documenta14.de/>

In the case of a tent, perhaps you can. Nikhil Chopra, one of the exhibiting artists at documenta 14, did so in his work *Drawing a Line through Landscape*. From April to June of 2017, Chopra and his companions travelled by road overland from Athens to Kassel, pulling a trailer that contained a canvas tent to be set up at spots along the way. Once the tent was erected at a site, Chopra drew landscapes on the canvas walls of the tent from inside. The tent itself has a large hexagonal floorplan and is made of pale canvas, rope, and steel poles. A decorative edging around the top of the tent evokes luxurious tents of bygone eras, like the celebratory tent cities of the 19th century Mughal Emperors and even Henry VIII's Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Chopra, who was born in Calcutta, inhabits an alter ego for this piece (and others) named Yog Raj Chitraker ("Chitraker" in Hindi means "picture maker").² Chopra describes Yog Raj Chitraker, who is loosely based on the artist's grandfather, as "a Victorian/turn of the century draughtsman or landscape painter, who goes on expeditions as an explorer."³ Chitraker is both an analysis and an embodying of the colonialist wanderer, a Romantic explorer who is inspired by exoticized landscapes but also seeks to classify, claim, and dominate those landscapes. It is a travel style defined by relative wealth and cultural sophistication, a mirror of the ethnographic journeys taken by European travelers through colonial empires from the 17th century forward (and now enjoyed by visitors to art fairs). Chopra turns this Orientalist activity back toward its land of origin, wandering through the Occident and framing it through his own Orient lens.

² Nikhil Chopra, "About." http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?page_id=1615.

³ Ibid.

The beginnings of the drawing in Sofia, May 21, 2017, photo: Madhavi Gore. Image via documenta 14 website, <https://www.documenta14.de/>

On an annotated, hand-drawn map posted on documenta 14's website, Chopra observes his intention to "be a nomad in a mobile home; fill the distances between places; be present."⁴ He evokes nomadism as a fulfilling and socially productive style of travel. Chopra's own journey feels leisurely and touristic, but the route he traced through Bulgaria and Hungary is the same taken by migrants fleeing Syria and Iraq who are attempting to reach safety and economic opportunity in Germany. The visual markers of nomads, migrants, and refugees are opposed here.

Rebecca Belmore's carved marble tent, also exhibited during both the Athens and the Kassel phases of documenta 14 and titled *Biinjiya'iing Onji*, addresses the migrant crisis more directly. Belmore is an Anishinabe woman, and as a First Nations person living in Canada, she is familiar with the constraints and tensions of colonial space. This sculpture is a monument to migrants and to the temporary structures they inhabit on a basis that has become more and more permanent. Candice Hopkins, writing about Belmore in documenta 14's *Daybook*, quotes Belmore on her sculpture's roots in vernacular architecture: "The shape of the tent is, for me, reminiscent of the wigwam dwellings that are part of my history as an Indigenous person."⁵ A wigwam is made of materials like bentwood and bark, things that can be harvested on location; a craft of temporal necessity. Belmore's sculpture has the rounded sides and layered coverings of the wigwam, but

⁴ Nikhil Chopra, "Mapping Drawing a Line through Landscape by Nikhil Chopra," May 10, 2017, <http://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/20611/mapping-drawing-a-line-through-landscape>.

⁵ Rebecca Belmore quoted in Candice Hopkins, "Rebecca Belmore," *documenta 14: Daybook* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017).

the marble evokes both classical sculpture in general and Greece in particular. Marble is the material of monuments and memorials, an honorific medium. If *Drawing a Line through Landscape* is a nomadic process, *Biinjiya'iing Onji* is a migrant process with stable lodgings on both ends of a temporary journey. The title, which in Anishinaabemowin means “from inside,” directs the viewer to climb inside and look out, inhabiting the space of the migrant.

Rebecca Belmore, *Biinjiya'iing Onji* (From inside), 2017, marble, installation view, Filopappou Hill, Athens, *documenta 14*, photo: Fanis Vlastara. Image via *documenta 14* website, <https://www.documenta14.de/>

Forced migration has resulted in an unprecedented 68.5 million currently displaced people. Of those displaced people, 25.4 million are refugees.⁶ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee is someone who “has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”⁷ This definition was codified in the 1951 Geneva Convention to address the refugee crisis resulting from World War II. Since 1951, Europe has transformed itself in hopes of maintaining peace, merging economic consortiums and executive bodies into a transnational union. But the European Union experiment is faltering. The EU is structured like a nation state itself: it has courts and legislative bodies, economic councils, and a common currency. It is nonetheless composed of many nations that retain their own sovereignty. What do the member nations owe to each other? What is the European identity, if there is one?

We can see these somewhat abstract concerns manifested in borders. Since the Schengen Agreement of 1985, internal border controls in the EU have been gradually abolished, and now

⁶ UNHCR, “Figures at a glance,” <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

⁷ USA for UNHCR, “What is a Refugee?” <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

most of continental Europe is part of the Schengen Zone. Inside the Schengen Zone, there are no border checkpoints or airport controls, and the Schengen Zone has a common visa policy for international travel. But the interior openness of the EU depends on the control of its exterior borders. We have seen the EU face these with concern, and even fear, as migrants move toward it in large numbers—in 2015, the first full year of the European migrant crisis, over one million refugees and migrants reached Europe by sea. Another 4,000 drowned in the attempt.⁸

In their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari divide the world into two types of spaces: sedentary and nomadic. Think of two aerial photographs side by side, one showing towns and farmland, the other showing a territory undifferentiated by markers: a desert, or the ocean. In sedentary space, the land is striated: divided by roads, walls, hedges, and fields. Your movement is determined by these structures and their ordered logic—you move along a street, stop at a wall, and turn left or right at measured angles.

Nomadic space is smooth. Over the sea, you move in circles. Lines are curved. You can navigate by stars and wind and through changes in noise and the color of the water. The sedentary and the nomadic are two logical orders of movement, and they are oppositional even though all real spaces are mixtures of the two. For example, as humans have learned to navigate the sea more efficiently and accurately, they have imposed striated space on the smooth with longitude and latitude, parallels, and meridians, so that the once-smooth sea is crossed by geometric patterns.

A fleet of ships on the water is a special case for Deleuze and Guattari, somewhere between what they call the “nomad war machine” and the rhythms and logics of the State. A fleet has “vortical movement,”⁹ performing its patrol through virtue of the threat that it can rise up at any point to intercept and capture. From European shores, rescue ships search for foundering migrant boats, many of them overfull inflatable dinghies that have risky chances of reaching Italy or Greece on their own. There are borders in the sea as well, the geometry of states laid onto the patterns of currents and tides. In 2017, Italy struck a deal with Libya to fund and train the Libyan coast guard, and now on the other side of the Mediterranean, Libya intercepts 1 out of every 3 migrant boats.¹⁰

The ability of the state to capture and detain any individual is fundamental to its power. In 1919, the economist and sociologist Max Weber outlined his concept of the “monopoly on violence,” that the defining character of the state is the exclusive use of legitimate physical force.¹¹ For Deleuze and Guattari, that monopoly manifests in the state’s ability to arrest the movement of

⁸ Jonathan Clayton and Hereward Holland, “Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015,” UNHCR (website), December 30, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html>.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 362.

¹⁰ Chico Harlan, “The retreat of rescue ships from the Mediterranean is a sign of changing odds for migrants,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-retreat-of-rescue-ships-from-the-mediterranean-is-a-sign-of-changing-odds-for-migrants/2018/06/15/099b74f0-6e61-11e8-b4d8-eaf78d4c544c_story.html?utm_term=.fede15b1f9ef.

¹¹ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf>.

citizens and detain them, to hold them in place. There is no better visual evidence for this than the refugee camp.

A refugee camp is a detention center designed for borders. In it, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, the state takes nomad architecture and uses it for sedentary purposes.

Most significant are perhaps borderline phenomena in which nomad science exerts pressure on State science, and, conversely, State science appropriates and transforms the elements of nomad science. This is true of the art of encampments, “castrametation,” which has always mobilized projections and inclined planes...¹²

Refugee camps and the inclined planes of their tents have changed the symbology of the tent. The tent has historically been contextualized by movement and it is designed for that purpose. It is lightweight and capable of being assembled and disassembled. It is also clearly not designed to last—the fabric it’s made of, whether traditional canvas or a synthetic polymer, will eventually disintegrate from exposure to sunlight, moisture, and wind. But now many refugee camps are so large that they are effectively permanent cities. The Dadaab complex of camps in Kenya were built in 1991 to hold refugees from Somalia and South Sudan, and 27 years later they still hold 231,000 people.¹³

As for Europe, the small islands of Lesbos and Samos have become host to nearly 15,000 asylum seekers who are prevented from going to the mainland before their requests for asylum are processed.¹⁴ And in the Karatepe and Pikpa camps on Lesbos, you can see a new kind of tent.

It’s called the Emergency Temporary Shelter, and it was developed by a Swedish organization called Better Shelter with the collaboration of the UNHCR and the IKEA Foundation. Better Shelter’s product factsheet describes the structure: “The shelter resembles a house, with semi-hard, non-transparent walls. It has four windows and a high ceiling, enabling residents to stand upright inside.”¹⁵ The factsheet quotes a similar testimonial from Hussein, a Syrian refugee in Kawergosk Refugee Camp in Erbil, Iraq, who says: “you can open a window like in a real house.”¹⁶ Importantly, this structure looks like residential vernacular architecture, with windows, a pitched roof, and a door that locks. It is made of a galvanized steel supporting structure and covered in polyolefin panels, and the only fabric-like component is the roof. The Emergency Temporary Shelter is designed for dignity and psychological comfort, to feel like a home and not a campsite. It’s designed to feel permanent.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 362.

¹³ Melanie Mwangi, “World Refugee Day: Dadaab number down to 231,000—UNHCR,” *The Star*, June 20, 2018, https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/06/20/world-refugee-day-dadaab-number-down-to-231000-unhcr_c1775403.

¹⁴ Helena Smith, “Anger Rises in Lesbos over Crowded Refugee Camps,” *The Guardian*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/09/anger-rises-in-lesbos-over-crowded-refugee-camps>.

¹⁵ Better Shelter, “About Better Shelter” (PDF), 6, http://www.bettershelter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/About_Better-Shelter.pdf.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

Pikpa camp, hosted by Lesvos Solidarity, Lesvos, photo: Pam Longobardi and Drifters Project

The Emergency Temporary Shelter is a good design, so good that in 2016 the Museum of Modern Art acquired it for its permanent collection. It was displayed at MoMA in 2016 and 2017 in an exhibition titled *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter*. The exhibition label for this piece touted its success at providing more privacy and security than “the common tent” along with its adaptable modularity and long lifespan.¹⁷

Better Shelter expects that their product will last three years in a moderate climate like Greece’s. Designing refugee camps for the long term, and to look like permanent houses, is a tragic commentary on the future of these encampments. If the tent symbolizes transition, a journey from one place to another, the Emergency Temporary Shelter symbolizes the improbability of ever reaching the end of that journey. They read visually as *stuck*.

Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between migrants and nomads in their relation to striated and smooth spaces. A migrant is a product of sedentary logic and striated space: they move from one place to another, and at each end they have land distributed to them. Their journey is finite. A nomad, on the other hand, is distributed on the land. For a nomad, any stopping points are subordinate to the journey, which is the continual relay of the nomad’s life.

¹⁷ Museum of Modern Art, “Emergency Temporary Shelter,” https://www.moma.org/collection/works/200325?artist_id=49237&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.

A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the *intermezzo*. Even the elements of his dwelling are conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them.¹⁸

A refugee seeks asylum, a new place to settle, and is therefore not a nomad. A refugee is, however, often not a migrant either, in that they do not reach the projected end of their journey. Instead, the journey is abruptly cut off, held up in a camp that may form an *intermezzo* of several years' duration. "Refugee" is a new logical order of movement, visually marked by a dwelling that does not invite either mobilization or permanence, but something caught in between.

The materials of the Emergency Temporary Shelter, plastic polymers, reveal the unchanged problem at the core of the refugee crisis. Better Shelter recommends recycling the wall panels when the shelter degrades at the end of its three-year life span. Refugee camps like the ones on Lesbos are sites of an enormous amount of plastic waste from sources like the plastic dinghies and life jackets used to travel there and from the bottled water refugees need once they arrive. Plastic recycling has a hard time keeping up. With so many climate refugees fleeing drought and storms, a number that can only increase in the coming decades, emergency housing made from oil byproducts is part of the problem. In a loop that seems endless, the extraction and processing of these plastic compounds fuels the climate disaster that causes the refugee crisis. People may be stopped at borders, but oil flows everywhere.

We are witnessing a nationalist and protectionist turn in many countries, including Germany and other nations of the EU that have temporarily reintroduced controls at their internal borders. But while human movement is constricted, oil and capital still flow freely inside the Eurozone and over its borders. The global financial crisis of 2007-2008, which caused the debt crisis in Greece, demonstrated the extent to which advanced economies have been financialized and how volatile the debt crisis cycle has become. One of the most common forms of debt, the mortgage-backed security, can move the value of a home internationally with great ease. Capital may be yet another logical order of movement, flowing and pooling like liquid metal. Deleuze and Guattari talk about metallurgy as a vital state of matter, as "the consciousness or thought of the matter-flow."¹⁹ Perhaps money, whether as currency or as securitized debt assets, moves more freely than anyone.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 380.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 410.

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