

# **Pluriversal Fragments in Exhibition Structures: Radical Perception & Mental Mapping**

By

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## *Abstract*

Meaning of artworks in galleries is often determined by the exhibition anatomy and the interpretive curatorial frameworks which guide visitors. This thesis looked into the radical possibilities of sidestepping such frameworks and harnessing the phenomenology of the art encounter to achieving a deeper connection to the work and others. Using Lacanian psychoanalysis, this thesis approached the exhibition as a language-like structure and employed the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real to quantify the intersubjective art encounter in Iman Issa's *Book of Facts*. In the absence of didactic text, the viewer approached artworks as floating signifiers and "anchor" meaning through personal memories, experiences, and culture. Sameer Farooq's *A Heap of Random Sweepings* and Homi Bhabha's Third Space were channeled to probe how this intersubjectivity can expand beyond the Western space to invite cultural hybridity. This thesis proposed Dynamic Thought Articulation, an experimental mapping exercise, for understanding elusive intersubjective art encounters and engaging in collective meaning-building.

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## Introduction: Navigating Exhibition Anatomies as Disobedient Subjects

There are still romantic idealists who believe in the power of art as a catalyst for change, truth, and action. Hopeful sceptics, such as I, may roll our eyes at the thought of this “power” in the context of the market-driven art world and point to instances where art undermines the activist causes it claims to represent. Yet, there is still something in the art encounter that has the potential to be an extraordinary force of affect, thought, and genuine connection among people. The phenomenology of this encounter—that which encompasses the hidden, unrealized, and unconscious—finds its point of emergence as the viewer attempts to understand the artwork before them. The energy of what is exchanged in the act of perception may captivate the viewer or even overwhelm them. Such episodes, while difficult to identify and articulate, carry the potential for evading the institutional frameworks—such as wall labels, signage, and curatorial statements—that orientate the viewer towards predetermined interpretations of artworks. This elusion points towards how productive phenomenological encounters with artworks can happen in the interstices of the gallery space.<sup>1</sup>

Through examining two contemporary art exhibitions that intentionally create interstitial methodologies of viewing in exhibition display—Iman Issa’s *Book of Facts*

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that these structures that guide visitors in the gallery and museum settings are built to favor Eurocentric and bourgeois agendas while actively (mis)reading and (mis)appropriating non-Western perspectives. Many scholars, artists, activists and thinkers draw attention to this dynamic through theory and practice. Carol Duncan, for one, probes the cultural institution’s status as a ritual site that “controls the presentation of a community” (Duncan, 8). Artists like Fred Wilson, on the other hand, challenge the unwelcoming Eurocentric structures of the museum through decontextualizing and recontextualizing practices. With his installation, *Mining the Museum*, Fred Wilson opposes the historical gaze of the institution and the ways of looking it encourages. See Carol Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge Ltd. , 1995), pp. 7-20; Ivan Karp and Fred Wilson, “Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums” in *Art Papers*, May 1993.

(2019) and Sameer Farooq's *A Heap of Random Sweepings* (2021)—this thesis paper theorizes ways of productively unsettling the conventional modes of framing interpretation deployed by large and medium-sized Western institutions to determine meaning of artworks in the gallery setting. It is my contention that learning to detect, reach, and think about the energies exchanged in our perceptive encounters with art while remaining conscientious of currents in meaning-making is important for viewers.<sup>2</sup> Such awareness enables us to think beyond stifling institutional frameworks to open up possibilities where knowledge can be collectively ascertained among viewers from different positionalities. Facilitating group discussions about personal experiences during art encounters, for example, encourages recognition of different perspectives and contradicts the stability of facts that are posited as authoritative through interpretative wall panels and curatorial statements. As a counterpoint to curatorial theory that is focused on the figure of the curator, institutional critique, and the placement of objects, I propose a theory of spectatorship in this thesis paper that rethinks how audiences arrive at meaning in the art encounter, seeking to articulate a framework of interpretation that moves beyond the inflexible infrastructure of exhibition-making to the heart of the phenomenology of the viewer's encounter with an artwork.

I approach this goal of unsettling and rethinking the art encounter first and foremost as a visitor of the gallery who reflects on their experience as a viewer in relation to and apart from the authority of the curator, the artworks on display, and the various

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<sup>2</sup> I equate meaning-making in the gallery to ocean currents, which are defined as the continuous and directed movement of sea water that is influenced by a number of forces. Similarly, meaning-making is continuous and impacted by different environmental and cultural influences. As people arrive at or are coerced toward particular meanings, they still share the gallery space—the ocean—and what they arrive at is often in conversation or tension with other meaning currents.



materials that support the exhibition. Taking this stance enables me to think more deeply about how audiences receive and interact with knowledge and experience affect in the gallery setting, as well as to ruminate on more interactive and meaningful methods of display that arise from embodied responses in viewers. The experiences I recount in my reading of Issa's *Book of Facts* and Farooq's *A Heap of Random Sweepings* are rooted in my memories, cultural knowledge, and geo-political locality as a viewer.<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, I draw on the psychoanalytical and postcolonial frameworks of Jacques Lacan and Homi Bhabha, who I use to deconstruct the structural perils of conventional exhibitions and find new ways of understanding meaning-making in the gallery. By way of conclusion and from my perspective as an emerging curator, I consider new ways of engaging with audiences, based on the potential deduced from the detailed analyses of the two contemporary exhibitions. I argue that artistic experimentation with the presentation of supporting materials, where the curator is an accomplice with artists and viewers rather than an authority that determines meaning, can create more equitable and engaged viewing practices.

The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to observing the equivocal phenomenon that unfolds during the viewer's perception of artworks in institutional settings. I employ dimensions of Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically the schema of the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real—the intrapsychic realms that comprise the various levels of psychic events—to contextualize the viewer's encounter with the artwork and to situate

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<sup>3</sup> I view, think, create, and theorize from the perspective of an Eastern European immigrant settler. I was born in Bulgaria, where I grew up in close relation to the culture, language, and the land. As such, I bring with me the roots of the Eastern European perspective and articulate it in the context of my working and living in Toronto, the traditional territories of the Mississauga of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of Six Nations, the Anishinaabe and the Wendat nations.

their subjectivity within systems of perception that can possibly evade the institutional coercion of the gallery. Issa's solo exhibition *Book of Facts* provides an excellent case study for observing the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real as articulated in the exhibition anatomy—a term I use to encompass the components and configurations of an exhibition, from the placement of objects to community outreach and press releases—because the artist twists the logic of display, producing ways of understanding works that can be regarded as alogical. She achieves this through experimenting with the placement and content of artworks, in relation to didactic text. Taking advantage of the unusual effects that Issa's presentation produces and situating them within the Lacanian intrapsychic narrative, I hypothesize about how viewer agency can be reclaimed in the exhibition setting, despite surveillance mechanisms and didactic determinacy, and how meaning-making occurs when the viewer *fixes* the artwork through their own memories, experiences, and histories. I consider how this is a process of self-anchoring that occurs in the intersubjective encounter of the viewer and the artwork.

Conceptualizing the art encounter through the lens of Lacanian theory is useful for revealing the potential of the intersubjective relationality between the viewer and the artwork. Yet, art-viewing frequently is an open-ended encounter that nurtures collective experience through interpretation, representation, and dialogue with others. Simply put, you are not the only one looking at the artwork because you share the physical and transient space with others. So, questions such as how to fix meaning while being flexible and welcoming of different interpretations and how to go beyond the Lacanian psychoanalytical framework to move into a decolonial intersubjectivity—an

intersubjectivity that is aware and respectful of cultural difference in articulation and meaning-making—are pertinent.

To this end, I introduce Farooq's *A Heap of Random Sweepings* in Chapter Two to probe how intersubjectivity can expand beyond the Western space. In his installation, Farooq calls out how colonial museum structures suppress cultural expression. He works with collaborators Gabie Strong and poet Jared Stanley to create a highly reflexive environment in the gallery space where visitors can navigate their own path of contemplation, guided by gentle, yet haunting, music and beautiful poetry. Through an in-depth examination of the installation, I consider how the creative work encourages viewers to self-anchor in the art encounter and to be mindful of how the resulting personal affective and epistemic outcomes can evade hierarchical structures of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Farooq's exhibition makes evident how the viewing subject—in committing to a process of decolonizing Western exhibition practices—must be aware of and unlearn the reflex of assuming an objective stance, especially when considering images, objects, and knowledge that belong to another culture.

In this respect, the path of contemplation that Farooq creates can be seen as resonant with Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space. Utilizing this concept of the Third Space as an interstitial site of exchange in my analysis of *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, I theorize that intersubjective relations produce transferential energies, including emotions, knowledge, and things not yet known evoked in the art encounter,

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<sup>4</sup> I am reminded of Walter Mignolo's basic epistemic principle: "I am where I do and think" which "de-legitimizes the pretense of a singular and particular epistemology, geo-historically and bio-graphically located, to be universal" (Mignolo, 2011). In other words, Mignolo's epistemic principle recognizes all ways of thinking, which I highlight in the second chapter as I expand on my experience as a viewer of *A Heap of Random Sweepings*. See Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 81.

which occur in the in-between of the exhibition space. Searching for balance between what one perceives with respect to others, I prioritize the importance of interculturalism in my analysis, stating that the viewing subject must anchor themselves in their specific geo- and body-political locality—that is, to position themselves from the culture and experience from which they come from—and articulate themselves in relation to other diverse localities.<sup>5</sup>

Through my investigation of Issa's propositional strategy in Chapter One and Farooq's emphasis on reflection in Chapter Two, I offer a theory of spectatorship that embraces viewer agency in meaning-making through intersubjectivity. By way of conclusion, I develop an experimental framework for mapping, sensing, and thinking about the art encounter in curatorial practice, which I term Dynamic Thought Articulation. In doing so, I am not advocating for an unruly subject but asking viewers to think about their position and relation to the art encounter and to others. Amid the monolithic structures in the art world that fix us in space and time to control knowledge production and subjectivity, I am asking the reader to consider how viewers and curators can experiment with and defy learned ways of deriving meaning from artworks and to use the framework of Dynamic Thought Articulation to think about relationships that are passively formed and actively hidden.

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<sup>5</sup> Interculturalism acknowledges the agency of cultures as dynamic entities and strives to promote dialogue and interaction between them. The concept arose as a criticism of multiculturalism which focused on culture as a passive acceptance of a fact. Much literature has been written on this topic. See Michael Galanakis, "Intercultural Public Spaces in Multicultural Toronto," in *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, vol. 22, no. 3, June 2013, pp. 67–89; *Interculturalism: Between Identity and Diversity*, ed. Beatriz Penas-Ibáñez and María Carmen López-Sánchez, Peter Lang, 2006.

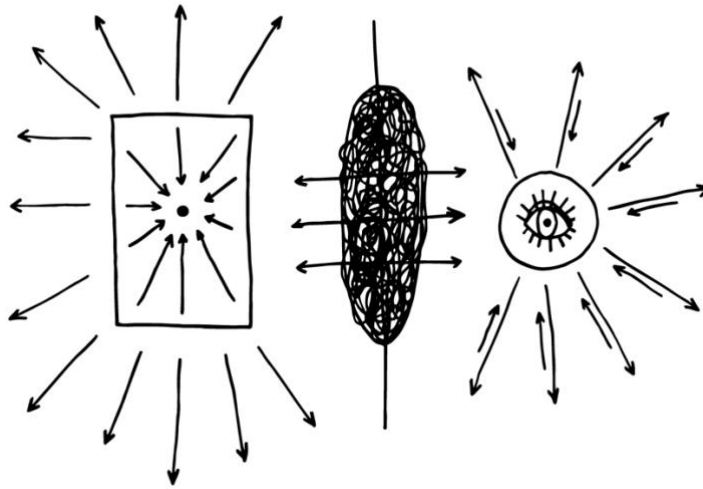


Figure 1: First iteration of the art encounter, part of a series of drawings undertaken during this thesis.

Intersubjective relationality in the art encounter is an important constituent of my research, since my thesis paper goes into detail about the phenomenological correlation between viewer and artwork, and the dynamic between viewers. While subjectivity denotes the quality of perception being based on or influenced by personal feelings, memories, and experiences, *intersubjectivity* is the sharing of this subjectivity with others during discourse, the negotiation of a concept, or other forms of communication. In other words, the latter focuses on the relation or intersection between people's cognitive perspectives, which in the exhibition setting, I argue, intersects with views expressed in the artwork itself. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the work of Issa and Farooq, as both artists address the potential of art to generate meaningful encounters on the intersubjective level. *Book of Facts* teases out the correlation between individual experience and association with language, history, and material objects through heavily abstracted installation, sculpture, video, photography, and text. *A Heap of Random*

*Sweepings* interrogates the violent histories of anthropological museum collections and their colonial origins with an immersive installation, featuring sound, sculpture, printmaking, photography, and poetry.<sup>6</sup> Through unconventional methods of display and the decisive omission of conventional didactic text, *Book of Facts* and *A Heap of Random Sweepings* succeed in reimagining the exhibition anatomy which—in the context of medium and large Western institutions—is a carefully calibrated formula that overdetermines processes of exhibition-making and reception.

Exhibition anatomy can be characterized in terms of components and configuration. The former category encompasses the artworks on display, the various media that contextualize them (wall labels, pamphlets, catalogs, audio guides, curatorial essays, press releases), and supplementary programming activities that dialectically foster thought and understanding. The configuration refers to the relations of the components in the gallery as directed by the curator who is not the focus of this thesis. I draw on the figure of the curator in my analysis because of their involvement in exhibition anatomy through didactic panels, layout design, and other materials that communicate particular narratives without reference to the subject positionality that is articulated the message. Strategically experimenting with elements of graphic and interior design, the curator produces a conventionally structured exhibition that engages an ideal and, intentionally, abstractly formulated public through its rhetoric, articulation, and pedagogies.<sup>7</sup> Carefully

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<sup>6</sup> Issa, Iman. *Book of Facts*. September 12, 2019 – November 10, 2019, daadgalerie, Berlin.

Farooq, Sameer. *A Heap of Random Sweepings*. September 25, 2021 – November 14, 2021, Koffler Centre for the Arts, Toronto.

<sup>7</sup> Roger I. Simon's utilization of the term "mise-en-scène" in *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice* offers an interesting explanation of how the exhibition anatomy courts viewers in the gallery. Usually reserved for theatrical and cinematic productions, mise-en-scène expands on how curatorial judgements strongly influence affect and knowledge in the gallery space. The "mise-en-scène" is to be understood as separate but working in tandem with the institutional apparatus—a closed environment that produces and reproduces a set of carefully constructed beliefs. See Roger I. Simon, *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

calibrated to support a particular narrative, the curator's authority—which hinges on expertise in translating artworks for a viewing public—deploys persuasive elements of display that presuppose the perceptive experiences of the viewer, seamlessly instructing audiences how to ingest factual and sensory information. The anatomy of the exhibition, thus, amounts to an ideological container for interpretation of the artwork that is constrained by the components of the exhibition.

It is my contention that in questioning the ways in which we view and derive meaning from displayed works in a gallery space, Issa and Farooq successfully challenge this ideological container. The exhibitions conceal the traditional curatorial presence that articulates itself through contextual wall panels. In both case studies, the involvement of the curator fluctuates and is hard to trace clearly. In *Book of Facts*, it is impossible to locate the curator on the exhibition floor as Issa has taken control over the didactic panels. Online catalogs and abstracts of the exhibition do not list any curatorial intervention.<sup>8</sup> One of the only curatorial insertions I could identify was an essay by Melanie Roumiguière, titled “familiarity — memory — generic — specificity —detail — proposition” and printed in a booklet which was placed on a small table at the entrance of the gallery. Mona Filip, the curator for *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, takes a more defined role for the exhibition—they establish presence through an introductory panel and curatorial essay. Filip positions themselves as a collaborator to Farooq's immersive installation and as such, gives more agency to the artist in the construction of the exhibit.

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<sup>8</sup> “Solo Show: Iman Issa - Book Of Facts Iman Issa,” ArtFacts , 2019.

The display methods of *Book of Facts* and *A Heap of Random Sweepings* unsettle the determinism in the relationship between viewer, art object, and their contextualization, amounting to experimental discursive viewing strategies that divorce from learned habits—exclusively relying on didactic texts to tell us what we see—and embrace practices of reflecting on what the work connotes relative to our own way of being in the world. Both exhibitions show how the curator or the team responsible for executing an event may regulate their role to favor artistic independence and a less deterministic establishing of meaning within institutional settings.<sup>9</sup> Through my analysis of these two case studies, I theorize how viewers can harness the art encounter to prioritize productive ways of meaning-making through an intersubjective approach to spectatorship—viewing the artwork in relation to one’s own personal and cultural locality—rather than relying on the instructive whispers of strategically curated display.

My consideration of how *Book of Facts* and *A Heap of Random Sweepings* defy the operating structure of conventional exhibitions and their anatomy is informed by Tony Bennett’s notion of the exhibitionary complex, which analyses how the exhibition functions as an institutional apparatus of coercion.<sup>10</sup> In his article “The Exhibitionary Complex,” Bennett compares museums and galleries with Michel Foucault’s “carceral archipelago,” a prison consisting of a series of islands, arguing that visitors are subjected to omnipresent forms of surveillance which articulate specific power relations and social

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<sup>9</sup> I rely on both Melanie Roumiguère’s and Mona Filip’s curatorial essays to produce descriptions and posit the intent of the exhibitions in my analysis. I want to acknowledge that curatorial essays can be useful in understanding the intent of the artist, but that it may be more productive to consider these descriptive texts following the viewer’s attempt to root themselves in the exhibition or work.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Benett, “The Exhibitionary Complex” in *New Formations*, no. 4 (1988): 73-102.



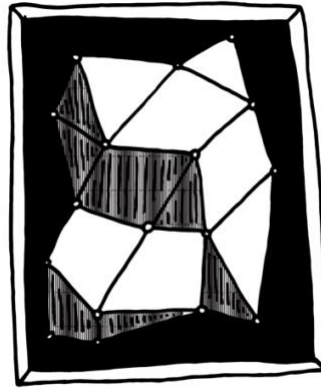
expectations.<sup>11</sup> These elements are tightly intertwined with the components and configuration of the exhibition. When crossing the threshold of the institution, one supposedly enters into a setting of authoritative neutrality that achieves “balanced representation and reasoned debate.”<sup>12</sup> The average visitor rarely contests what they are confronted within these settings, accepting the truth-value of display as an opportunity to become better educated or “cultured.” Visitors, for example, must comply with the learned gallery etiquette (including dress code, mannerisms, “no touching” directions, and so on). Whether due to the presence of the attendant, the judgmental looks of other visitors, or the legacies of “great” (high) art established by Western bourgeois culture with an emphasis on sophistication and status, viewing subjects govern themselves and monitor every movement in order to “belong.” In failing to comply, they run the risk to be denied entry or worse, perceived as “uncultured.” Unsurprising, these procedures and the viewer’s willingness to self-surveil testify to the overwhelming hold that class position has in the construction of taste in the gallery space.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tony Benett, “The Exhibitionary Complex” in *New Formations*, no. 4 (1988): 73.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Lyons, “Disobedient Objects: Towards a Museum Insurgency,” in *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 7, no. 1 (2018), 20.

<sup>13</sup> In his famous 1979 book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu focuses on the French bourgeoisie, its taste, and preferences. Through a number of surveys that focus on different social factors of importance in France (clothing, furniture, leisure, activities, and other matters of taste), Bourdieu argues that people with high cultural capital are more likely than those with lower volumes of cultural capital to define what constitutes taste within a given society. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge, 1989.



*Figure 2: Second iteration of the art encounter*

While galleries and museums constitute only one island in Foucault's "carceral archipelago," they efficiently interact, collaborate with, and inform others. The purpose of these islands is eloquently explained by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who introduced the term "patrón colonial de poder" (the colonial matrix of power) in the late 80s and early 90s. This concept consists of four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of gender and sexuality, of authority, and of knowledge and subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> The mechanisms set in place to maintain this organization rely on abstract universals that approach human experience in a de-racialized, de-sexualized, gender-neutral manner to hide the locality of Eurocentric genealogies of thought and affect. The authoritative neutrality of Western art institutions is one example of the colonial matrix of power functions. These institutions frame historical knowledge through what Rolando Vazquez

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<sup>14</sup> Walter D. Mignolo draws heavily on Aníbal Quijano who eloquently explained the sly methodology that make the current model of global power so effective, one reason being the employment of institutions that control the structure of each sphere of social existence. These agencies are tasked with forming, developing, and reproducing the structure of the colonial model. Additionally, the institutions exist in interdependence with one another, configuring an almost impervious system and also recalling Foucault's notion of the carceral archipelago. See Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 8; Aníbal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," in *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000), 533-580.

calls “an instantaneous space of presence, where representation predominates.”<sup>15</sup> The logic of display establishes order in the exhibition, regulates artworks and artifacts, and leaves no room for disputing knowledge that is deemed “objective” by the institution. The exhibition floor—both in concrete and phenomenological terms—propagates Western sensibilities that make claims to cultural diversity while erasing difference by framing identity and culture as objects of empirical knowledge. Assimilated by the Eurocentric perspective, these are de-racialized, de-sexualized, and gender-neutral “facts” that Aníbal Quijano vocalizes in his theory.

In order to assert the undeniability of these “objective” certitudes, the institutional apparatus of Western galleries and museums glorifies the expert—the art historian, the anthropologist, and the curator—and gives them the reins and authority over constructing the exhibition anatomy. The perceiving subject as an abstracted viewer is regarded as a sponge for information who doesn’t question or participate unless specifically instructed to do so. The wall panels and the staging of artworks establish a sense of false objectivity that dominates the atmosphere of the exhibition by obscuring the geo- and body-political location of the speaking subject (in this case, the curator) in the moment of enunciation. This is the speech act of expressing an opinion and positing it as an undeniable fact in a way that is immediately digestible by others who accept its objectivity as truth or law. The individual is docile in the reproduction of the colonality of knowledge and subjectivity—the fourth domain of the colonial matrix—which controls epistemology,

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<sup>15</sup> Rolando Vazquez, “Decolonial Aesthetics and Relational Tenses,” Interview by Miriam Barrera Contreras in *CALLE14: Journal of Research in the Field of Art* 11, no. 18 (2016).

education, and the formation of the subject.<sup>16</sup> This method creates distance between viewers and ignores the unique signifiatory boundaries of subaltern communities by subsuming them into a particular narrative of representation.

In the contemporary moment of social protest and agitation – from Black Lives Matters to Occupy Wall Street, boycotts and calls for decolonization led by these subaltern communities are blanketing Western institutions, as exemplified by the Decolonize This Space interventions.<sup>17</sup> These activists, who see through the thin, yet securely tightened, veil of uniform and restricted cultural representation, are rising in protest to contest the coloniality of knowledge and subjectivity propagated by the exhibition complex. The tenacity of these demonstrations is inspired by centuries of struggles by subaltern (non-European) communities and decades of writing by non-White scholars. The critique of institutional museum structures had led to concepts like “disobedient curating,” introduced by Steve Lyons to address how socially minded curators can “work within the institution but against the protocols that limit its capacity to act in the interests of the common.”<sup>18</sup> In his analysis of *Disobedient Objects*, an exhibition staged by art historian Gavin Grindon and V&A curator Catherine Flood at the Victoria

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<sup>16</sup> Anibal Quijano claims that Eurocentric systems guide knowledge and subjectivity production for both European and non-European communities, in the process forming “new geo-cultural identities” for the latter. When one reads the wall text in the gallery, one accepts it but rarely ponders who wrote it and from what cultural perspective. Those who are thrust into new geo-cultural identities are usually, however, acutely aware of the staging inauthenticity of their own cultural heritage in galleries and museums. These processes of knowledge and subjectivity production, as well as the traumatic effects they may produce in an individual, flatten the depth of local subjecthood—whether one is oblivious to them or not. The viewer assumes a position of objectivity, for the most part, automatically or forcefully. Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis go on to say that through Eurocentrism they denote a specific perspective of knowledge whose formation as a system was initiated in Western Europe in the middle of the seventeenth century. Its roots, however, are noted to be much older. See Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” 540-41.

<sup>17</sup> Manuel Charr, “Decolonize This Place Targets New York Museums” in *MuseumNext*, January 20, 2022. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/decolonize-this-place-targets-new-york-museums/>. The work of author Kirsty Robertson examines the contentious intersection of art, protests, and museums throughout history and in relation to political action. Focusing on the art institution as occupying “an uncomfortable space” between the arts, government, corporate culture, and the public, Robertson weaves of narrative of struggle and negotiation. See Kirsty Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums*, (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Steve Lyons, “Disobedient Objects: Towards a Museum Insurgency,” 24.

and Albert Museum in London in 2014-15, Lyons gracefully articulates the tussle between insurgent content of exhibitions—artworks that boldly critique systems of power that obscure cultural identity and weaponize class, race, and gender—and the infrastructure of the colonial museum institution.

Grindon and Flood staged an exhibition on activist art, spanning from the late 1970s to the present. Their efforts focused “a logical extension” of institutional resources” towards ongoing global movements, rather than “a radical intervention.”<sup>19</sup> They certainly succeeded in some respects with the deployment of powerful supplementary programming which included practical workshops— ranging from protest law to the history and practice of squatting to prop-making—and downloadable PDFs. With illustrations and step-by-step directions, these how-to guides, designed by Barnbrook and Marwan Kaabour, showed individuals how to make protest objects like tear-gas masks and compound lock-ons from mostly household objects.<sup>20</sup> The PDFs circulated globally and were utilized by communities that desperately needed them. In his paper, Steve Lyons identifies a few instances, including the University of Hong Kong where students were assembling hundreds of tear-gas masks in preparation of the 2014 Umbrella Revolution, a set of sit-in street protests that advocated for universal suffrage and electoral independence.<sup>21</sup> This displays how institutional status, in particular its public following, can serve to disseminate information with the aim of disrupting the global coherence of interdependent institutional power.

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Lyons, "Disobedient Objects: Towards a Museum Insurgency," 5.

<sup>20</sup> Gavin Grindon and Catherine Flood, curators of "Disobedient Objects," (2014-15), <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/disobedient-objects/how-to-guides/>, (September 20, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Steve Lyons, "Disobedient Objects: Towards a Museum Insurgency," 5.

Although valuable and inspiring for raising awareness through advocacy, such examples of museum activism are still anchored in an externalized notion of addressing subjects who are fixed in the anatomy of an exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Projects like *Disobedient Objects* fall short of attending to the phenomenology of the art encounter and its effect on viewers, masking the inherent potential which I argue for in this thesis paper. The activist objects, curated by Grindon and Flood, that took up space in the V&A, however, may not necessarily achieve the disobedience that is inscribed in their histories to the same degree that the exhibition programming does. Aside from their pedagogical value as signifiers for decades of global resistance against established doctrines, surveying the documentation of the exhibit produces a suspicion in me that the enveloping institutional genealogies subsume and disarm these objects.<sup>23</sup> These passionate works of resistance do not belong behind the glass of chipboard boxes or on hooks that suspend them from the ceiling—perhaps, because the people who give the objects a political agency by using and propping them up are absent. I am left with a sense of contrast between structure and content that produces more so annoyance directed toward the hypocrisy of institutions than motivation to change them.

This is not to say that all instances of institutional critique, which I take *Disobedient Objects* to be, are futile. Andrea Fraser successfully parodies the docent

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, it has become relatively easy for activism to be appropriated and misused in the curatorial field. Instances of artists, curators, collectives and other parties who take advantage of “activist trends” to gain publicity and advance their careers are well-documented in art magazines and journals. Steve Lyons writes about one such occurrence in *Disobedient Objects: Toward a Museum Insurgency*. He briefly mentions the Croatian curatorial collective WHW (What, How, and For Whom) who came under scrutiny during the 11th International Istanbul Biennial in 2009. They were accused by Guerrilla media of servicing the neoliberal agenda through shallow political engagement. See Steve Lyons, *Disobedient Objects: Toward a Museum Insurgency*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> The documentation I’ve looked at includes various photographs of *Disobedient Objects*, Lyons’ descriptive account of it, and a video walkthrough, featuring an interview with Gavin Grindon. See TeleSUR English, “Ep. 7 Disobedient Objects | Rear Window,” YouTube video, 00:11:05, September 3, 2014.

figure as propagating what Simon Sheikh calls “an ironic hierarchy of language” with *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), for instance.<sup>24</sup> “Institutional critique was never anti-institutional,” as Fraser argues, and “can only function within the institution of art.”<sup>25</sup> At this stage, the contemporary exhibitionary complex has adapted to the production of works that criticize their presence, operation, and legacy. In fact, the exhibition of activist and discursive works is encouraged because it carries currency in the present moment. It shows that institutions are self-reflexive and alert to injustices in society.

While good intentions certainly informed the curatorial approach of *Disobedient Objects* and despite the success of its programming component, an exhibition of activism does little to destabilize the exhibitionary complex, which instrumentalizes exhibition anatomy to construct an ideological container that tames art—whether the art is relational, non-relational, critical, or political. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Orient and Other Others*: “institutions [which rely on whiteness as comfort] involve orientation devices that keep things in place.”<sup>26</sup> The visitor, along with the objects, must fit and fit *in*; this often involves bending, twisting, and cramming into a subjectivity cast by an idealized mold. Within this mold, the viewer is both a subject and an object of the scrutinizing gaze of “the white, bourgeois, and [...] male eye.”<sup>27</sup> Any plurality of cultural experience that falls outside of the West is restricted and flattened by the staged neutrality, representational openness, and participatory invitations within the exhibitionary complex.

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<sup>24</sup> Simon Sheikh, “Letter to Jane (Investigation of a Function),” in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, (London: Open Editions, 2010), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique” in *Artforum*, pp. 278–83.

<sup>26</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 134.

<sup>27</sup> Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” 96.

Is the creative work and the viewer doomed to remain in the chokehold of false objectivity? This thesis argues no.

In her famous defamation of interpretive practices, Susan Sontag writes: “real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable.”<sup>28</sup> Conceivably, it is the human impulse to rationalize the artwork through interpretation and to acquiesce to the hegemonizing presence of the exhibiting institution that causes even the most daring works of art to lose their essential kernel which articulates itself in the phenomenology of the art encounter. Unconscious of the potential to engage this phenomenological dimension of the viewing experience, the viewer habitually flocks to interpretive materials to glimpse meaning, denying themselves an unfiltered sensory experience. In rare cases, a work of art will arrest them in their tracks before they reach the words on the wall; this phenomenon evades the interpretive instinct and captivates, whether the viewer is fully aware of it or not. It happens between the viewer and the artwork, undermining the exhibition anatomy with a kind of undefinable intensity. A revelation may occur—its silhouette is evasive like an eye floater. It vanishes swiftly and the viewer leaves with a moment they can’t fully account for, but one that they feel pertinent. It is the elucidation of this revelation that I turn to now in Chapter One, in which I undertake a reading of Iman Issa’s *Book of Facts* through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, to outline the core potential of the phenomenology of the art encounter.

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 24.



## **The Exhibition Has a Language, It Lulls Me With Its Speech; *Book of Facts***

*I would have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather it's lining. We do not remember; we re-write memory much as history is re-written. How can one remember first?*

- *Sans Soleil* (1983)<sup>29</sup>

When visiting Berlin on a work trip, a friend of mine invited me to join him and see Iman Issa's exhibition *Book of Facts*, which ran during Berlin Art Week 2019. The event took place in the *daadgalerie*, located in the vibrant Kreuzberg district. When we arrive at the gallery, we pass through a glass façade that led into an elongated and narrow room with white walls. Immediately to my right is a circular bench with four sets of over-ear headphones, an audio work in which a mechanical voice describes the attributes of a fictional protagonist. I later learn that this piece is called *The Revolutionary* (2010). Looking toward the end of the room, I discern a number of artworks lining the walls of the *daadgalerie*. Many of the pieces are abstract sculptures, mostly black or white in colour. Because of their formal similarities—their smooth texture and monochromatic exteriors—I assume that the sculptures are part of a series. Some of the forms are familiar to me, such as the megaphone shape that faces the glass façade and the long open-top box

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<sup>29</sup> *San Soleil*. Film. France: Argos Film, 1983.

that occupies floor space near *The Revolutionary*; others puzzle me with their ambiguity, and I found it difficult to understand what they are depicting. A lengthy text label behind a thin pane of glass accompanies each sculpture. Because these labels bear a resemblance to the form and placement of didactic texts, I assume they explain to the visitors what is on display. Upon closer inspection, I discover that each text verbally describes the thematic of a painting, alongside its date of completion, medium, and dimensions. I look around, but I cannot locate the paintings that the texts are referencing. I later learn that the abstract sculptures and the accompanying text labels are part of Issa's *Lexicon Series* (2012-14), a work in which the artist selects terms she doesn't understand clearly and reimagines them—materially and conceptually—through sculptures.<sup>30</sup>

At the end of the room, video and textual work are on display. A screen on the right wall plays a compilation of images of hands, alongside another text label behind glass. In a nook on the left wall, which one cannot see upon entering the space, there is a HD-video playing called *Proposal for an Iraq War Memorial* (2007) that visitors can listen to via headphones. Another abstract sculpture and a three-panel text printout with the dimensions of standard book pages rest beside it. When I reach the end of the room I turn a corner to be greeted by another abstract sculpture and its accompanying label. This one, however, is hanging on the wall, unlike the rest which are placed on the floor.

The other two rooms of the gallery space that featured Issa's work are a bit more intimate and dimly illuminated than the light-filled street-facing first room of the *daadgalerie*. This darkness creates an atmosphere that permits the artist's time-based

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<sup>30</sup> Iman Issa, "On Language," *Corona Essays* (blog), 2020, accessed November 25, 2021.

work to stand out. In one section, a large video is playing; this time, there are speakers that fill the room with sound. In another, five-HD videos play simultaneously. They are mounted on the same wall and are equal distance apart. Only one screen has over-ear headphones attached to it. A circular white table takes up space on the right-hand side of the same room. Four cuboid white stools welcome visitors to sit in front of four books. Exhibition goers are invited to leaf through these publications. One of these objects is *Book of Facts: A Proposition*—an artwork that should not be confused with the title of the exhibition, *Book of Facts*, that it is a part of. It is this book that catches my attention and will become a focal point for my analysis of Issa's work in this chapter.

I begin my analysis of Issa's work by briefly considering how the ambiance of the opening night of the exhibition can be understood through the lens of the Lacanian Imaginary. I then undertake a close examination of two artworks in the exhibition: the publication *Book of Facts: A Proposition* and *Comrade*, one of the thirteen sculptures that are part of the *Lexicon* Series. Through my examination of *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, I argue for the importance of understanding how the instability of the sign functions in the work and introduce the concept of the floating signifier in relation to her artistic practice. Following this, I undertake a close reading of *Comrade* in relation to the Lacanian Symbolic and my own positionality as viewing subject. Overall, I consider how Jacques Lacan's intrapsychic realms of Western subjectivity—Imaginary-Symbolic-Real—open up rich grounds for discussion on gallery etiquette and perception logic within Eurocentric institutions, and for contextualizing how audience members behave in such environments, prompted or not by the directional cues of exhibition flow.

## *The Imaginary of the Gallery, its Public, and Opening Night*

The Imaginary, which is the first realm of Lacan's psychoanalytical triad, involves the construction of the subject as an Ideal Ego through a process of (mis)identification. Lacan explains that this occurs in the Mirror Stage: the moment when an infant recognizes its own reflection and develops a sense of a self as distinct from the other (the mother) for the first time.<sup>31</sup> A fundamental misrecognition characterizes this relation to the image of the counterpart (another who is me). The infant observes its body as a whole, the reflection containing an illusory unity which the subject imprints with its own ego image. Thus, the Ideal Ego—a narcissistic formation that contains the perfection that the ego strives to emulate—reveals itself.<sup>32</sup> Since the unity of the reflection (another who is me) is erroneous, the Lacanian subject lacks something it perceives it has. Capitalism provides a great way to visualize what this lack entails; the regime instrumentalizes this deficit in the fabrication of desire, promising the achievement of the "best self" through various products, services, and meritocratic examples of success.

The public—by definition constituted through subjects with shared characteristics and/or interests—falls in the realm of the Lacanian Imaginary precisely because of its ambiguity.<sup>33</sup> The notion of the public in curatorial texts often figures as a well-defined

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Freud's Papers on Technique (1953-1954)*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 79.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Freud's Papers on Technique (1953-1954)*, 129-142.

<sup>33</sup> The topic of "the public" is widely discussed in other curatorial and social theory texts, as well. Claire Bishop talks about the public in relation to interactive art in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Nancy Fraser introduces the counter-public as a discursive subaltern community who develops in parallel to the "official" (or bourgeois) public sphere. Maggie Sava expands on the ethics of attention during incarceration-focused curation that facilitates connection between the public and inmates. These and many more texts attempt to define the elusive entity that is the public. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso Books, 2012; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>; Maggie Sava, "To Send a Kite: Simone Weil's Lessons in Ethical Attention for the Curator," *Philosophies* 5, no. 4 (2020): 32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies5040032>.

and unified entity that masks the social discontinuity and hierarchy. Simon Sheikh critiques the shallowness of the public in *Constitutive Effects: The Technique of the Curator*, stating that: “an audience [...] is imagining and imagined through a specific mode of address that is supposed to produce, actualize or even activate [...] ‘the public.’”<sup>34</sup> It is constructed precisely like a mirror that one peers into only to say: “Yes, there I am. This is me. I am (part of) the public.” In actuality, the notion is universal; in its generalized modes of address, it neglects cultural particularities and problematic histories of display within institutional settings. Forged through the very components and configurations of the exhibition, the false unity of the audience does not engender interculturalism—which honours the right to difference and balanced relationships between cultures. The universal flattens the depth of the local with structures that favor upper class European audiences as a “public” that prioritizes some bodies over others, both in attendance and in engagement.

It was during the opening reception that I glimpsed a public that, I argue, was Imaginary in the gestures it assumed. Nicely dressed people roamed to-and-fro between the abstract sculptures that monolithically claimed space within the gallery. Spending an appropriate amount of time in front of each piece, guests turned to each other and exchanged a few words to acknowledge what they had seen before moving onto a different object. The occasional lone visitor substituted this exchange for a slight nod or a smirk of self-satisfaction. Everyone appeared to move in harmony and unison. The

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<sup>34</sup> Simon Sheikh, “Constitutive Effects: The Techniques of the Curator,” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill, (Amsterdam: Open Editions, 2011), 178.

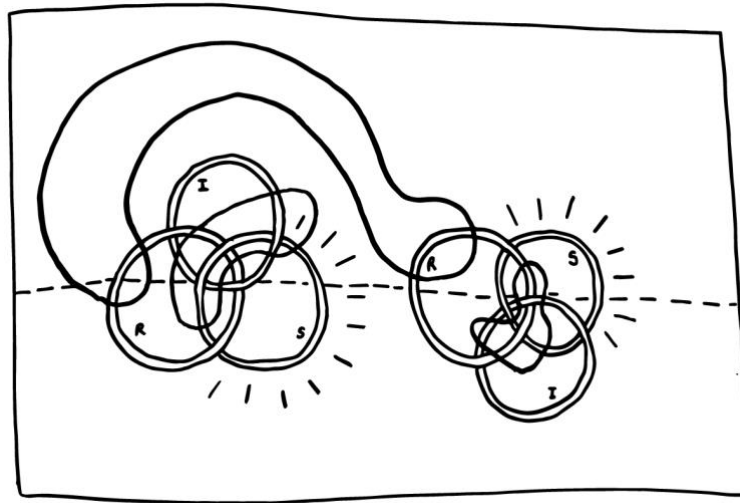
audience searched for points of identification in the work—relatability can be considered an important component for art, literature, and other narrative forms—and a sense of belonging amid others on the floor of the exhibition.<sup>35</sup> Viewers imposed their ego onto ambiguous canvases of abstractness to claim part in this elusive entity referred to as “the public.” The Ideal Ego emerged to pat our backs for “understanding” art and for being “cultured.” This process enables the narcissistic relation between the subject and their ego. It is for these reasons that the spectacle of the exhibition opening reminded me of the Mirror Stage.

Viewing Issa’s work during this intoxicating harmony of the opening night, I can’t say for certain that I was aware of my own or anybody else’s Imaginary impositions. Reflecting back on my experience of the opening through the theoretical lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I can locate points of personal fragmentation in my viewing experience that contest the unity (wholeness) of the viewing public. Was it not sensing a certain lack in myself that stopped me from approaching the artist to compliment her work and talk to her about the aims of her exhibition? And did my discomfort amid the sea of visitors who were enthusiastically chatting about the work signal to a particular discontinuity of our collective experience during opening night? These uncertainties point to the *intrasubjective* impulse rather than the intersubjective plunge which can be so fruitful in relation to the artwork. *Intrasubjectivity* denotes responses and exchanges that happens within a person. As such, my perceived fragmentation from the viewing public was not

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<sup>35</sup> Many theorists and cultural scholars expand on the notion of relatability as a useful tool for connecting with audiences. Author Brian Glavey, for one, examines relatability as a potentially useful aesthetic category, using Frank O’Hara’s poem *Having a Coke With You* as a starting point. See Brian Glavey, “Having a Coke with You Is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique” in *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 134, no. 5 (2019): 996–1011. doi:10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.996.

necessarily stimulated from forces outside of me, but rather generated through the lack of something I perceived I had. Rather than untangling the intersubjective relations that are productive for understanding the art encounter, as I argue in this thesis, I was caught up in the Imaginary of the public and the desire to realize the Ideal Ego.



*Figure 3: First iteration of the Imaginary intersubjectivity*

Similar to my experience at the opening, viewers misrecognize themselves in the promise of the public—whether as a learner who obtains knowledge or as a status-seeking individual—and are not cognizant of their fragmented state. Rooted in the politics of the Ideal Ego, imaginary identifications embrace images in which one appears likeable to one’s self and others.<sup>36</sup> From exhibition openings to Sunday gallery visits, visitors are driven by the promise of improvement, productivity, and (even) satisfaction of the unconscious lack. In the process, they obey the rules of looking and being seen. In

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso, 2008), 116. Although the claim that the Imaginary seeps into how one identifies with works of art can certainly be developed, the general context of the exhibition provides a more stable point of reference for this paper.

support of this, Hito Steyerl and Irit Rogoff hint at the inherent and compelling relations of power and knowledge in contemporary art that support the Imaginary. Steyerl articulates economies of presence (acts of being there) as enabling a fundamental investment that, in the technological age, supersedes one's ability to produce an "object."<sup>37</sup> Rogoff, on the other hand, challenges knowledge economies, perpetuated by a certain liberalizing shift.<sup>38</sup> Both address the undeniable social currency of exhibition-going. Crossing the institutional threshold, viewers assume an aura, informed by residues of elitism and authority of taste; they enter the Imaginary public. Whether consciously or not, they walk a little taller, taking part in the economies of knowledge and presence that inscribe the art space and the image of self. They engage in an act of intersubjective perception and misrecognition.

### *The Language of the Exhibition, Interpretation & Floating Signifiers*

#### *in Book of Facts: A Proposition*

In order to advance the theory about intersubjective perception and misrecognition in the Imaginary of the gallery, modes of address—like architecture, narrative, communication media—must be considered in their own right. If an exhibition is a system of beliefs that poses what is right and wrong, true or false, then artworks are the components for building meaning. Curatorial projects incorporate storytelling as an important technique for public address and utilize the logic of display to stimulate

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<sup>37</sup> Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, (New York: Verso, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Turning," in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. by Paul O'Neill, (London: Open Editions, 2010), 34.



contemplation or facilitate communication. With all its emphasis on components and configuration to convey ideas and beliefs, the exhibition space is structured like a language, insofar as it is articulated through the display of artworks in a way that obeys rules, like syntax and grammar, to connote a given meaning.

Lacan based much of his theory of psychoanalysis on a similar notion; for him, the unconscious possesses certain characteristics that make it language-like.<sup>39</sup> He referred to the teachings of structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure who theorized language as a system of signs where each sign combines a signifier (the name of the object) and a signified (the actual object).<sup>40</sup> For instance, the word horse is a signifier, while the hoofed mammal it points to is the signified. While Saussurean linguists maintain that the signifier and signified balance each other in an interdependent relationship, Lacan emphasizes the primacy of the signifier. For him, the equation of the sign is unstable. As part of a closed order of language that determines the social and linguistic relations in the sign's constitution, the signifier represses the signified by virtue of shifts in its meaning; it bars the subject from ever really reaching the real of the signified, just a representation of it.<sup>41</sup> Examples of this hierarchical relationship include metaphor, which entails deliberately saying the wrong signifier in the process of signification, and metonymy, which substitutes a signifier for another that closely relates to it in meaning.

With her artwork *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, Issa plays with signifiers that have captured her intention to display the instability of signs. This is a book about an

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 2018), 20.

<sup>40</sup> Ferdinand Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (London: Duckworth, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink, H  lo  se Fink, and Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 412-444.

exhibition that has never taken place.<sup>42</sup> Commissioned by the Sharjah Biennial in 2017, the publication's design is minimalist. On every left page, there is a diagram, contained by a thinly outlined black rectangle. In the unmarked space, Issa inserts red dots and beside them—a word or a set of words. The artist chooses these signifiers, presumably, from the paragraphs on the opposing page. These strings of text have varying length and content. No context is provided for these excerpts. Some signifiers in the diagram are mentioned in the short paragraph on the right page, others are only indirectly alluded to. Toward the back of the book, Issa includes a bibliography of titles that end in ellipses, perhaps suggesting their incompleteness (e.g., *The Sumerians...*). There is no author nor year. A list of illustration and an index are also included. The aura of ambiguity cloaks the gallery-goer as they leaf through the book, looking for any clue that would help them understand what is taking shape before their eyes.

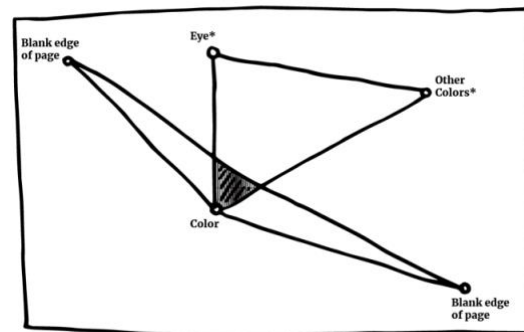
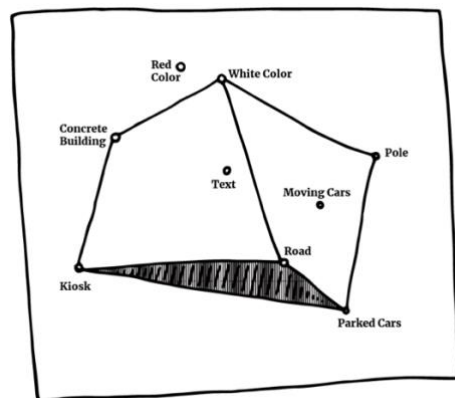


Figure 4: (left) Mental Mapping Exercise #1, in relation to Figure #65 in the "Book of Facts: A Proposition"

Figure 5: (right) Mental Mapping Exercise #2, in relation to Figure #16 in the "Book of Facts: A Proposition"

<sup>42</sup> Linda Taylor, "Iman Issa at Spike Island, Bristol," in *ArtReview*, April 04, 2018, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://artreview.com/ar-april-2018-review-iman-issa/>.

These words, in relation to one another, tell a story but I am not sure whether they communicate to me in the same way they have communicated to Issa who has bestowed them with importance by including them in her work. In the context of *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, these signifiers are floating, meaning they accept a slew of highly variable signifieds and may denote different things to different people. The absence of specificity and the deliberate omission of framing or fixing information does not indicate reduction, but rather stimulates participation in meaning-building. Issa calls on the imagination and the locality of the viewer with this work, employing “[omission] as a device for democratic enrichment,” as art critic Laura Taylor claims.<sup>43</sup> *Book of Facts: A Proposition*’s mode of delivery gives the viewer some agency in determining meaning value which, in a way, deliberately destabilizes Issa’s “authority.” The artist’s cryptic experiment with signifiers extends to her exhibition at large.

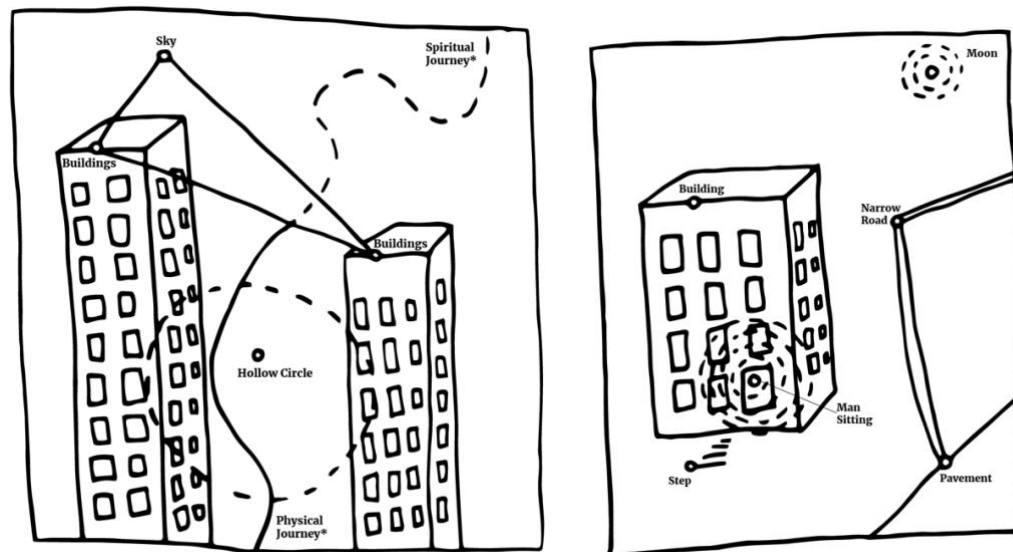


Figure 6: (left) Mental Mapping Exercise #3, in relation to Figure #69 in the "Book of Facts: A Proposition"

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

*Figure 7: (right) Mental Mapping Exercise #4, in relation to Figure #42 in the "Book of Facts: A Proposition"*

In traditional North American and European galleries, the ideological container—that which guides particular interpretations of artworks through the curated exhibition anatomy, the rules of display, and the authority of the curator act as totalizing forces that perform classificatory functions. The curatorial team arrives at the final presentation of artworks by filtering the viable components and thematically presenting the configuration. Decisions are made about who and what to include based on relevance to the contemporary moment, currency in the art market, and usability in supporting the premise of the show. Transpiring at numerous stages of exhibition-making, materials are carefully selected, interpreted, and translated within the confines of the hosting institution.

The sorting process is multi-layered. Classification, for example, is the *modus operandi* of archives. Thus, in passing through the eyes and hands of the curator, the work/artist/idea has already been compartmentalized and organized in relation to other works/artists/ideas. This also extends to the hosting institution which contributes its own boundaries on activities and topics, mostly enacting these limitations during negotiation processes that unfold during curatorial pitches, fundraising, planning and logistics. Gallery aesthetics, on the other hand, guide how the work is classified in the public consciousness—most notably in creating hierarchical relations between the objects by putting a certain piece on a pedestal, while another remains in a corner. All these classificatory events come to a crescendo in the final program where the artworks act as

signifiers in the closed order of the pre-determined and layered decision-making processes.

Artists such as Issa are cognizant of the transformative effects that curatorial, institutional, and archival sorting may have on their work. In conversation with Nina Tabasommi, Issa confirms this closed order by stating that the artworks on display don't necessarily exist outside of the gallery because they are part of a particular set of relationships, enacted through selection and arrangement, as well as expectations.<sup>44</sup> Much like signifiers, artworks are differential elements that are combined according to the coalescent totalizing laws of the curator, the display, and the institution.<sup>45</sup> How a spectator approaches an artwork as a signifier depends on how they anticipate the object's meaning. This, in turn, can be influenced by how much is known about the piece and its network—the artist who made it, the curator who displayed it, its interpretation as communicated through modes of address. It also depends on the artist's history of circulation, as Mieke Bal points out when referring to the modernist legacy: “semiotically speaking, [the] omnipresence of Rothko sustains a particular strategy of cultural imperialism, namely repetition. Indeed, by the repeated encounter with the same style or concept, the public is bound to get used to the idea which the particular work represents.”<sup>46</sup> In this case, “greatness” as meaning doesn't result from but is engrained in the mindset of the spectator, subtly denying the possibility of divergence. The repetition of content,

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<sup>44</sup> “1 QUESTION\_\_1 ANSWER: Relationships,” YouTube video, 00:02:45, posted by “TAXISPALAIS Kunsthalle Tirol,” March 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoM8LoCh8Mc>.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 116. It is important to note that the nature of the artwork can be versatile, depending on which relation one focuses on—the relation between the work and the artist or the work and the spectator. In the first instance, the artwork can also be regarded as a sign, the artist combining a signifier and a signified to communicate something (the sign).

<sup>46</sup> Mieke Bal, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reese Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, (London: Routledge, 1996), 147.

structures, and mode of address overdetermine the viewing experience. Led by didacticism and grandiose repletion, the individual visits having prepared for the art encounter which, ironically, mutes some of the potential inherent in it.

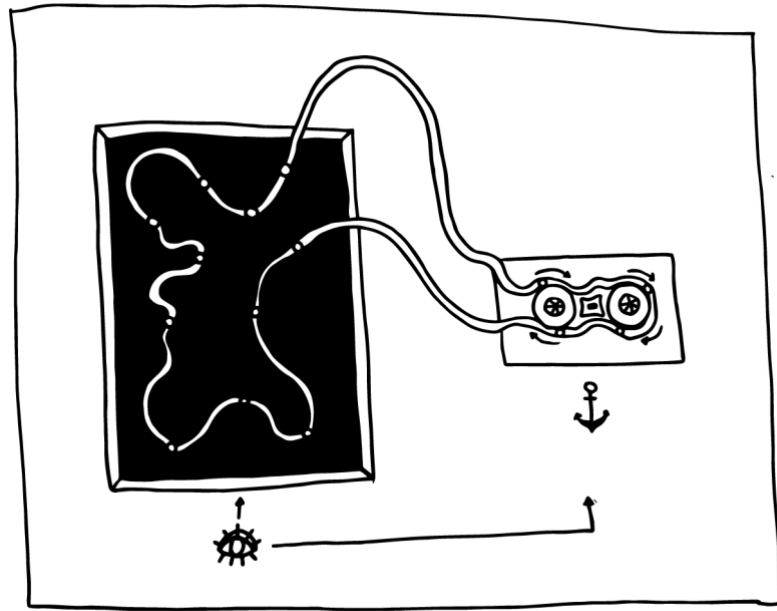


Figure 8: Third iteration of the art encounter, through the lens of didactic text

The textual materials that support the experience of viewing in the exhibition space act as quilting points for the artwork in the absence of the artist or curator. Lacan refers to this site of attachment as the *point de capiton*—where the signifying chain stops its endless flow because the signifier and signified knot together.<sup>47</sup> In the gallery, the language *on* art superimposes itself on the language *of* art (the articulations of the artworks themselves), the former fixing and in some instances, overwriting the latter.

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Psychoses (1955-1956)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 258-270.

Slavoj Žižek quantifies the ideological space as a site of non-bound, non-tied elements.<sup>48</sup> Given my previous stipulation of the exhibition as a system of beliefs, these non-bound components can be approached as floating signifiers—similar to the ones we encountered in Issa’s *Book of Facts: A Proposition*.

With an unspecifiable or non-existent signified, a floating artwork carries radical potential. What is actually at stake in the ideological space that Žižek has identified is which *point de capiton* “will totalize, including in its series of equivalences, the free-floating elements.”<sup>49</sup> Those who write the wall text highlight what is deemed noteworthy in the piece, its big idea. A viewer looks at the artwork and then mechanically turns to the label for guidance. Much like the process of interpretation that Susan Sontag outlines, the words on the wall read: “Look, don’t you see that X is really—or really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?”<sup>50</sup> The text label names the thing, allowing its passage onto the Symbolic plane and making it available to the realm of discourse. In the process, the artwork is turned into a techno-scientific object. The initial thing is negated.<sup>51</sup> In the attempt to deepen the audience’s understanding of the artwork, the curator needs to transform the piece into an observable artifact that contributes to knowledge-building in a way that aligns with the economies and mechanisms of the exhibiting space.

Many scholars are rightfully skeptic about didactic practices enacted by institutions. Margaret Lindauer, for instance, considers the limitations of written text of exhibitions by keenly pointing out that even when wall texts pose questions, the queries

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<sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 95-6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Hub Zwart, “Conceptual and Methodological Framework: Lacanian Psychoanalysis,” in *Tales of Research Misconduct: A Lacanian Diagnostics of Integrity Challenges in Science Novels*, Vol. 36, (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 25-55.

are merely rhetorical and followed up by informative responses.<sup>52</sup> Yet, the format begs the question: where does the shared knowledge come from? As it becomes evident in Mieke Bal's example of Rothko's paintings, the enunciation of "greatness" fails to locate its enunciator—"greatness" according to who? Even in their capacity as *point de capitons*, wall texts don't reveal what epistemology didactically fixes the narrative of an exhibition. The imprecision of who attributes meaning to signifiers in the gallery and who speaks behind didactic panels is channeled in Issa's practice. The artist harnesses consciousness and meaning-making to formulate micro interventions that interrogate what is said, how it reads and how it activates the audience.

By way of analysis, I pose my own micro-intervention to destabilize order: suppose that the viewer walked into *Book of Facts*, without knowing anything about the exhibition nor of the artist and curator. In the absence of didactic texts to anchor the sculptures, photography, text-based and time-based works, the viewer may approach the artworks in the exhibition as floating signifiers. In reading Lacan's intentions, Jeanne Willette postulates that the free-floating element acts as a repository for the yet unnamed and unarticulated; it poses a way for "the child to control the entry into the Symbolic order."<sup>53</sup> The artworks as (free-)floating signifiers form a signifying chain with no conceivable end, at least until something comes along and fixes them. In the absence of the totalizing agent of institutionally provided information, what else can act as quilting

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<sup>52</sup> Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. by Janet Marstine, (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 213.

<sup>53</sup> Jeanne Willette, "Postmodernism and The Trail of the Floating Signifier," *Art History Unstuffed*, February 21, 2014, <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/postmodernism-floating-signifier/>.



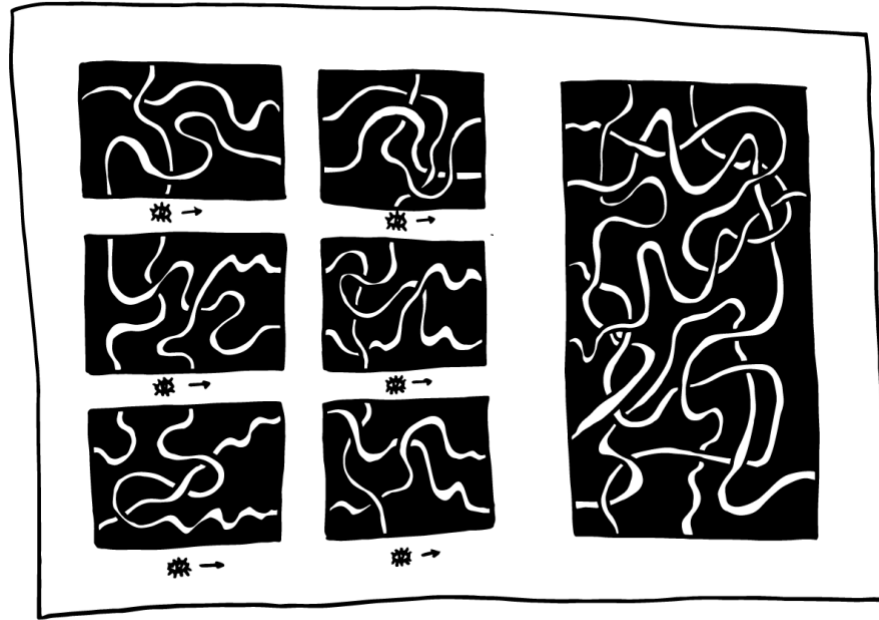
points? Issa's answer to this question involves the viewer's memory, experience, familiarity, association, and personal understanding of history,

Through her exploration of the possibilities found in association and experience, familiarity and memory, Issa calls on the unique psyche of each visitor in readings of her work. By probing the relationships between history, language, and objects, Issa comments on how we manifest mental images and how we interpret existing ones; she “explores the very act of perceiving,” as Roumiguère states in her essay about the exhibition.<sup>54</sup> On the floor of the daadgalerie, the artist articulates her series as studies where the artworks are granted the status of propositions. This framework permits Issa to intervene with the Symbolic Order of the gallery and potentially make spectators cognizant of their reflexes. In illuminating learned behaviors in the exhibiting space, *Book of Facts* observes the symbolic relations and hints at what may transpire when the order is destabilized.

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<sup>54</sup> Melanie Roumiguère, *Book of Facts* (Berlin: daadgalerie, 2019), 27.

## *The Symbolic of Display & Viewer Locality in Comrade*



*Figure 9: Fourth iteration of the art encounter, in a group setting*

The relation between artworks, the primacy of wall text, and modes of public address—all constituents of the language-like structure of the exhibition, as I have argued—fall under the Symbolic. This realm, Lacan states, defines the position of the subject as seeing.<sup>55</sup> This pre-determined and inflexible order governs the subject in its connection to the world and others. Conforming to the particular structure of the gallery setting, the visitor abides by the exhibition etiquette which hints at desired behaviors—no touching unless specified, talk quietly—and ways of extracting knowledge—read attentively, accept the truth-value of the information provided. The experience of the

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Freud's Papers on Technique (1953-1954)*, 141.

Imaginary public is, in some sense, curated alongside the objects on display. Searching for anchors of meaning denotes a habitual practice. Often void of critical reflection, this pattern, unbeknownst to the viewers, affirms the authority that hides its locus of enunciation, the place and experience from where one speaks and does.

Issa highlights and challenges the dependency on labels as a means of decoding what is seen with her thought-provoking *Lexicon* series (2012-2019) which pairs conceptual sculptures of differing proportions and wall text. The material objects take on abstract forms, inviting degrees of ambiguity that depend on the viewer's familiarity with the shape. As if awaiting interpretation, these works appealed to the minds of curious visitors who attempt to make sense of them. A paragraph of wall text stood on the right side of each sculpture. One immediately associated the labels with the objects and reverted to them in an attempt to glimpse what the artist was trying to say with each inorganic and abstract sculpture.

At the opening reception of *Book of Facts*, the first object I approached from the *Lexicon* series was titled *Comrade* and dated 2018. I remember this piece being just about my height. The sculpture constituted a rectangular prism that was propped on four skinny legs. The geometric shape was elongated but had a short width and height. Stripes of red, navy, grey, and white adorned the cuboid. I instinctively looked toward the text panel, which was covered by a thin pane of glass, to find out what the puzzling sculpture elicited. The text read:

A 1948 oil painting on cardboard depicts a group of nine figures: two men and seven women standing before seven empty plates and a water ewer all

placed on the floor. All of the figures have bare feet and are standing side by side with their hands folded before their bodies, as if posing for a picture. They are varied in dress: some nude while others are fully covered. Only one of them is wearing any jewelry. She is standing in the middle with a golden necklace, earrings, and a ring. The painting is expressionistic in style. It has uniform brushstrokes and a varied palette of red, green, and yellow hues. Its width is 96 cm. Its height is 68 cm.<sup>56</sup>

I turned back to the object and scanned it to locate the seven figures or the setting's sensibility that the text describes. I imagined everyone was doing this. After some time had passed, I realized there was no connection between the subject matter of the label and the abstractness of the artwork. The relation I had been insisting on was simply not there—I could not rely on the wall text to tell me what I was seeing in this abstract sculpture. Following this revelation, I became cognizant of how I was inviting other parts of me to complete the reading of the work in the absence of the *point de capiton*: a memory of a past experience or something I've read, a conversation with a friend, a feeling that was overwhelming me in the particular moment of perceiving. As my thinking unfolded in front of *Comrade*, it became apparent to me how dependent my perception was on my cultural locality, which also included my memories and experiences, and how my reading of the works is probably completely different than some—if not most—people who attended the opening reception.

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<sup>56</sup> Iman Issa, *Book of Facts*, September 12, 2019 – November 10, 2019, daadgalerie, Berlin.

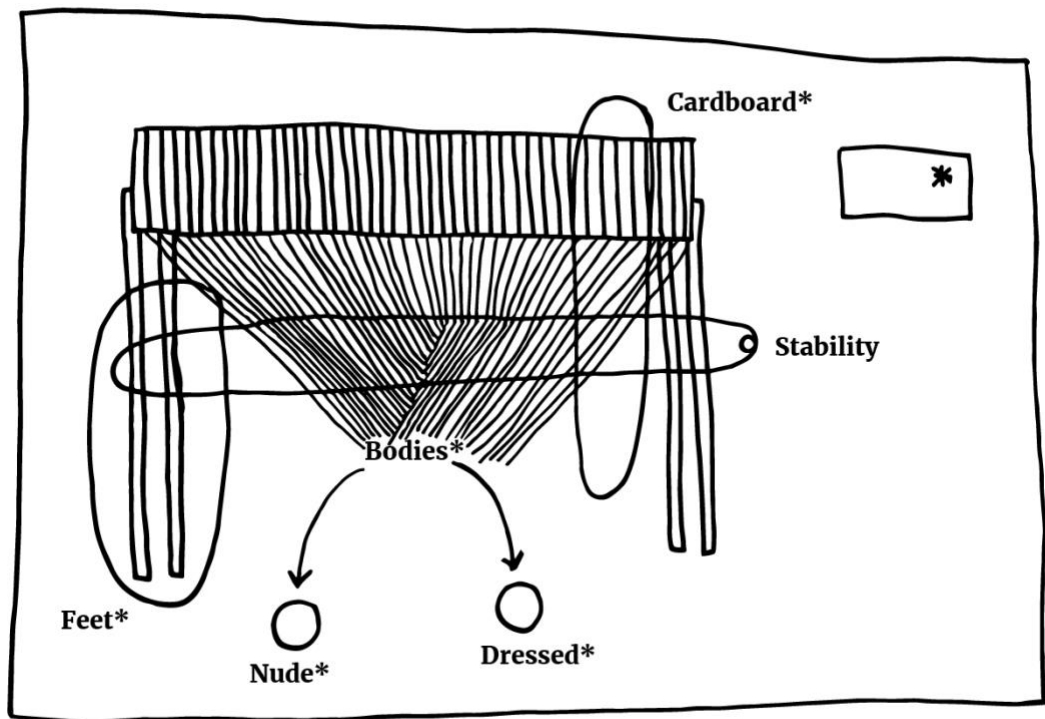


Figure 10: Mental map #1 of Issa's "Comrade" sculpture

In challenging the status of an object through indefinability and staging, Issa inquires whether there really is a knowable, ontological fullness to it. With a specific term as a starting point, each sculpture in the *Lexicon* series visualizes the connection between a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified). Issa explains that “the terms [she] picked were ones which felt pertinent, yet for which a clear reference appeared missing. Relying on existing artworks by different artists which had these terms as titles and which had a descriptive relationship to these titles, [she] attempted my own remakes.”<sup>57</sup> In doing so, Issa denies the established *point de capiton* and anchors the signifier from within

<sup>57</sup> Iman Issa, "On Language."

herself—an act of self-anchoring. In the process of creation, for example, one can call a ‘table’ a ‘chair,’ and the viewer will entertain the possibility.<sup>58</sup> And so, the signifier slides on the endless chain until it is fixed by the agency of the artist and later, by the viewer.

Through staging *Comrade* as a proposition, Issa invites audiences to impose their own interpretations onto the final form, material, image, and/or text. The anchor that the artist drops in her work is indiscernible enough as to not interfere with the perceiving subject’s reception of the piece. Issa offers a signifier without a known signified and in the process, a potentially generative force emerges. The sculptures, thus, appear as compound manifestations of outside stimuli—qualitative elements of the objects and the environment—and the imposed aura of memories, beliefs, and personal knowledge that each viewer brings. Any knowable, ontological fullness escapes. Instead, the object, fragmented in its nature, is enacted both in the process of creation and perception. In the gap between what is known and unknown, communicated and understood, viewers find their loci of enunciation by activating the intersubjective relation between their own positionality and the ideas that the artwork emits. In the Symbolic of the gallery, such an activity can emerge from the de-prioritization of the didactic text on the part of the curator or artist.

Standing before *Comrade*, I observed its visual qualities as a sculpture—the smooth surface, the sharp edges. In the absence of any clear *point de capiton* that fixed it in an ideological fabric of interpretation, I was afforded the time and space to articulate what the title meant from my own locality—that is, my geo-political subject position.

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<sup>58</sup> “Contemporary Conversation: Form and Frontier,” YouTube video, 01:24:00, posted by “Nottingham Contemporary,” December 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nCr3yZa5ZI>.

Conventionally, the signifier ‘comrade’ is closely associated with Russia and the political left. When voiced in the Western context, I reflect on what transpires in the gap of translation—between what is said in the source language (Russian) and what is taken to be said in the target language (English). In Russian, the word ‘comrade’ is ‘товарищ’ [tovarisht]. It originates as military address but was adopted in common social discourse shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1923). Hugely influenced by the Soviet Union, the Bulgarian Communist Party (1946-1989) made ‘comrade’— ‘другар’ [drugar, masculine] and ‘другарка’ [drugarka, feminine]—the mandatory form of address to facilitate a collective spirit. Inscribed in the social consciousness, the word was ever-present in my childhood.<sup>59</sup> In the daadgalerie, I imposed these meanings, inscribed intimately in my culture, on images painted by words and cryptical forms enacted by objects, all the while being cognizant of the aperture inherent in creation and perception.

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<sup>59</sup> When buying a ticket at the train station, the person behind the counter would smile and say “Ето билета Ви, другарко.” When asking about what I learned at school on any given day, my dad would often phrase it as “Другарката какво преподаваше днес?” (What did the teacher go over today?).

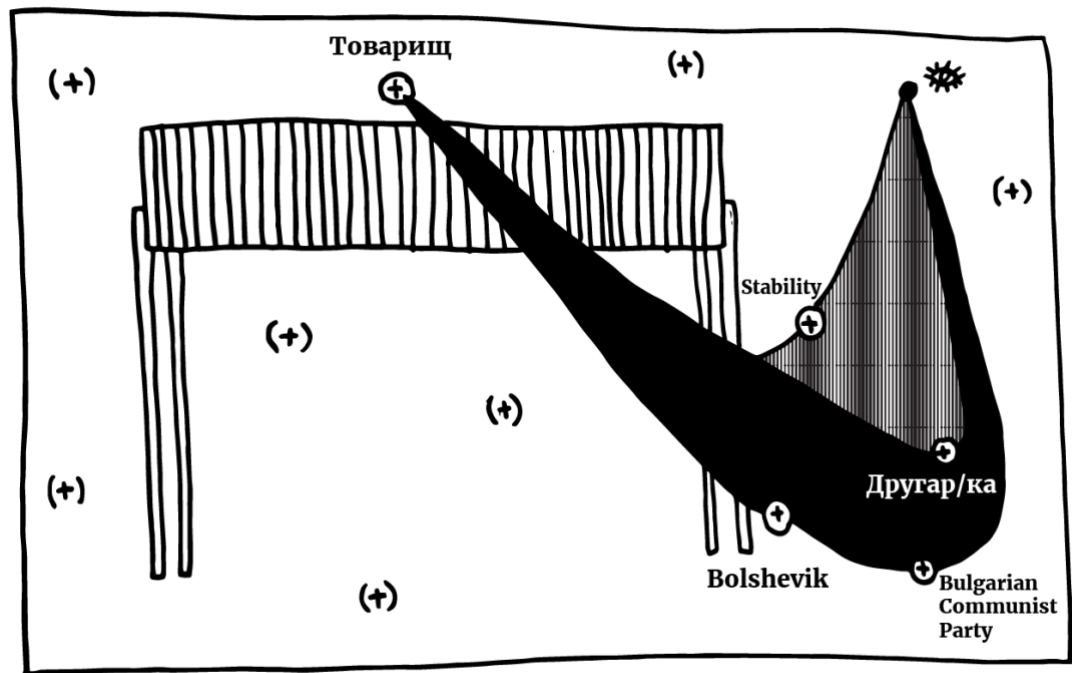


Figure 11: Mental map #2 of Issa's "Comrade" sculpture

As a material study, *Lexicon* suggests that language is malleable, calling attention to how the action of interpreting and translating necessarily transforms or even, to an extent, fulfills the fragmented object. Issa's strategy in the *Lexicon* Series challenges how artworks are conventionally staged. Instead of presenting an object with a fixed meaning, her abstract sculptures and texts appear more so as floating signifiers, awaiting to be fixed by each visitor's psyche. The artist poses questions like: "What role does memory play when we are called upon to make associations, and thus to form mental images?" and "What is left in the space between what one experiences, what one remembers, and what one forgets?"<sup>60</sup> The prospects of such an exercise, as I will argue in the second chapter, is

<sup>60</sup> Melanie Roumiguère, *Book of Facts*, 28.



compatible with the demand to decolonize institutional space—to whatever extent that is possible.

### *The Real & Objet Petit a within the Artwork*

The third realm of Lacan's psychoanalytical triad, and the most elusive of them all, is the Real—the beating around the bush of the unconscious. Following on Freud, Lacan instructs that “the place of the Real stretches from the trauma to the phantasy—in so far as phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary [...].”<sup>61</sup> This description points to the fact that the Real is distinct from reality. Despite its elusiveness, Lacanian theorists such as Žižek attempt to arrive at some kind of definition. According to Žižek, the Real is the “traumatic point which is always missed but nonetheless always returns.”<sup>62</sup> Reality shepherds this missed encounter, while serving to protect the subject from the senseless kernel—the Real—that which cannot be integrated into the Symbolic yet stalks it.<sup>63</sup> Thus, social systems constructed within the Symbolic are haunted by the phantasy of the Real.

With its emphasis on highly conceptual and abstract forms and breaking the order of the conventional display, the exhibition *Book of Facts* allows the viewer to dwell in the vicinity of something that belongs to the Real—a mysterious object that drives our desires. When attending an exhibition, visitors are not just looking at but are looking *for*

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<sup>61</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 60.

<sup>62</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 36.

something in the work, never quite identifying it in the process of interpretation.<sup>64</sup> When I first viewed Issa's works, I suspected that my reading was incomplete. I was missing something. Why did my mind respond to the breaks in exhibition language structure the way it did? What made me think of товарищ—aside from the obvious linguistic link? What was the reason for this excitement that still captivates almost four years later?

It is this excitement that links my viewing experience to the lack that originates in the Imaginary and is denied in the Symbolic, to an (impossible) desire to become whole. Lacan uses the *objet petit a* as that which motivates us to action, formulating it as “the key of human desire.”<sup>65</sup> It is within the definition of this partial object, which belongs to the Real, that it is unobtainable. The *objet petit a* is not what impassions the subject, but the phantasy of it. Lacan notes: “we are always searching for fulfilment, for knowledge, for possessions, for love, and whenever we achieve these goals there is always something more we desire; we cannot quite pinpoint it, but we know that it is there. [...] The *objet a* is both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality.”<sup>66</sup> The key to human desire is, therefore, not the object of desire, but the object-cause of that desire. In this context, one best understands Lacan's *objet petit a* as an excess or surplus, something undefinable that we reach toward in the realization of our lack. So, we continue to attend exhibitions to look *for* the unreachable and I carry on reflecting on *Book of Facts*, wondering what I have missed and what causes the infatuation or, better yet, desire to still look *at* it.

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<sup>64</sup> This is the quest of self-betterment or glimpsing some kind of “higher truth” (not to be misunderstood for Hegel's Absolute Truth or any such stipulation of abstract universals) about our/their current situation.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Transference*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Bruce Fink, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 143.

<sup>66</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 87-8.

On rare occasions, a work of art will transcend the confines of the technoscientific object and become animated. Displayed as a “balanced organic whole,” complete with interpretive labels that anchor it, art is closed.<sup>67</sup> However, it can also be, as Umberto Eco has argued, “an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity.”<sup>68</sup> The right conditions—including the position of the viewer and their psyche at the precise moment of the encounter—need to be in place for this to happen. Strong feelings, often not fully describable, arise out of the rendezvous. Undoubtedly, the visitor feels different for some time after leaving the premises of the exhibiting space. The event eventually engrains itself as a glorious or disturbing memory that the person looks back on. I have demonstrated this through my detailed account of affective and epistemic processes and conclusions during the *Book of Facts* experience. The *objet petit a*, the gap in our Symbolic reality, presented itself in the openness of Issa’s artwork as I contemplated it and brought my own enunciative nuance to it. In its capacity to fluctuate between maintaining its given significance and reflecting new meanings, stemming primarily from the observer’s personal experiences, the work of art becomes potential grounds for revelations of self.

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<sup>67</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

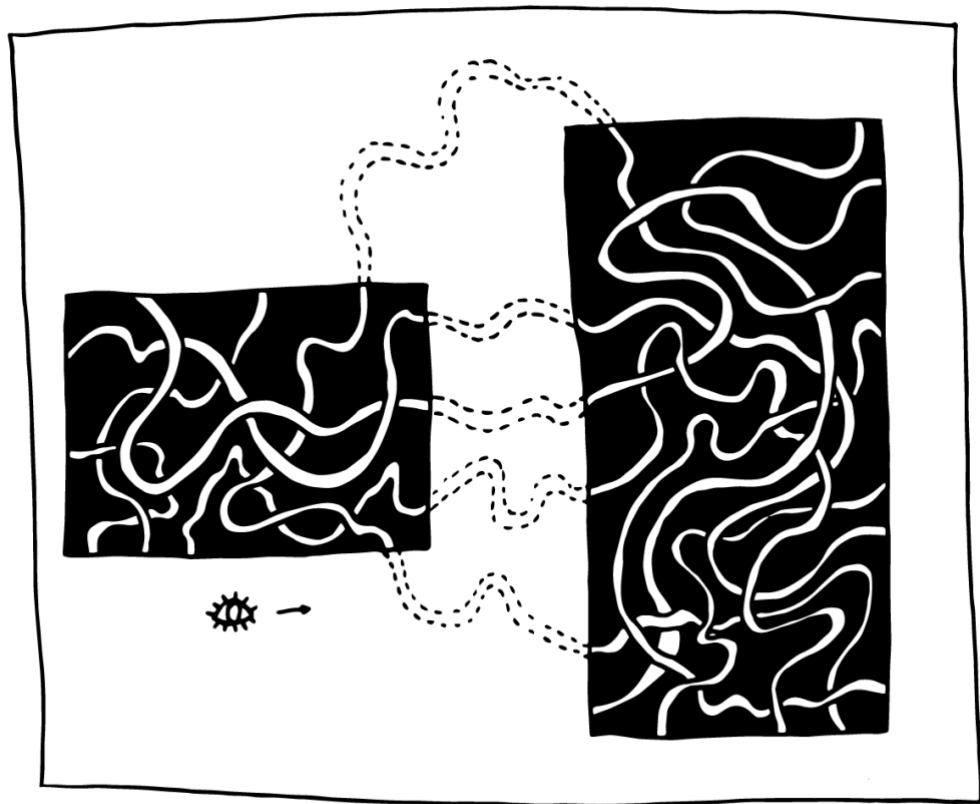


Figure 12: Fifth iteration of the art encounter, individual

Even quantifying the experience of art as an encounter hints at something more that lies behind the material dimension of the work. Theorists like Nicolas Bourriaud and Simon O’Sullivan have claimed this in their writing.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the latter perceives a certain surplus in art: “a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations” and which can momentarily give access to a realm beyond the known.<sup>70</sup> Perfectly aligning with the mysticism and the unreachability of the *objet petit a*, the way art has the potential

<sup>69</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guatarri: Thought Beyond Representation*, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 39-40.

to emotionally move the perceiving subject cannot be fabricated.<sup>71</sup> One can look at a piece and confirm its “greatness,” swayed by the many filtering mechanisms. However, when art truly moves during the perceptive encounter, then the surplus in the work becomes animated and partially, insofar that the feeling can’t be fully rationalized, reveals itself.

In this chapter, I suggested how institutions are guilty of presenting quasi-universal narratives that hide their locus of enunciation and how they fail to address the traumatic kernel of the Real through rapid historization. The traditionally posited curatorial team’s rationale does not necessarily enrich cultural consciousness, but rather preserves the colonial structural omnipresence of the institution. Experimental, daring, and disobedient curatorial practices can help destabilize the inflexible, language-like structure of the exhibit. *Book of Facts* is just one example that displaces the authority of truth-speak and shows the audience that the plurality of lived experiences can thrive in the breakage of the universal bond between wall text and artwork. The viewer sees the work through the lens of their own desire in the absence of labels that describe the object. For a split second, they catch a glimpse of that which motivates them. In this awareness of self and of perception, the potential for becoming cognizant of one’s own locality and that of

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<sup>71</sup> A great example of a soul-stirring art encounter comes from artist Zultan Ará who offers a detailed description of “one of [his] most profound memories” in a video from the program *An Anecdote of Exhibition Lives*. The work in question was by Dominique Gonzalez Forster. At the time of the encounter, Ará wasn’t aware of the artist, the name of the video installation, nor its topic; he paid no attention to the supporting textual materials that contextualized the piece—neither prior nor after the moment when something unfolded between him and the work. He was mesmerized by its aesthetic and emotive sensibilities. In telling the story of this encounter, the artist stresses the significance of the place and time of the event, testifying to the importance of mental state and environment in glimpsing something beyond the known. Clearly, Zultan Ará was touched by Gonzalez Forester’s video installation and yet, his experience had nothing to do with the materials that contextualized the piece. See Zultan Ará, “An Anecdoted Archive of Exhibition Lives: Zultan Ará,” interview by Farbod Fakharzadeh and Niko Nurmi, *Basis Voor Actuele Kunst (BAK)*, (2016), accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.bakonline.org/an-anecdoted-archive-of-exhibition-lives/zultan-ara/>.

others in the exhibiting space is potent. This may well be the missed encounter of the conventional exhibitiongoer.

Issa's conceptual play with objects and signifiers, although critical about how meaning is derived, does not evoke the relativity of the local to greater structures of dominance with immediacy. Western museums that emphasize multiculturalism, political agency, and decolonial approaches are good examples of social systems that rely on phantasy to function. In constructing a reality that prioritizes investment in historically overlooked artists and hosting exhibitions that "challenge the status quo," they fail to address their own traumatic kernel of their colonial origins, which critical decolonial discourses hint at. Through repeated commitments to improving equity and diversity, an event is recognized in its symbolic necessity; it finds its place in the symbolic network and is realized in the Symbolic Order.<sup>72</sup> In contemporary institutional practices, multiculturalism and political agency embody emblematic gestures that mask "the real driving force of repetition," which Žižek reveals as guilt.<sup>73</sup> The symbolic episode supersedes the traumatic one, never acknowledging it directly.

While a museum can be deemed progressive through its critical showing of decolonial works, the structures that uphold these works and the classificatory functions that filter them for display are anything but decolonial—they revert to the origin of the exhibiting space as exclusive, inaccessible, and violent. The Real in the genesis of the gallery/museum or behind the content of the work of art itself is inconspicuous in the

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<sup>72</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 64. This is not to say that such commitments are bad but more so to point out a subdued hypocritical relation between what is presented to the public and how this presentation came to be, or the reasoning behind it,

<sup>73</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 65.

context of viewing the artwork. By hosting challenging and thought-provoking exhibitions, the institution presents specific events that have occurred in specific places at distinct historical points. These events are framed as distant to the reality of the present since viewers are positioned as “objective” observers rather than active agents. The Real, therefore, is tamed. However, its kernel returns through repetition as institutions attempt to neutralize it through assimilation in the Symbolic Order.

Viewers, curators, and artists need to actively acknowledge the presence, assertions, and rights of self-determination for different geo-political subject positions, in order to achieve peaceful co-existence. The Lacanian intersubjective relationality falls short of these balancing efforts, for it considers only the viewer’s position in relation to the floating artwork. It constitutes an ego trap. In turning now to an examination of Farooq’s exhibition *A Heap of Random Sweepings* in Chapter Two, I suggest how the artist’s strategies of display reach beyond the Western space of the gallery to engage with different positionalities and how this strategy redirects us back to the missed encounter.

## Catching the Dynamics of Thought & What is In-Between; *A Heap of Random Sweepings*

*We need to transcend the idea of the museum as a place where objects are presented but the museum as something that we inhabit. I am the museum. The museum is what I bring with me to how I experience those things.*

- Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung<sup>74</sup>

*A Heap of Random Sweepings*, held at the Koffler Gallery from September 25<sup>th</sup> to November 14, 2021, is an immersive installation by Sameer Farooq, consisting of sculptural, photographic, and print works that address how cultural hybridity—the mixing of different cultural practices, values, and customs—manifests in the Symbolic through exhibition choreography. Much like Issa’s *Book of Facts*, *A Heap of Random Sweepings* avoids the conventional etiquette of didactic texts. When entering the Koffler Centre of the Arts, a short prologue introducing the exhibition is posted on the wall. Nearby, the titles, media, and dimensions of the objects are shared in a vertical list, alongside tiny images that help visitors pair the information to the corresponding artwork.

The exhibition featured three major works by Farooq: *Restitution Series* (2020-21), the *24 Affections* series (2019), and *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps of ASCENSION* (2019). *Restitution Series* includes three sculptures and eight photographs. Intended to “evoke the format and arrangements of museum

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<sup>74</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "An Anecdoted Archive of Exhibition Lives: Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung," interview by Nora Sternfeld, Basis Voor Actuele Kunst (BAK), (2016), accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.bakonline.org/an-anecdoted-archive-of-exhibition-lives/bonaventure-soh-bejeng-ndikung/>.



cabinets that hoard cultural belongings,” as the curatorial essay suggests, the artworks depict bones, masks, Buddhas, stone heads, minerals, and more.<sup>75</sup> While the two-dimensional images create a sense of movement through hazy outlines and overexposure, the sculptures—which aesthetically conjure up the likeness of excavations—play around with protrusions and depressions in the plaster to juxtapose absence and presence in the museum. The *24 Affections* Series consists of monoprints that are more abstract visually than *Restitution* Series. Each image in *24 Affections* features one dominant color—blue, yellow, red—set against a black background. Letterpress poems by Jared Stanley, the artistic intent of which are to unsettle the inflexibility of didactic text, supplement this series.<sup>76</sup> Finally, positioned against the gallery wall is *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps of ASCENSION* (2019), mounted on a six-tiered white pedestal. A hundred-and-twelve small, organic-looking objects that Farooq made out of clay adorn the shelves. On the upper right-hand corner of each shelf, viewers can make out the faint presence of five verses.

For the Koffler Centre exhibition, the works were enveloped in an immersive and highly meditative audio environment, composed by collaborator Gabie Strong, which was designed to guide visitors as they contemplate the works on display. Six different “stations”—occupying the middle of the dimly illuminated exhibition space—orchestrated the viewer’s interactions with Farooq’s immersive installation. Each “station” included a low-set black cuboid bench on wheels that was surrounded by

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<sup>75</sup> Filip, Mona. “A Heap of Random Sweepings.” *Koffler Centre of the Arts*, September 25, 2021.

<https://kofflerarts.org/Exhibitions/Gallery/Online-Publications/Sameer-Farooq-A-Heap-of-Random-Sweepings>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

photographs, sculptures, and prints from the *Restitution Series* and *24 Affections*. The artworks were mounted on tables or secured between two panes of glass which were held in place by concrete mounds at the bottom. Often, the photographs and prints were presented as a pair—one print or photograph hanging above another that shared similar or complimentary visual characteristics. When sitting on the benches, visitors could observe the towering display structures of *A Heap of Random Sweepings* and their vertical dominance. Mounted in this way, the artworks created intimacy for some, inspired awe in others, or fueled a sense of claustrophobia.

Throughout the duration of *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, the benches and the units that framed the artworks were moved around, serving a specific artistic intent to unsettle the museum space and its display strategies. According to the curatorial statement by Mona Filip, this decision “emphasized the fluidity of thought, necessary for shifting entrenched practices.”<sup>77</sup> The resulting configurations presented to visitors new paths for association and contemplation—an intent that was achieved through the collaboration between curator and artist. As one of these visitors, in the configuration of stations I happened to stumble upon, I was particularly drawn in by two works: *Restitution Series (Masks)* and *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps of ASCENSION*. In what follows, I recount my intersubjective experience with these two works to illustrate how locality—the geo-political positionality of the viewing subject—is engaged in the art encounter. I reference literary theorist Homi Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space to theorize how this engaged locality can enter in productive

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

dialogue with the artist through his work, as well as with other visitors in the exhibition space. I suggest how *A Heap of Random Sweepings* unlocks the potential of decolonial intersubjectivity through the framing of artworks in a modular display strategy, the unsettling of didactic text through Stanley's poems, and Strong's meditative soundscape. Filip explains that the installation is staged as "a deeply poetic reflection on the fraught and violent histories of encyclopaedic museum collection, their colonial origins, structures, and impulses." This strategy enables *A Heap of Random Sweepings* to create a space within the institution where cultural difference in articulation and meaning-making is encouraged.<sup>78</sup>

Upon entering *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, I hold my breath. Guided by the introspective soundscape, I am thrust into a deeply reflective state. I sit on bench at one particular station and look up at images and verses around me. At the time of my visit, this particular bench was facing a photograph, titled *Restitution Series (Masks)*, that depicted a collection of twenty masks within another display case. The photograph shows warm-toned colors and hazy outlines. I am so drawn to something in the phenomenological encounter with this image that I develop tunnel vision. I am aware of the other works that surround me as I sit on this bench—the white concrete block on my right that shows the excavated outlines of vases, *Restitution Series (Pottery)*, and two other vertically mounted images, part of the same series. Strong's soundscape and the vibrations of my own locality in the context of this exhibition, however, guide me to the masks. My initial impression is that these masks are looking down at me, their outline is

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

hazy. They vibrate, charged with cultural meanings I may not fully understand but want to come in conversation with. *Restitution Series (Masks)* destabilizes the frame of the institution's gaze toward a dizzying presentation of objects that "are no longer captive, no longer frozen in time."<sup>79</sup> In front of the pulsating masks, the process is one of exchange not of truth-speak. The "unstable" aesthetic of the *Restitution Series* banishes the certainty of presence as the horizon of thinking; the images bear the weight of muted temporalities.

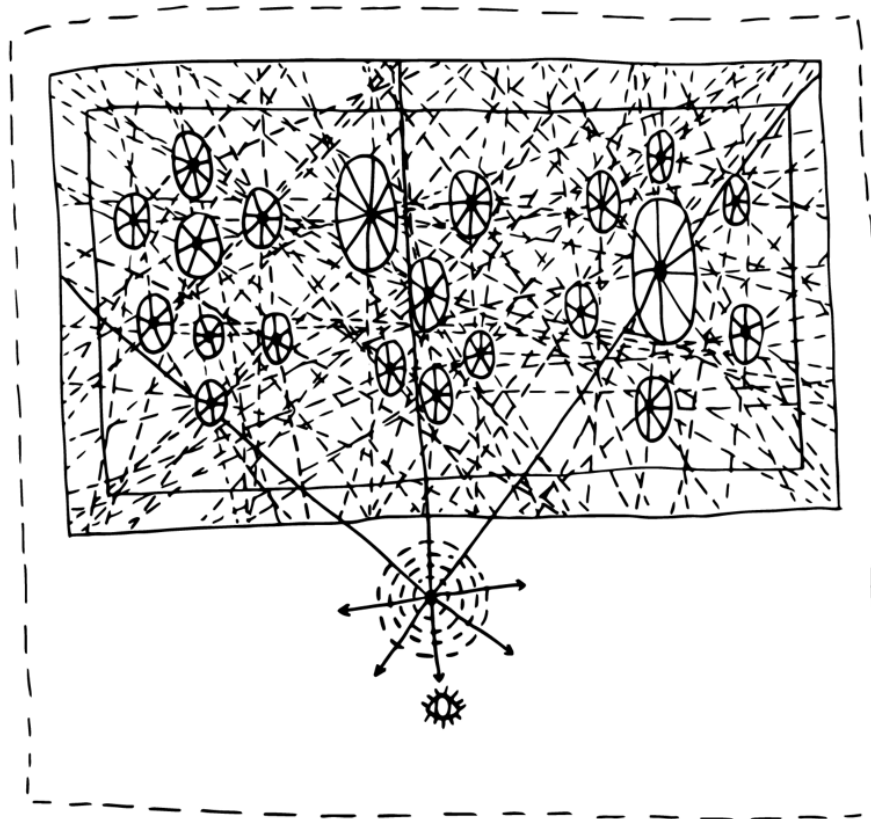


Figure 13: Mental map of "Restitution Series (Masks)"

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Contemplating the masks in the *Restitution* Series, I am no longer in the instantaneous presence of the gallery—instead, I am in the past and in the future—unaware of who moves in the physical space around me but in contact with something beyond it. This in-between cannot be located in the material and phenomenological methodology of traditional curatorial practices because such exercises are preoccupied with definitions and techno-scientific objects. They read *for* the visitor. The liminal, on the other hand, is messy, unclear, and confusing. Here, the responsibility falls on the viewer or a community of viewers to orient themselves and reach understanding(s) about what is displayed.

*A Heap of Random Sweepings*’ execution contests the permanence of the sign, the primordial unity, and the instability of socio-linguistic hierarchies through opening up this space of contemplation that channels cultural perspectives. With its meditative and self-reflexive modalities, the installation teases out more than just the flexibility of signifiers as reservoirs for meanings. Farooq opens up a Third Space whose ephemeral presence favours dialogical approaches over determination and showcases the inherent ambivalence of cultural authority. Widely discussed by Bhabha, the Third Space is a transitional site “that carries the burden of the meaning of culture [...] and eludes the politics of polarity.”<sup>80</sup> The encumbrance bases itself on historical realities of oppression and forced erasure, as well as the still dominant “objective” approaches to knowledge that we must unlearn. The blooming articulation of localized difference in the art encounter

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<sup>80</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38-9.

transpires in this elusive infrastructure. The interstice becomes the reservoir for localized affective and epistemic expressions.

The Third Space is elusive and escapes the physical which is why it is malleable and generative. It accepts the invisible, the unarchivable, and the undefinable as fragments that interact and dwell in-between the material display of the gallery and the borders established by modernity; it houses the cultural plurality that rebels beneath the determinacy of the colonial order. This is why it constructs a pathway for dislodging the macro frames that fix subjects and objects in place within the conventional institutional setting,

Visitors of the gallery come into contact with this interstice when engaging with an artwork on an intersubjective level. As the viewer moves to anchor the artwork, a transferential dialogue unfolds between the two, emitting everything lived by the former and everything contained in the latter.<sup>81</sup> In a sense, the Third Space houses the transferential liminality of cultural self-determination through the process of self-anchoring and, what Rolando Vazquez calls a “radical multiple otherness” that is constituted through the abundance of cultural perspectives and remembering.<sup>82</sup> The temporal release in the exchange contains the plurality of the viewer’s lived experiences, ancestral memories, relationships to the world and to worlds. The intrapersonal (existing in the mind) and interpersonal (external associations with other people and objects)

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<sup>81</sup> A concept frequently employed in the field of psychoanalysis, transference denotes the unconscious redirection (also, misdirection) of feelings from the past to the present. At the heart of the term is the idea that our expectations of people and situations in the present moment are dictated (to an overwhelming extent) by what people and events were like in our immediate vicinity during childhood. With its varying temporal signature, transference contradicts the notion of linear time; it relies on the individual’s relation to a specific object and/or subject, both in the past and in the present. As such, when connecting with a piece of art, the subject enters a process of transference.

<sup>82</sup> Rolando Vazquez, "Decolonial Aesthetics and Relational Tenses," 76.

relations called upon in this process open up to cultural hybridity and the depth of the subject.

Positioning myself within the distinct meaning scaffolds of my cultural locality within the settler Canadian context, I am unaware of who speaks to me behind the masks of Farooq's *Restitution Series*. It is evident that it is (a) culture(s) different than my own. I reflect on this knowledge. I think about the state of human relations in the world. I speculate about possible similarities and dramatic differences that my locality may have with the ones embodied in the hazy photographic image. In performing these acts, I am acutely conscious of the fact that the masked localities may disagree and that I can't argue with that because, fundamentally, we interact based on cultural difference. Our conversation unfolds in the Third Space. It will end either in agreement or an impasse and there must be harmony in this.

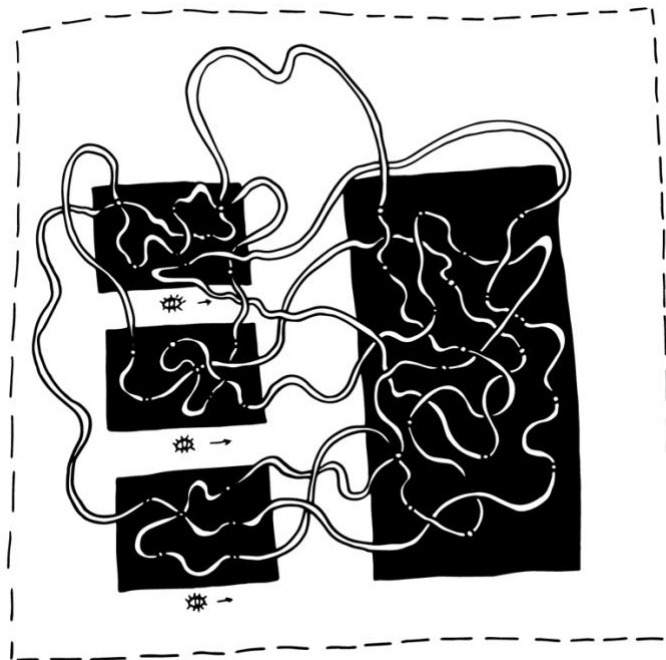


Figure 14: Sixth iteration of the art encounter, group viewing in the Third Space

The formal and contextual qualities of *Restitution Series (Masks)* call forth my intuition, affective and factual knowledge that I've inherited and accumulated over years. What I contribute to the Third Space is my Eastern European perspective and my positional awareness as an immigrant settler in Canada. This is my geo- and body-political locality. I converse with these masks. The draw of familiarity guides my mind to an important annual and centuries-old tradition in Bulgaria. Marking the beginning of January, young men dress in elaborate costumes, accented by cow bells. They dance, accompanied by live music, to scare evil spirits away for the year ahead. Their hand-made masks are heavy and fantastical; they vary in appearance—from detailed wooden ones that depict an animal or bird to towering ones that are draped in fur. The tradition is steeped in folklore and they are called кукери.

I compare the dress of the кукер to the masks before me. I search for relationality—there are similarities and there are differences. I think about the context within which these masks are presented. Then, I reflect on instances where the кукер tradition was taken out of its original cultural context.<sup>83</sup> Witnessing it framed as an object by someone's camera lens, I sense that something is lost. It is not the same as observing the masks, animated in the throes of the festival or static, stored in the basement of a dear friend but still taming with life because they belong there. Before I can follow this thread, the gentle bell of Strong's soundscape marks the end of a contemplative cycle. It brings me back to the physical space of the gallery.

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<sup>83</sup> Aron Klein, "Kukeri," *The Independent Photographer* (May 30, 2018), <https://independent-photo.com/stories/kukeri/>.



I get up from the bench and move to the work called *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION*. A hundred and twelve objects made out of fire clay sit atop a minimalist white tiered pedestal. This is the biggest and only unmoveable piece in *A Heap of Random Sweepings*. I muse about how quickly I decided that this sculptural centerpiece will be my next point of contemplation in my experience of this exhibition. The artist elicits a sense of kinship through this work.<sup>84</sup> I wonder if there is a correlation between the points of connection and disconnection I perceived in my encounter with *Restitution Series (Masks)*. Barely visible on the right-hand side of *ASCENSION*'s white-tiered pedestal, a poem cascades down like a mountain stream. The words are powerful but one particular verse stands out. It reads: "we never knew there were others / there are so many others."<sup>85</sup> The verse evokes both the then and now, denoting the continuation of struggles that persist today. The juxtaposition of "never knew" and "there are" enables Farooq to emphasize presence through visualizing absence.

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<sup>84</sup> Mona Filip (curator), "A Heap of Random Sweepings."

<sup>85</sup> Sameer Farooq, *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, September 25, 2021 – November 14, 2021, Koffler Centre for the Arts, Toronto.

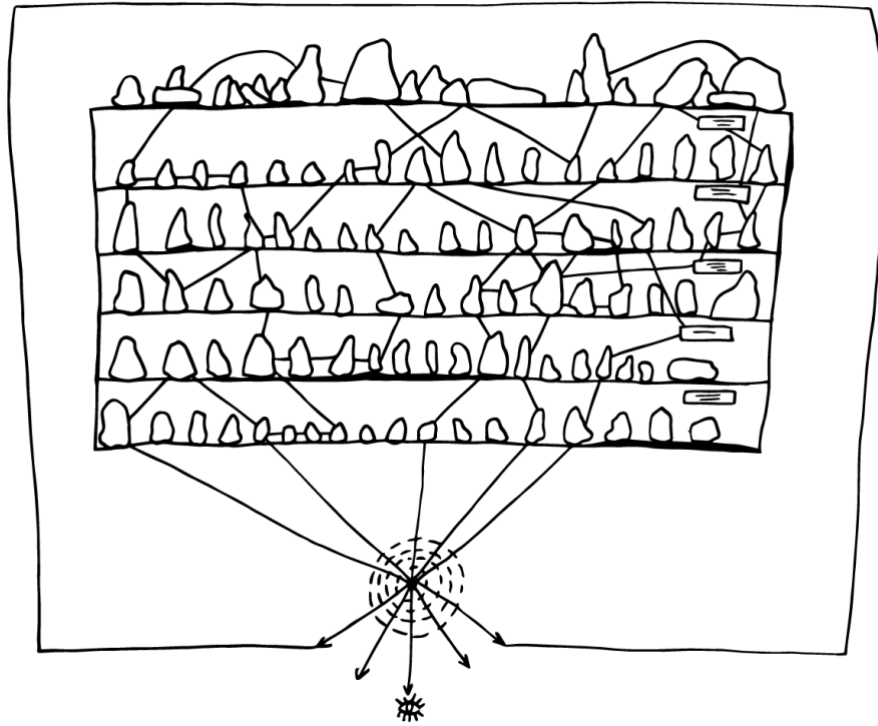


Figure 15: Mental Map of "If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION"

Farooq brings this forward in other pieces, as well. With the Buddha Heads in the *Restitution* Series, for instance, he shows physical traces of solid objects. The viewer looks at carvings that signify the displacement of cultures connected to those “artifacts.” The negative spaces demand attention in assertive ways. There is an inherent sadness there, the invisibleness once again gains its haunting outline. It depicts that which has been repressed and oppressed. Because of the strategic staging of *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, my readings of *Restitution* Series (*Masks*) and *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION* bleed into each other. The transferential exchange between communities and localities, evoked in the artworks and in the viewer contemplating them, connect in the Third Space of the gallery, From a non-Western, but

nonetheless European, perspective, I experience a kinship with this excess that oscillates in this Third Space between my embodied locality and those in the artwork. I desire to release the surplus so it can envelope and overpower the gallery structures.

What the artwork brings forward in the exchange of the encounter is the plurality of these perspectives which bombard me with immediacy. The indelible excess amounts to a typhoon of localities that have been flattened for decades in the institutional setting and a depth of subjecthood that has been prevented and forbidden for a long time. In the act of perception, the viewer may knowingly recognize or unknowingly receive these pluralities.<sup>86</sup> Strong marks another end of the reflection cycle.

### *Self-Anchoring the Interstice of the Gallery Space*

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha eloquently explains cultural difference as “the process of enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, [and] adequate to the construction of [its own] systems of cultural identification.”<sup>87</sup> It localizes the images, modes of communication, ways of doing and thinking of a particular community, giving them the authority to self-determine themselves and how they present to others. This dynamic approaches the social fabric as nodes of localities that are in constant interaction and negotiation with one another as they navigate and take up space, instead of an ideological container with a function that subsumes difference through the

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<sup>86</sup> I use these two verbs to honour the instances where we might miss (or can’t recognize) something that is having an extraordinary effect on us. This came to my mind when reading an article on Iman Issa. The artist shares the author that while some facets of the artwork capture her attention, she may miss others in the process of recognition. The latter she identifies as the immaterial and unconscious corollary of identification (knowing something at face-value). See Mia Jankowicz, “In Focus: Iman Issa,” (Frieze: January 11, 2013), accessed December 14, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/focus-iman-issa>.

<sup>87</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge), 1994, 34.

politics of representation. Embracing cultural difference—*interculturalism*—in the place of “objective” truth enables decolonial intersubjectivity. Cultural difference—as opposed to diversity—dismantles the hierarchy of the colonial matrix of power by actively acknowledging the agency of communities on the periphery.

In *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, the visitor glimpses how their way of being in the world is enforced, directed, erased, silenced, and/or privileged by the colonial matrix of power. They potentially become aware of their amnesic condition, where the context of instantaneous presence and cosmetic multiculturalism in the gallery coerces them to forget personal deviations from the Symbolic Order to become obedient subjects. The images presented in *A Heap of Random Sweepings* present injustices, inflicted on specific communities by institutions. Farooq activates cultural memory through self-direction to highlight what is exchanged in the intersubjective encounter. The artist and curator do not explain the images that they show audiences nor do they specify in what order these works should be experienced. It is the viewer’s responsibility to ponder what is in front of them and understand it. Because *A Heap of Random Sweepings* spotlights objects that viewers associate with culture and approach as “cultural artifacts”—a reflex in an institutional setting, the cultural positionality of the viewing subject and their cultural memory is activated. I approached *Restitution Series (Masks)*, with reference to my Bulgarian heritage and the ways we use, understand, think about, and interact with masks. The viewer—having articulated their locality in the act of self-anchoring—recognizes that other localities are speaking to them. Emitted by the artwork and, possibly, from other

visitors, as well, the affective and epistemic currents gradually gain outlines that are localized and embodied.

The poetic strategy employed in *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, thus, expands on the importance of the intersubjective relation—mirrored in the act of introspection—by immersing the viewer in a pool where other localities dwell. One cannot deny the spectral presence that charges the environment of the exhibition—the masks were speaking to me; it was not just me conversing with them. The tensions between fervent cultural histories and icy modes of display is felt. The reflective space that Farooq, Strong, and Stanley forge, however, is not necessarily angry nor hostile. It stimulates thought and awareness, which I experience intensely as a viewer in the gallery.

During my encounter with the artworks in *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, I am aware of how my enunciated thoughts and feelings are determined by a particular moment of enunciation, which depends on my upbringing in the historic and cultural traditions of Eastern Europe. This act of self-anchoring prompts a distinction between the enunciated—the sign or “what is being said”—and the enunciation—the subject that produces/manipulates the sign or “who is saying what.” The act of fixing the floating signifier, whether it is an artwork, a word, or a gesture, must be done with flexibility, respect, and willingness to enter into productive dialogue with others. The floating artwork and the act of self-anchoring operate on the premise of what Bhabha emphasizes in *The Commitment to Theory*: “there is no given community of body of the people whose inherent, radical historicity emits the right signs.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 27.

Signs can be rehistoricized and appropriated in different ways, they can never be permanently stable. When it comes to reading, interpreting, and communicating, one must properly acknowledge the cultural and discursive specificity of any given sign. To engage in cultural hybridity, our anchors must interact and negotiate with other anchors. Faced with overdetermining institutional structures, we need radical viewing practices for deriving and socializing meaning. We must honour different perspectives through dialogue, creation, dissent, negotiation, and other modes of communication and interaction as they arise.<sup>89</sup> Practicing mindfulness of these generative attributes of self-anchoring is pivotal to decolonial intersubjectivity. It is also important to acknowledge that some things are out of one's conceptual, epistemic, and affective reach.<sup>90</sup>

Surrounded by the artworks in *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, the viewer articulates the intersubjective act not only in alliance with the piece they are contemplating, but also to specific cultural realities evoked directly and indirectly in the work. I've argued that a lot transpires in the art encounter when it is approached through an intersubjective lens. At face value, this dialogical process cannot be discerned. In fact, the overbearing institutional structures, which Farooq critiques, prevent it. The localized enunciations in acts of self-anchoring on the side of the viewer and pluriversal emissions—the plurality of perspectives evoked in the floating artwork—need to happen *besides*, and even despite of the physical epistemologically coercive and surveillance structures of North American and European institutions. In these conditions, the process

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<sup>89</sup> I use the verb "honour" here in the sense of acknowledging and respecting, rather than as a moral imperative.

<sup>90</sup> Raqs Media Collective presents a useful framework for understanding one's cultural locality in relation to the self and others. The collective evokes it as a radical viewing process of "knowing 'non-knowledge.'" The framework accepts the limitations of one locality while honouring the boundaries of another. See Raqs Media Collective, "Wonderful Uncertainty," in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. by Paul O'Neill, (London: Open Editions, 2010), 78, 81.

and outcomes of the intersubjective relation constitute an excess but where does this surplus unfold?

*A Heap of Random Sweepings*’ affective modalities and critical strategies vocalize the collective energies and ancestral histories of non-Western communities who are traditionally objectified in display. The viewer is not *told* about them but invited to think and connect with them. In suggesting that the “museum might as well collect a heap of random sweepings,” Farooq challenges notions of history and contemporaneity, the objective and the subjective, representation (visibility) and erasure (invisibility).<sup>91</sup> He sidesteps these binaries in order to orchestrate a passage through a period and area of ambiguity—a liminal state—that summons cultural hybridity.

### *Doubling and the Return of the Lacanian Real*

While institutional architecture, structure, and phenomenological purpose rely on the notion of presence to function properly, the subject in transferential liminality insists on a different kind of presence. The Third Space of the art encounter contains the transferential and historic surplus that is not coded within the physical and ideological confines of the institution. It is where the intersubjective consciousness of the individual bonds and balances with that of others.

While the sign accepts variation of meanings, the interstice acts as a reservoir for the historic cultural difference that is unarticulated and negated in the present of representation. In the embrace of the Third Space, Bhabha writes: “[we] emerge as the

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<sup>91</sup> Mona Filip (curator), “A Heap of Random Sweepings.”

others of ourselves.”<sup>92</sup> The duplicity alluded to here is intriguing. Intuitively, this quote testifies to how our identity in the present of the gallery (singular, linear time) differs from and overlaps with our identity in the present of the Third Space (plural, non-linear time). While the subject and its relation to the world is regulated in the former through curatorial determination, the agency of the self enjoys a sense of liberty in the latter through self-anchoring. *A Heap of Random Sweepings* prods this independence by inviting visitors to “enter into dialogue with [the] objects’ presences, as well as the absence they evoke.”<sup>93</sup> With minimal access to curatorial texts, one has no choice but to come forth from their own locality and anchor meaning for themselves in the ambiguity of the Third Space.

The deep reflection about visible and invisible dichotomies transport one beyond the overdetermining structure of the gallery. It shows that true meanings, anchored by non-Western sensibilities, can permeate the wall of linguistic objectivity. The physical container of the institution, however, persists, creating the duplicity that Bhabha points to. The “locality” (I use the term loosely here) of the Koffler Centre of the Arts, where Farooq’s work was on display, found itself in a particular moment of controversy as the show opened to the public. In contrast with the decolonial mission of *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, the gallery was accused of supporting Israeli apartheid on Palestinian land. The conflict further destabilized the institution’s authority by demoing, in real time, what Farooq was critiquing. Supporters called for the institution to divest and separate itself from one of its major funders—the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Federation, an

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<sup>92</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38-9.

<sup>93</sup> Mona Filip (curator), “A Heap of Random Sweepings.”



organization accused of harbouring Zionist goals.<sup>94</sup> This contradicts the decolonial intent of *A Heap of Random Sweepings* quite obviously. The situation was in-and-of-itself ironic, displaying the utter incompatibility between the spatio-temporal characteristics of the gallery and the procreative promise of the Third Space of cultural difference.

The duplicity alludes to the contrast between reality—as a construct of the Imaginary and the Symbolic—and the Real, that unreachable traumatic kernel. Institutional presentism, which Claire Bishop explains as “the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking,” did not achieve the desired ideological effect but imploded, revealing the double-time of the gallery.<sup>95</sup> I crossed the threshold of the exhibition with one foot in the nebulous Third Space and the other in the Koffler’s contradictory physical frame. Split between the two, I couldn’t ignore the evidence of a failed reality, contained in the gallery’s mandate to advocate for social justice (the phrasing of this on the Koffler’s website has since changed).

I am immediately reminded of Slavoj Žižek who deems ideology to be the “fantasy construction which serves as support for our reality.”<sup>96</sup> Amid the shambles of a broken reality, the interstice welcomed me to articulate my locality, to contemplate productively, to enter a discourse with other localities that were evoked by the artworks or which passed through with the visitors before me. Peering into the photographs, the sculptures, the prints, and the poems, I was transported elsewhere. The sensorial

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<sup>94</sup> Radheyen Simonpillai, “Toronto Artists Call on Koffler Centre to Divest from United Jewish Appeal” in *NOW Magazine*, (May 28, 2021), <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/toronto-artists-call-on-koffler-centre-to-divest-from-united-jewish-appeal>.

<sup>95</sup> Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: Or, What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, (Köln: Walter König, 2014), 6. The “double-time of the gallery” is a play on the “double time of the nation” which is employed by Homi Bhabha in his essay *DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation* to argue for the ambivalent character of the nation’s temporality. See Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” *Essay in Nation and Narration*, 291–323, (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>96</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.

environment of *A Heap of Random Sweepings* gently guided me. Some stimuli were distinguishable—I was aware what stimulated the affective outcome—others proved to be a mystery. Physically present in the gallery, I was duplicated.

During the transferential exchange of agencies in this encounter, the Third Space opens up to the Lacanian Real—the inexpressible realm that exists beyond language and systems of signification. In the midst of a failed reality construct, the subject is in the vicinity of the Real, with all its traumatic implications. Farooq’s exhibition, in its context of the Koffler, nudges the viewer toward this split. Visiting *A Heap of Random Sweepings*, one becomes cognizant of the double-time. On one hand, I am framed as object in the context of an institution in turmoil—its authority is relinquished, its ideological edifice is in shambles. I feel the gaze of the critical on-looker interrogating me: what are you doing there? Others nod in approval. At the same time, I feel that Farooq’s objects, Strong’s soundscape, and Stanley’s poems transport me to a space where the gazes of others cannot reach me. My conscious and unconscious interpolate in the openness of the artwork which has invited me in. I search for something to replace the ideological reality that has been negated; the Third Space doesn’t give me access to the unreachable, but it does unleash the excess by facilitating new affective associations with art and other visitors.<sup>97</sup> In the process, can the viewer—me—truly grasp at the Real? What else can be left after the demolition of the constructed reality? In the interstice, can the Real be negotiated? These are the questions invoked by Farooq’s strategy of display.

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<sup>97</sup> Affect here is not to be understood as equivalent to emotion, but rather—as Roger Simon argues in *Pedagogies of Witnessing*—as a “reference to a nonspecific, immediate sensation not pre-coded by a presentational system that settles its substance with specific linguistic markers that offer an understanding of just what it is that one is feeling.” See Roger Simon, *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, 60.

### *Conclusion: Mapping the Transferential Exchange*

Art arrests us in trying to communicate something that is otherwise inexpressible and approaching the exhibition floor as language-like testifies to how the rules of display diminish the effect of this encounter. In its logic, standard classification procedures, and the grammatical and metaphorical structures that layout designers employ to coerce affect, the exhibition structure is reminiscent of “normative language,” a concept introduced by OBERIU—a short-lived (1920s-30s) Russian avant-garde collective.<sup>98</sup> Artists, musicians, and predominantly writers, who were part of this movement, aimed to disrupt the Symbolic system that forced subjects in cycles of mistaking the properties of language for properties of the world; according to the OBERIU mandate, “alogical” joining of words presented a way for distinguishing between constructed realities and the Real.<sup>99</sup> Approaching the artwork as a floating signifier nears, even fulfills, the alogical requirement that disrupts normative language because our perception of the thing is often chaotic, inexpressible and even irrational. This state is only aggravated by the absence of guides or rules, both compatible with normativity. Self-anchoring is simply a process of coming to terms with the potential of alogical viewing—a practice that does not acknowledge authority and does not insist on truth as a final destination.

The artistic gesture, with its eloquence in condensing complex historic and contemporary events through the artist’s unconscious, provides a glimpse into something that escapes the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Walter Mignolo stipulated in *Local*

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<sup>98</sup> Eugen Ostashevsky (ed), *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, trans. by Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

*Histories/Global Designs*: images are closer to the unconscious than words are.<sup>100</sup> This quote references visual pleasures and any affective ‘image’ that arises as a result of sense perception. Bonding with the elements of composition and the content of the piece, individuals interrogate the unconscious gap and the *objet petit a*—of course, never quite reaching it. Bhabha builds on this statement by acknowledging that a successful work of art “needs to drive you to the place where you have forgotten what you knew, and you are on the threshold of something that is yet to happen.”<sup>101</sup> The affective response overpowers the individual who frantically tries to rationalize it by impulse, but the affective infatuation pushes to things beyond one’s awareness in the everyday. Both Mignolo and Bhabha tease out the importance of alogical viewing with these statements because both the unconscious and the thresholds of things yet to happen fall outside of what an individual can reach or the realm of logic for that matter.

Through the reading, reflecting, and drawing phases that took place during the research and writing of this thesis, I became aware of a useful method for thinking through the art encounter that I term Dynamic Thought Articulation. The process is a form of experimental mapping, sensing, and tracing that analyzes the intersubjective encounter with the artwork to activate reflection on what transpires in the transferential exchanges of the Third Space. One maps out the elements to trace and identify affective and thought-provoking forces. They visualize elements of bonding and contradiction in

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<sup>100</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 228.

<sup>101</sup> “Homi Bhabha: Kochi-Muziris Biennale as An Exploration of Horizons,” YouTube video, posted by “Kochi-Muziris Biennale,” January 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS5mAn75QNM>.

processes of self-anchoring and signification, as well as spaces of ambiguity, containing non-knowledge, not-yet-knowns, possibly even the Real.

The Third Space is what artworks and viewers hold in common. This thesis outlined some very important attributes for spectatorship in the spirit of decolonial intersubjectivity, highlighting the instability of signs, the currents of meaning-making in institutional settings, and the importance of cultural difference articulated in the interstice. Dynamic Thought Articulation operates on the premise that thought is always fleeting, but that even the most transient impressions generally point to the vicinity of something important and worth exploring. As a form of mental mapping, it relies on the memories, feelings, and embodied moments of enunciation activated by dwelling in the Third Space. One can consider a particular element in an artwork and visualize their affective/epistemic response to it. The concept is inspired by curator Nicolas Bourriaud's "dynamic articulation": an artistic gesture to realize a form and link a multiplicity of scattered signs.<sup>102</sup> However, Dynamic Thought Articulation is more democratic in the context of the exhibition as it invites the viewing gesture to be considered in the process of meaning-making, stimulating not just the artist's but also the mapper's locus of enunciation by promoting active introspection.

Engaging in this mental mapping exercise, viewers identify objects of interest and the intersubjective relational structures that are generated through the encounter. The goal is to tease out elements that arise interest or revelation—whether through recognition, general familiarity, or even unexplainable infatuation. Through a visualized experience

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<sup>102</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exformal*, trans. Erik Butler, (New York: Verso, 2016).

that denotes points of interest in the work and the feelings/memories that arise in response, the viewer has the opportunity to re-enact the Third Space for themselves on paper—incompletely, of course, for the site is too elusive for any accurate concrete representation. One reflects on the bigger picture, gaining understanding of different embodied factors that influenced their reading.

Curators perform acts of translation in adapting works to exhibition settings—an inherently political act that transfers meaning from one culture into the sign system of another. While some exhibit with care, stating their own positionality and taking careful consideration of the needs of artists and communities when mounting an exhibition, others—usually constrained by the overbearing presence of institutional hierarchy—embrace the “impartial” viewpoint. There is a surmountable difference in translating into the third-person perspective (this is how didactic texts are usually written) and translating with emphasis on one’s own locality. The “impartial” sentence is compatible with the idea of normative language; it approaches thinking and writing as an object—a certain default of modern-day, Western-influenced modes of communicating. Curating with care and consideration of cultural difference, on the other hand, echoes something Bhabha argued in his lecture *Translation and Displacement*: “[To hold the Third Space in common with others is] to believe that thinking and writing are acts of translation.”<sup>103</sup> Recognition of this calls for a certain respect toward the articulation of other localities in acts of communicating, moving beyond language as object and normativity. Dynamic Thought Articulation strives to awaken this realization through energetic attempts to

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<sup>103</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Translation and Displacement" (Lecture), *Translation Theory Today*, (Harvard, Cambridge, May 6, 2016), Accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVQcdSOkV6OI&t=988s>.

make sense of the outcomes of alogical viewing. In striving to capture the inherent uncertainty in the Third Space, the process necessarily showcases the instability of language and hierarchical cultural determination.

With its emphasis on localities in perception, Dynamic Thought Articulation focuses attention on thinking, writing, and anchoring as culturally dependent processes. Walter Mignolo calls such actions languaging—a mode that causes one to prioritize currents of meaning-making and knowledge/experience as they take shape. Unlike studying a foreign language, which implies grammatical and etymological mastery—a “code,” Mignolo calls it—learning new ways of languaging is more complex as it entails learning “a new way of being in the world.”<sup>104</sup> It pushes us to consider object of communication, but also its process of coming into being. It asks important questions such as: who is the knowing subject, and what is their apparatus of enunciation? Dynamic Thought Articulation harbors the possibility for one to enact, trace, and understand this dynamic process of languaging as it combines the mapping of things in space—like artworks and the symbols of interest in them—alongside the transferential energies of the unarticulated Third Space which include the locality of the spectator within the act of translation.

I purposefully leave guidance surrounding the aesthetic outcome of Dynamic Thought Articulation open-ended since the implementation of any kind of structural rules, after a long thesis arguing against such practices, would be ironic. My hope is that curators who implement this process will act as facilitators and adapt Dynamic Thought

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<sup>104</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 227.

Articulation in reference with the topic and style of the exhibition, as well as in accordance with the community that they are working with. In practice, it will hopefully “evolve thoughts toward a theory of participation” that allows viewers to practice languaging through mapping the art encounter.<sup>105</sup> Through enacting geo- and body-political coordinates, one sidesteps the binaries of the language-like structure of the exhibition.

While the exercise can certainly be done independently, it would be interesting and indispensable to apply Dynamic Thought Articulation in a group setting. This prompts the product of the intersubjective encounter to be considered within the context of cultural difference. Introducing the “universality of the connector” is pertinent here, for subjects cannot and should not operate in cultural silos.<sup>106</sup> This term approaches the resulting sign—the floating artwork grounded by the psyche of the individual—as a node of connection instead of a stable reservoir. This “changes the terms of the conversation and makes it possible to conceive and work toward ‘pluriversality as a universal project.’”<sup>107</sup> Instead of the familiar universal fixation of the world and its subjects, one approaches it through the understanding that it consists of fragments of different localities. To recognize this, the floating artwork needs to morph into something different in the act of socializing perceived meanings in group settings.

In the second chapter, I argued how viewers needed to be mindful of not anchoring the signifier permanently because that would entail the establishment of new

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<sup>105</sup> Irit Rogoff, “How to Dress an Exhibition,” on *How to Dress an Exhibition?*, ed. by Mika Hannula, (Helsinki: NIFCA The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998), 133.

<sup>106</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 230.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



hierarchical structures. In the aftermath of Dynamic Thought Articulation and in the presence of different subjectivities in the group setting, one needs to begin thinking about the floating artwork as a connector. This approach recognizes the existence of diverse geo- and body-political knowledges that may impose different meanings onto the same signifier. The universality of the connector is not an abstract universal but a ubiquitous connection that brings pluriversal fragments together, enabling distinct cultural visions to exist in tandem, without domineering each other.

The potential of Dynamic Thought Articulation as a collaborative practice of unlearning, sharing, and co-existing is worth exploring practically in the gallery setting. Theorizing this process within the individual experience in the art encounter helped understand how it fits—or, should I say, visibly articulates transferential energies—within the gap of the missed encounter. A collective approach to Dynamic Thought Articulation opens up the avenue for collaborative thinking and self-determination in relation to others on the basis of cultural difference. By acknowledging that thinking and writing are acts of translation and emphasizing the processes of creating meaning (linguaging), we turn to more democratic and collaborative ways of cultural transcription. This is reminiscent of Double Translation, introduced by Walter Mignolo in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* as denoting “a double process of translation in which Western [he uses the example of Marxist] epistemology is appropriated by Indigenous nations’ epistemology, transformed, and returned.”<sup>108</sup> The technique allows for more thoughtful ways for engaging in theory and building equitable futures that are based in the acknowledgement

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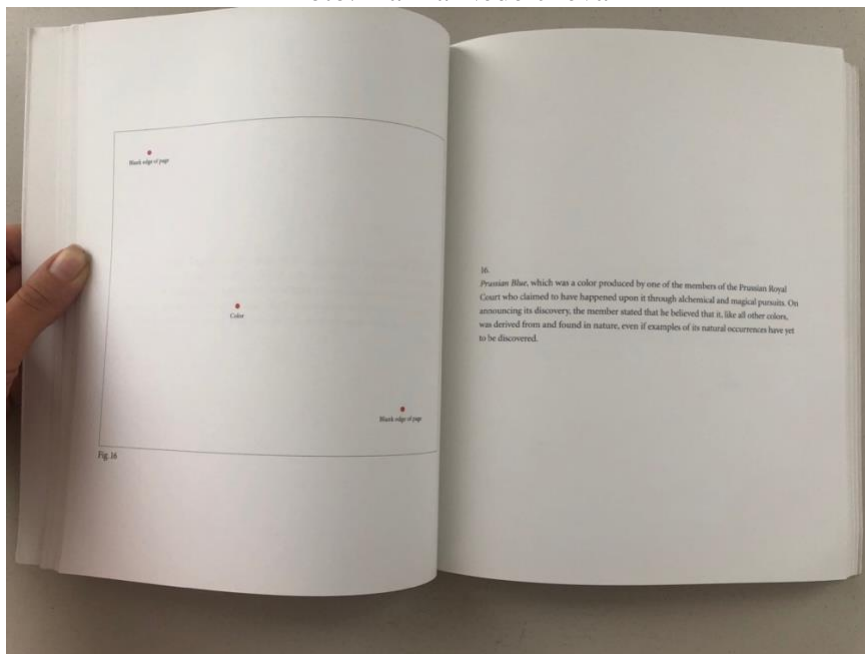
<sup>108</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 225loca

and respect of cultural difference. The process of articulating the unexplainable and unanchored in a group setting may give rise to numerous conversations where signs are translated and re-translated from different localities, opening up the awareness of rights to difference and the pluriversal vibrancy of our communities.

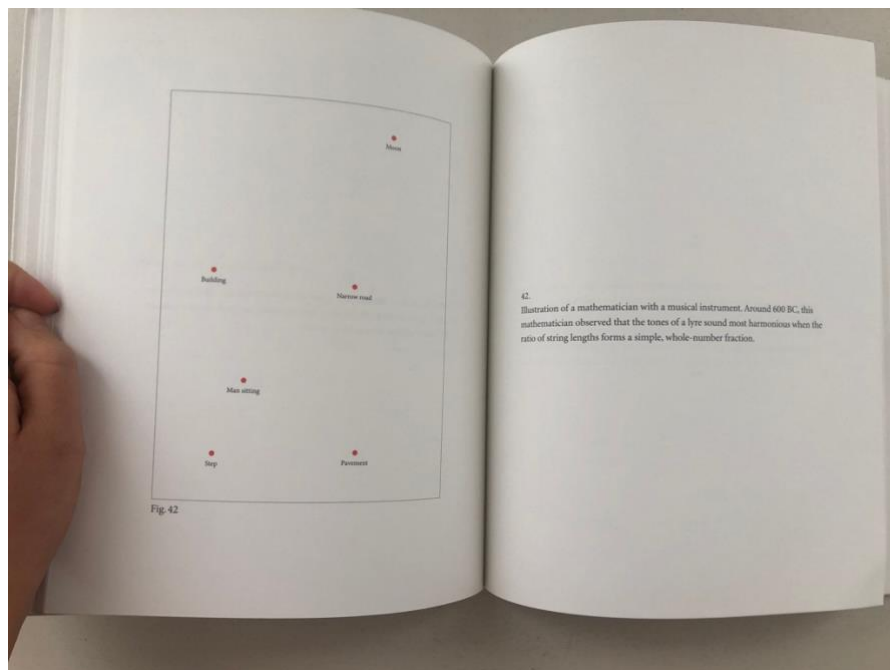
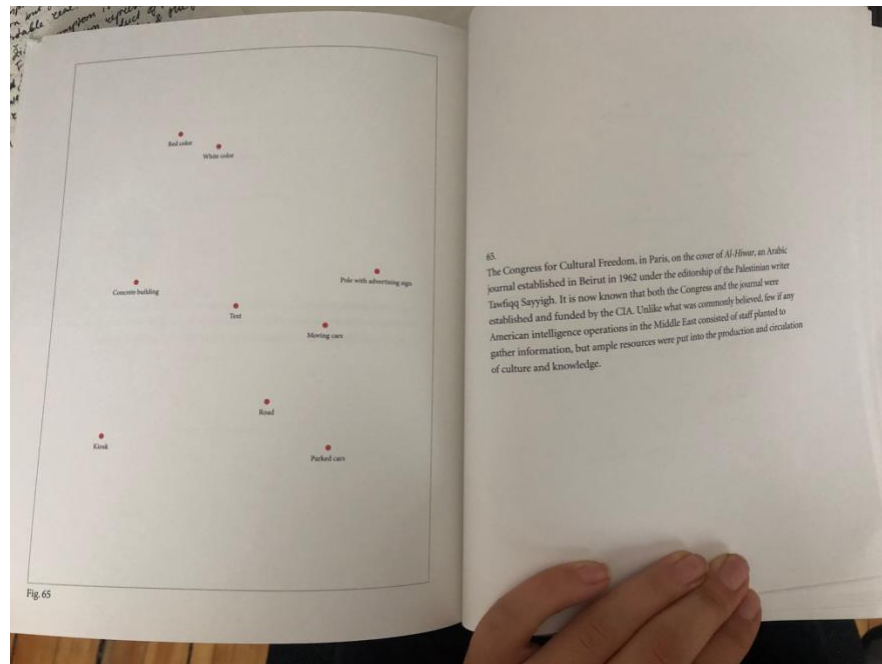
While we continue to live in the presence of galleries and museums, we need to develop new ways of instituting that offer different and collaborative ways of receiving and reflecting on knowledge and affect. This is what I sought out to do with the idea of Dynamic Thought Articulation and a theory of spectatorship that considers the perception logic of the viewing gesture. Implementing these strategies practically in group settings will help continue theorizing what happens to artworks or individual/collective subjectivities when they are dislodged from their institutionally determined roles and how the resulting fragments of localities interact with one another. This thesis has certainly only scratched the surface of such occurrences and much more can be said about the potential of alogical viewing for disrupting authority. As I continue to weave these ideas from my own locality, I invite anyone who has the desire and interest to engage in double translation with all the ideas shared here. Academic theory is no exception to the rule.

## Appendix A: *Book of Facts: A Proposition* Source Material

Iman Issa, *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, 2017.  
Photo: Kalina Nedelcheva

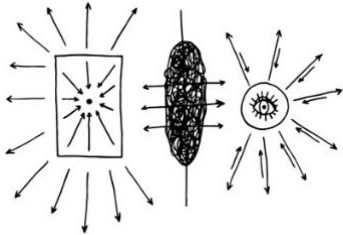


Iman Issa, *Book of Facts: A Proposition*, 2017.  
Photo: Kalina Nedelcheva



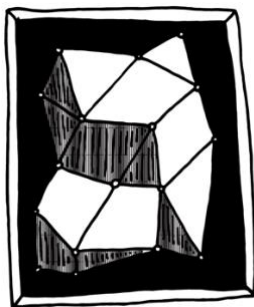
## Appendix B: Dynamic Thought Articulation (Figures)

**Figure 1:**



This picture is a depiction of an art encounter. The eye symbolizes the person who emits transferential energies—including knowledge, non-knowledge, emotion—and also who receives stimuli from the external environment. The painting, depicted by the rectangle, includes a dot, which is the nucleus of the artwork. The nucleus denotes the intent of the artist who concentrated their transferential energy into the work. This is depicted by the arrows pointing in. The arrows pointing out are the various pluriversal perspectives the artwork may emit, whether the artist was conscious of them or not. The double-headed arrows portray the act of perception which passes through a gap, whose contents are unknown.

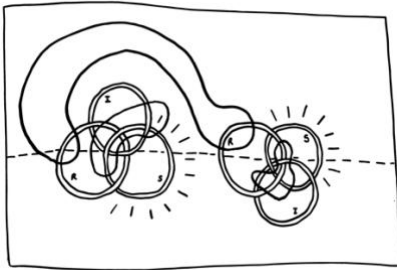
**Figure 2:**



This figure depicts an artwork as a system of beliefs that is made out of interconnecting nodes—the white dots. I, as a viewer, hypothetically perceive a particular combination of these nodes in a given work. The shaded portions signal to connections that are felt but unclear, while the white portions connote connections that are clearly defined and visible

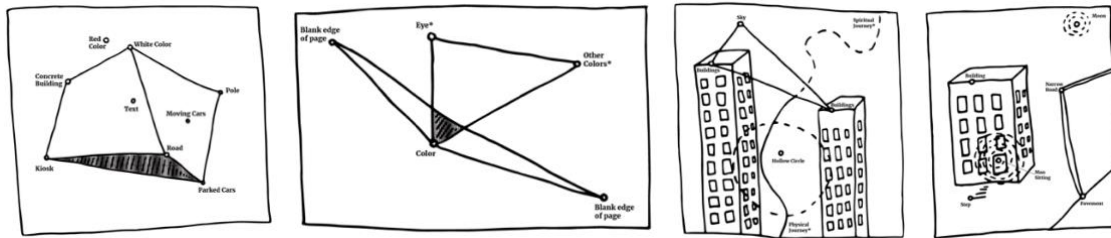
to the viewer (me). The solid black background indicates the unconscious—that which I am not cognizant of.

**Figure 3:**



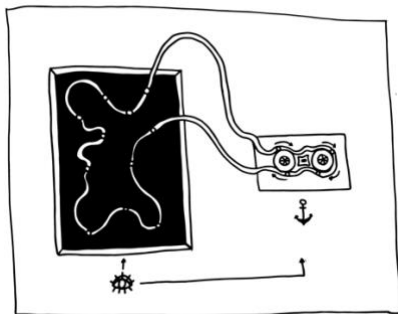
This is a play on the Borromean Knot—originally, a mathematical schema that Lacan employs in his later formulations about the unconscious. In psychoanalysis, the Borromean Knot visualizes the relationships between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Lacan adds a fourth category to it, and this is the Symptom, which is a sign of the Real and can only be defined in the way each subject enjoys their unconscious (Žižek, 2008). The two Borromean Knots in this figure depict mine and Iman Issa’s intrapsychic realms. The solid line designates the ideological container of the daadgalerie and the horizontal dotted line shows a hierarchy of Imaginaries. My Imaginary ring is on the bottom (the right Borromean Knot), while Issa’s is on the top (the left Borromean Knot). I stress that this is my perception of our relation to one another during the opening reception. Our Imaginaries are placed in a hierarchical structure because I clearly perceive Issa as superior to me as I don’t build the courage to go up and talk to her. I assume that we share some similarities in our Symbolic realm and the short lines denote that. Our Real is linked as I perceive the Real for people to be closely intertwined, if not the same.

**Figure 4-7:**



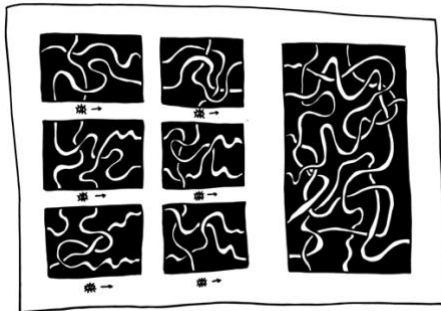
These are Mental Maps in response to Figures #65, 16, 69, and 42 in Iman Issa's *Book of Facts: A Proposition*. For images of these pages and their contents, refer to Appendix B. I drew lines between the dots of signifiers that I perceived as connected in the moment of perception. I considered the layout of Iman Issa's figures, as well as the source on the opposing page. For Figures #16 and #69, I added additional signifiers, derived either from the text or my personal impressions to complete the drawing. While some connectors are more literal, others are less so. I was experimenting with my own process of articulation and how I was seeing these works.

**Figure 8:**



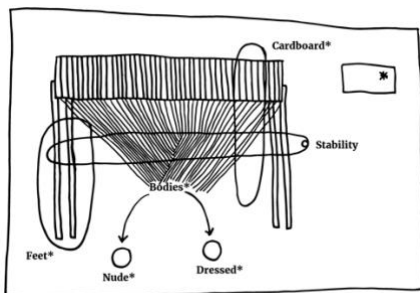
This is an iteration of the art encounter, depicting the perceiving subject (the eye) as they survey both the artwork and the didactic text which anchors the piece. The artworks showcase the nodes of interest that are talked about in the supporting text. The solid background depicts the uncertainty and the unconscious—the things we haven't perceived in the art encounter likely because of the didactic text.

**Figure 9:**



This is the fourth iteration of the art encounter in the ideological container. This map depicts six people, each contained by a cell, looking at one work of art. The solid black background is the unconscious, the white intertwined tubes are conscious thoughts and feelings. The drawing recalls the relations between subjects and to the artwork. The white tubes end once outside of the cell but continue as if uninterrupted in the adjacent cell. This connotes shared thoughts and feelings—collective consciousness, perhaps—which are not realized in the gallery setting. The solid black background depicts the unconscious gaps in the perception of the work.

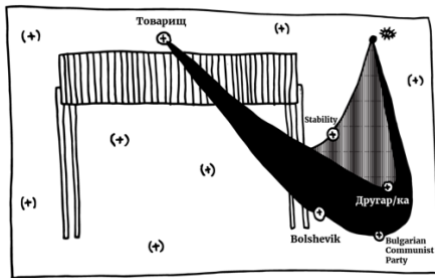
**Figure 10:**



This is a mental map of Iman Issa's *Comrade* sculpture. The drawing shows the ideological container of the daadgalerie, a visual representation of the artwork and the text that accompanies it. I drew on words from the text and attempted to “see” them in the artwork. These words are noted with a star symbol (\*). I also include signifiers that the piece evoked in me but were not present in the wall label. I note where I perceive the location of these words on the sculpture itself.

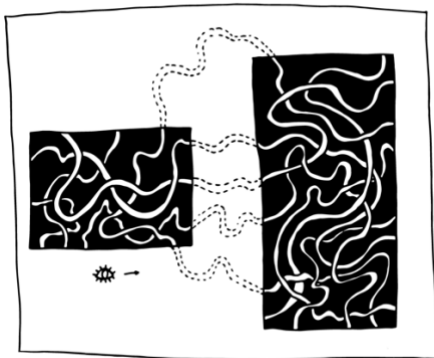


**Figure 11:**



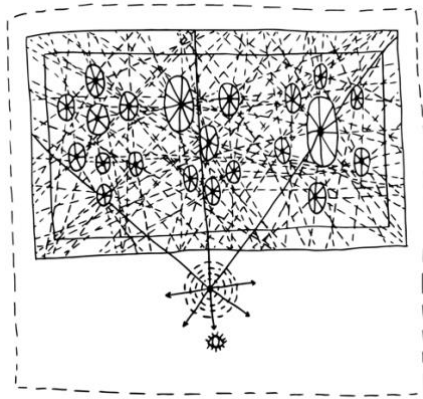
This is a mental map of Iman Issa's *Comrade* sculpture. The (+) marks content in the ideological field of the gallery. The idea is that my Bulgarian heritage (the black dot) connects certain floating signifiers as I experience the work. The words in Cyrillic translate to "comrade" from Russian and Bulgarian, while the rest are words that carry specific meaning to me. All of these words are conjured up from memories, experience, and my culture during the art encounter.

**Figure 12:**



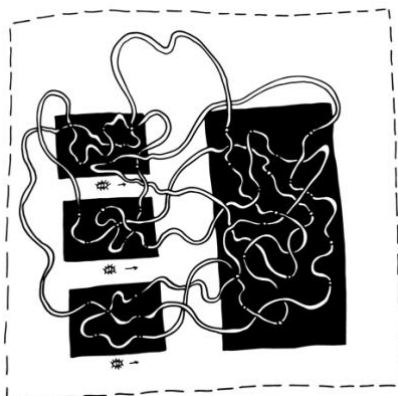
This is the fifth rendition of the art encounter, as experienced by an individual. Expanding on the fourth iteration, this drawing showcases the possible connection between the transferential energies emitted by the perceiving subject and the those coming from the artwork. The dotted line signifies that these relations are immaterial and highly elusive.

**Figure 13:**



This is a mental map of Sameer Farooq's *Restitution Series (Masks)*. Each mask is noted with an oval, the dot is the concentration of its essence—that is, its locality, the culture it comes from. This essence emits affect, knowledge, and non-knowledge outside of itself (the dotted lines). These lines intersect, denoting cultural identity cross-over, tension, collaboration, negotiation in meaning-making. The perceiving subject (the eye) also emits their locality in the art encounter that intersects these masks. This is the process of “understanding” the work. The dotted container of this drawing signifies Bhabha's Third Space. instead of an ideological container.

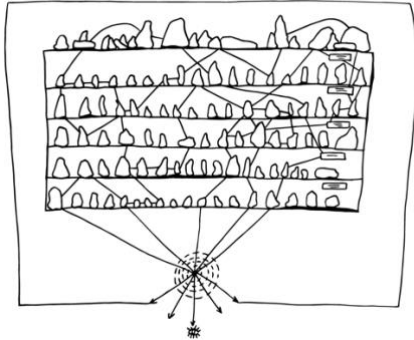
**Figure 14:**



This is a group art encounter as perceived in the Third Space. The nodes depict points of interest between viewers and the artwork. There is clear connection, as well as points of

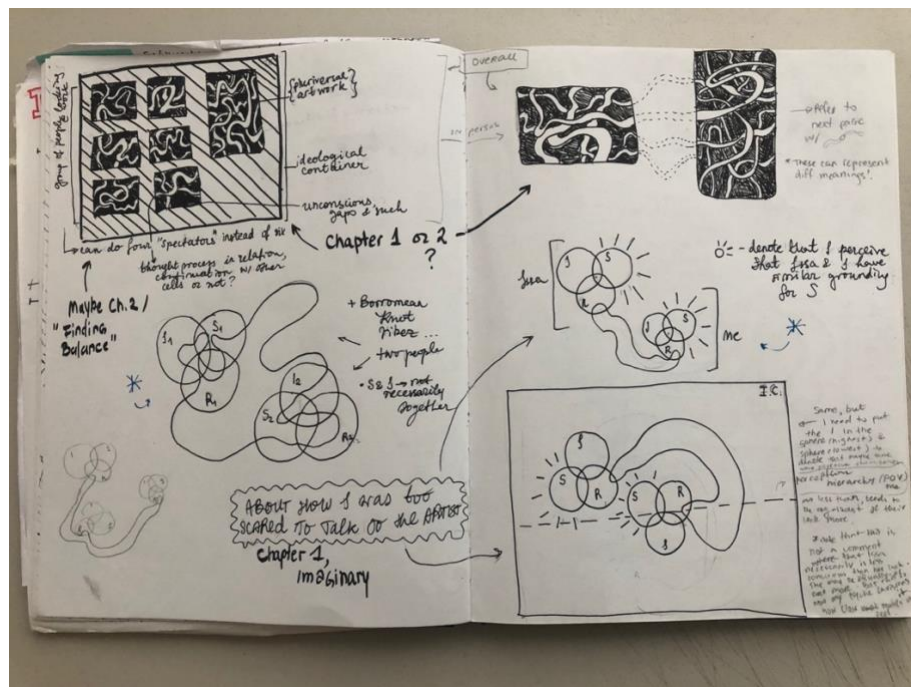
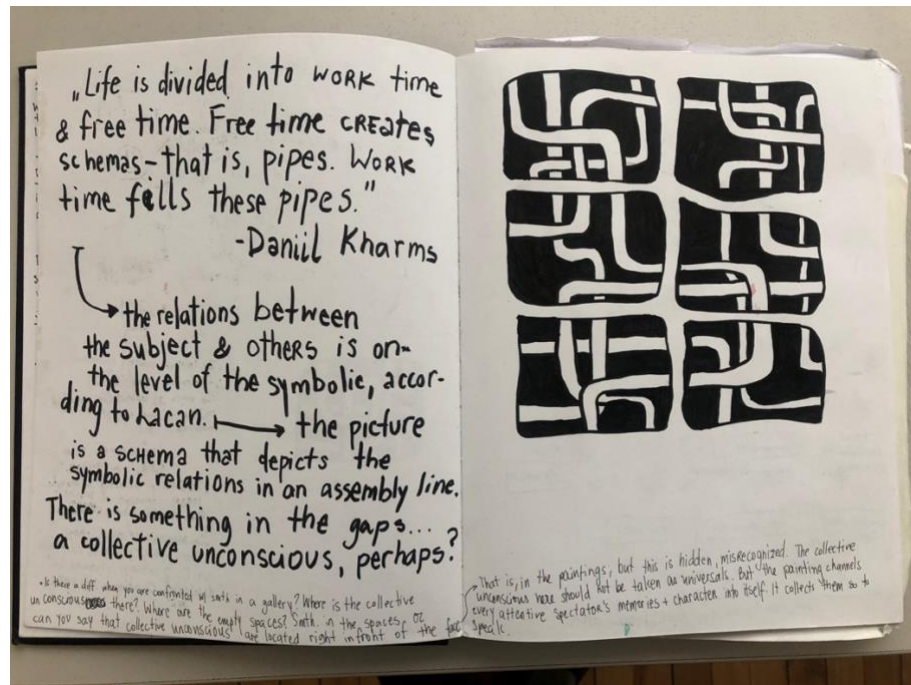
intersection for the conscious articulation of knowledge and feelings. This indicates “a revival” of collective consciousness in the Third Space of the gallery.

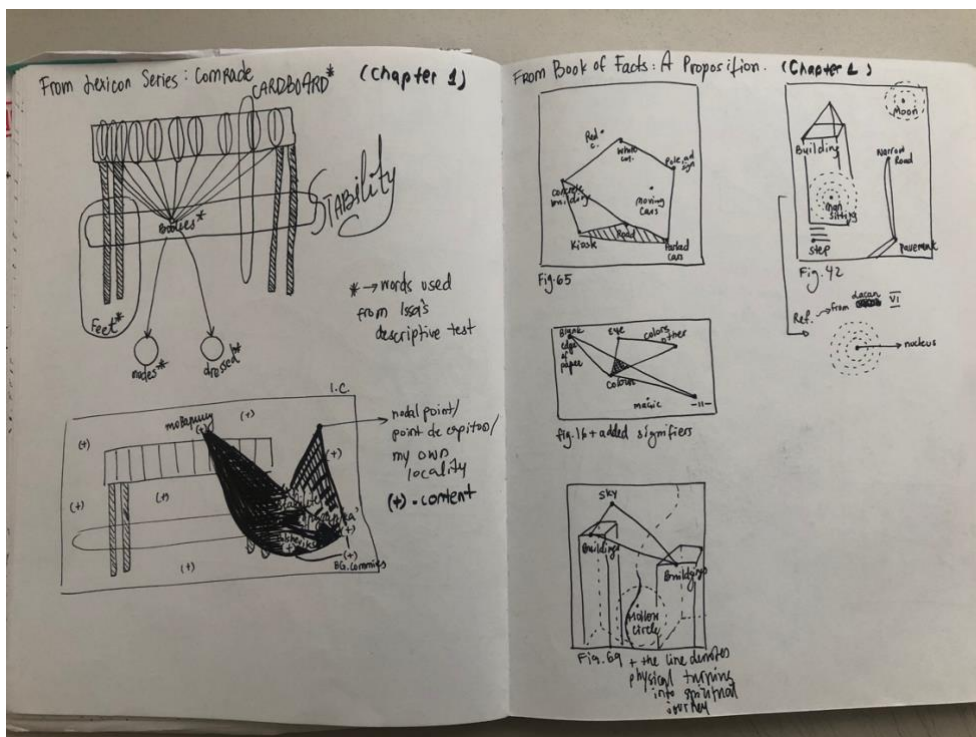
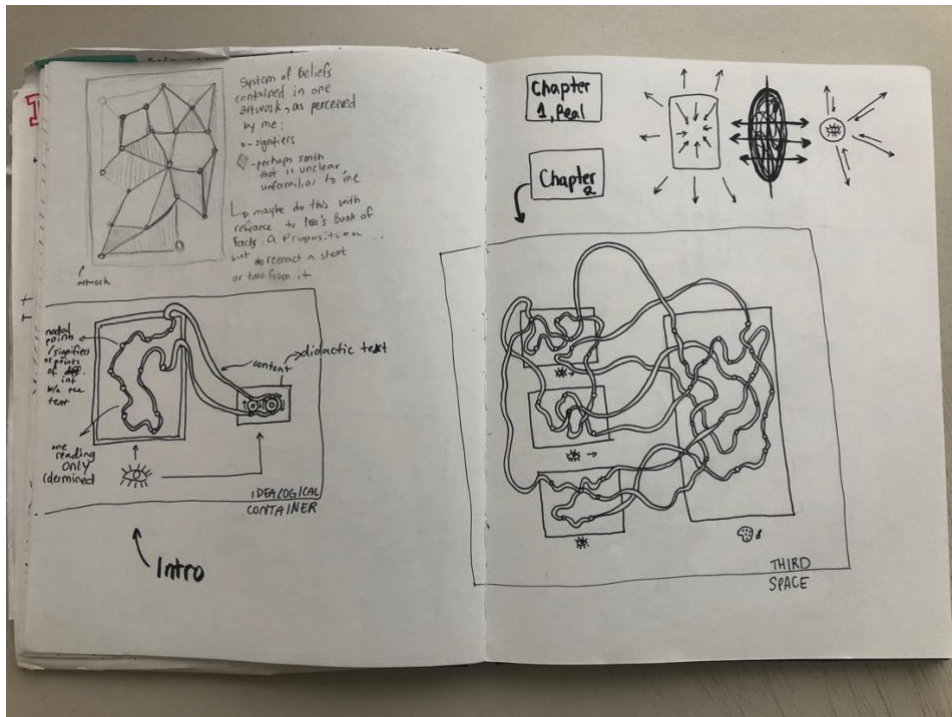
**Figure 15:**



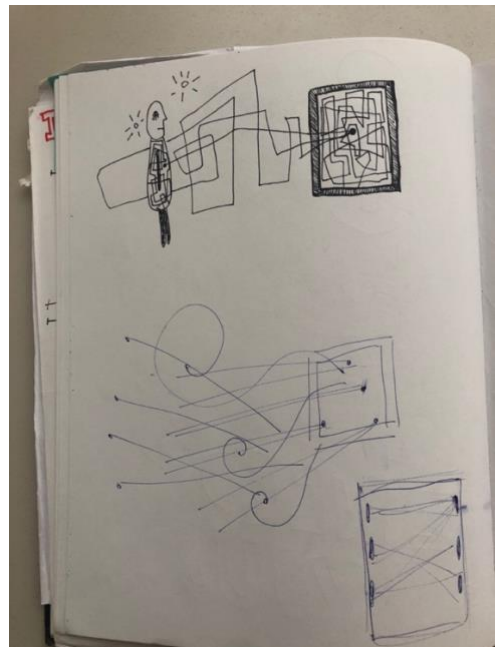
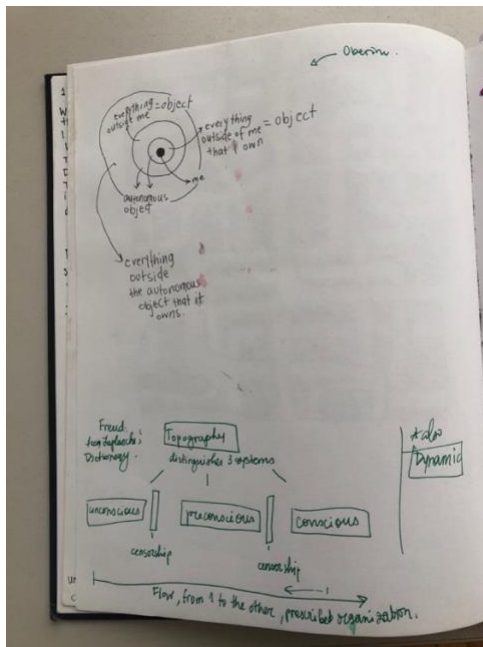
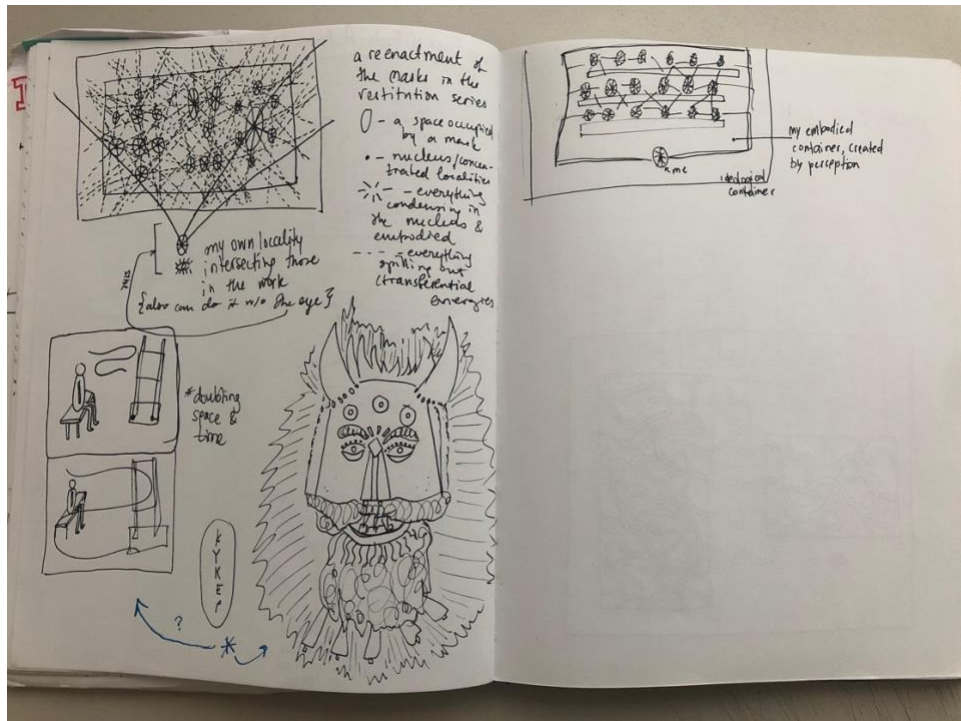
This is a mental map of Sameer Farooq’s *If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps of ASCENSION*. The eye depicts the perceiver (me). The black dot is my nucleus—that which contains my truth, locality. The dotted line that concentrates around it is my attempt to articulate this nucleus in the act of seeing and speaking. My locality frames the artwork and becomes the container. My nucleus emits transferential energies toward the artwork as I connect the objects and identify those which stand out to me, as well as outside of the artwork as I exist in the Third Space with others.

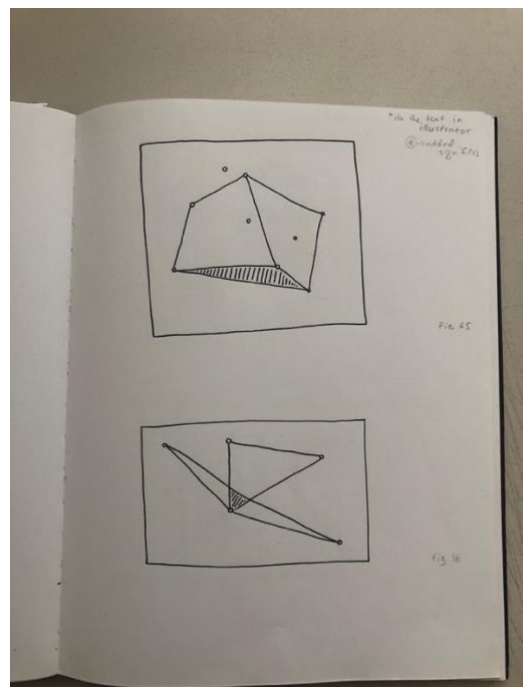
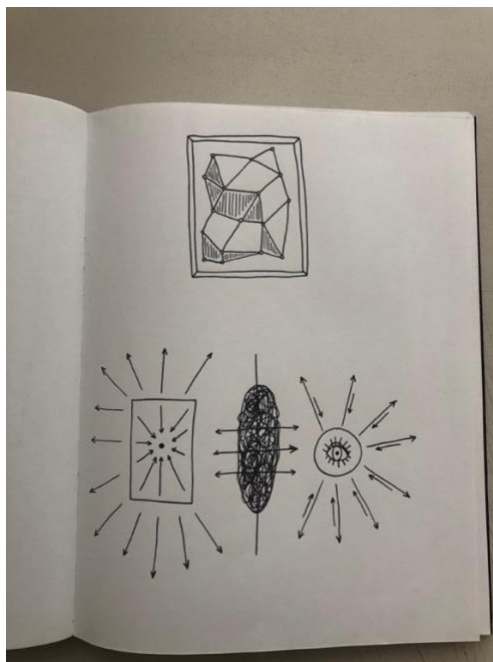
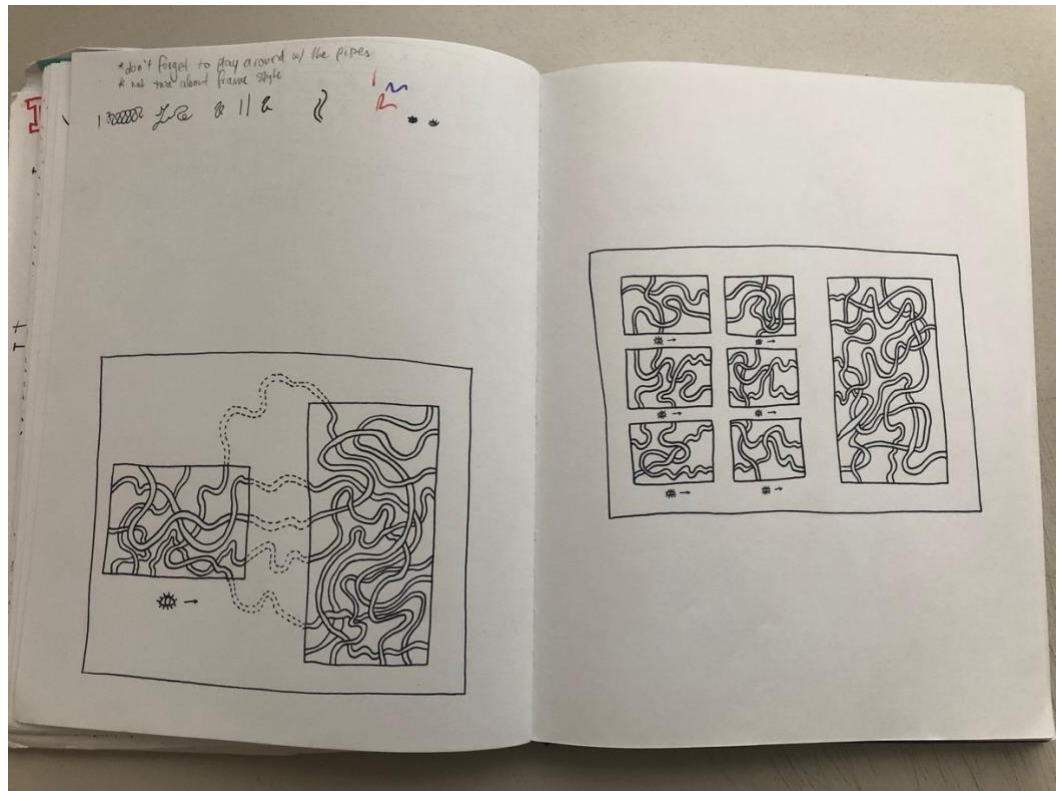
## Appendix C: Notebooks for My Dynamic Thought Articulation Sketches

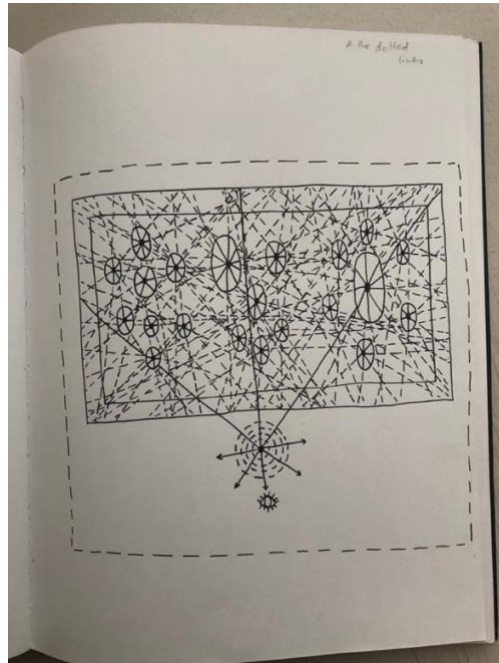
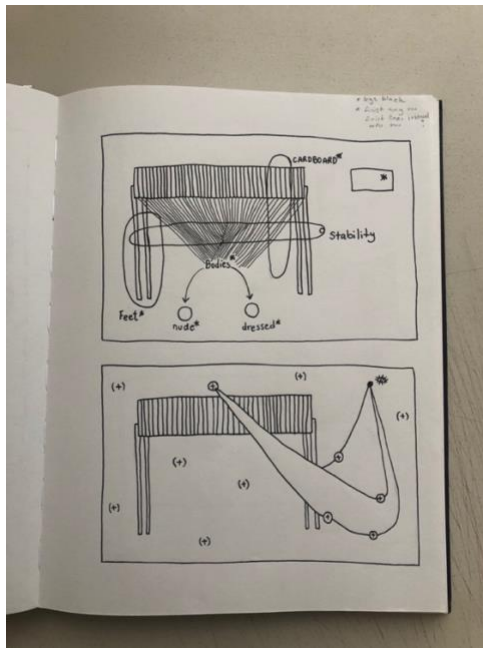
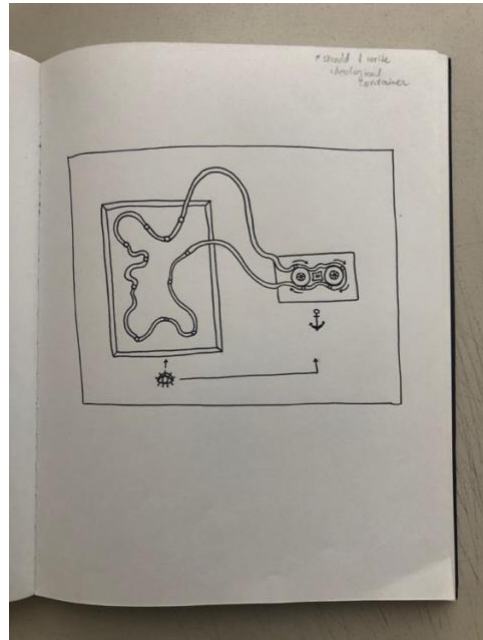
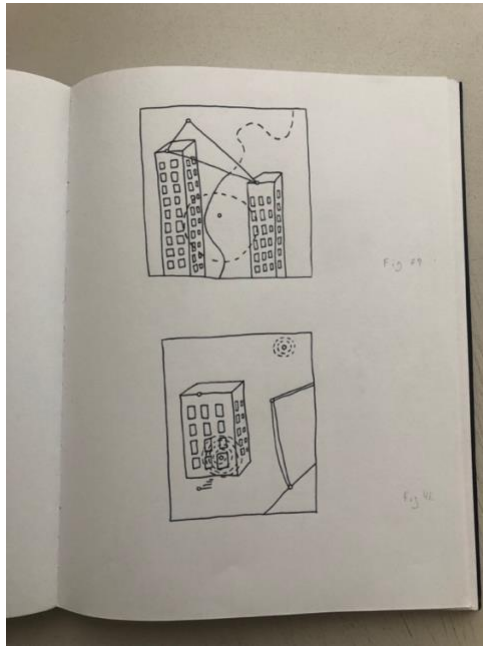














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