LIMINAL FORMS

by

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in CRITICISM AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

Liminal Forms
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Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice, 2018
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Liminal Forms is a group exhibition of works by Scott Benesiinaabandan, Jawa El-Khash, Marcus A. Gordon, Qendrim Hoti, and Mariam Magsi. It explores inter-cultural and cross-medium translations in contemporary art to understand aesthetically and materially hybrid manifestations motivated by the simultaneity of different cultures. By engaging with practices that are informed by interdisciplinary methods and actively acknowledging the artists' Indigenous, third-culture and immigrant identities, I examine the tactics used by artists to communicate issues of origin, place, survival, identity, and agency. The artworks selected contemplate the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary co-existence. They offer a visual and contextual analysis of specific issues related to the following topics: ways of remembering misplaced, erased, and violent histories; forming relationships with culturally and geographically specific issues through the affect potential of inter-disciplinary art practice; and the effect of pervasive information networks on meaning-making in art.

Key Words: hybridity, translation, inter-cultural, inter-disciplinary, liminality, displacement, identity, memory, globalization, exhibition, new media, digital art, video, photography, virtual realities.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I acknowledge the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land on which we stand and create.

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"That eternally harassing, tantalizing future. Mystery! We will all eventually get there—willing or unwilling, with all our soul and body. And too often it proves to be a great despot. And so, in the end, I arrived too. Whether the future is a kind or a cruel god is, of course, its own affair: Humanity too often claps with just one hand."

— Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind)[1]

Historically, cultural hybridity has been a predictable factor in propelling innovations in technology, art and design. Whether by trade, war, or migration, contact with different peoples has and continues to serve as a catalyst for creative expression.[2] Due to the rise of information networks, culturally hybrid forms are accelerating and happening on a mass-scale. From curry chips and Bollywood to the musical genres of ska and raggae, our global economies and networks generate entirely new modes of producing material culture, and produces a mass displacement of bodies and identities. However, globalization has been described as a "harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational,"[3] because as an ideology it often ignores the complexity of cultural and social discrimination. Thus, cultural hybridity today can be defined as the coexistence, and cross-fertilization of oral, written, material, media, and cyber cultures, however, it often occurs in the context of exploitation and coercion.

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[1] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra Publishing House, 1975), 4.

[2] Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 16.

[3] Ibid.

Liminal Forms is a thesis project and group exhibition featuring the works of Scott Benesiinaabandan, Jawa El-Khash, Marcus A. Gordon, Qendrim Hoti, and Mariam Magsi. It explores inter-cultural and cross-medium translations in contemporary art in an effort to understand aesthetically and materially hybrid manifestations motivated by the simultaneity of cultures and beings. By engaging with art practices that are informed by interdisciplinary methods and actively acknowledging the artists' Indigenous, third-culture and immigrant identities, *Liminal Forms* ultimately examines the tactics (namely translation and innovative, interdisciplinary approaches) used by cultural producers to communicate issues of origin, place, survival, identity, and agency.

The title of the project refers to an adaptation of Walter Mignolo's "border thinking" method, specifically its focus on post-colonial and transitional identities, geographies and histories. For Mignolo, "border thinking" is a type of critical approach that weaves in and out of multiple geographically and culturally specific philosophical influences, problematizing the notion of binaries in critical thinking (especially that of East/West, or colonized/colonizer). This acceptance of the spatial confrontations between different concepts of history aims to redistribute power in the geopolitics of knowledge.[4] The *liminal* — referring to a state of flux and in-between-ness — also alludes to new digital forms and transitional spaces in which a hybridization of culture occurs on a mass scale. Through the perspective of distinct yet comparable types of displaced identity, I focus on the creative practice of individuals who are in an

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[4] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 67.

especially strategic position to address this topic because their understanding of the different impulses and starting points of inter-cultural exchange comes from lived experience.[5]

Each participating artist in Liminal Forms has experienced personal and professional life in between cultures, and as a result their practices tackles a unique set of concerns surrounding "border thinking" and the hybridization of cultures as well as identity. Furthermore, the artworks selected signify both material and digital existence. In this exhibition, a counterpoint to the displacement caused by geopolitical tensions is the displacement caused by the inclusivity of digital networks. By drawing a parallel between the simultaneities of multicultural and material/digital existence, I hope to find stable ground on which to trace interconnectedness between local and global issues.

The artworks selected encourage thinking about the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary co-existence. They offer a visual and contextual analysis of specific issues related to the following topics: ways of remembering misplaced, erased, and violent histories; forming relationships with culturally and geographically specific issues though the affect potential of inter/trans-disciplinary art practice; and the effect of pervasive information networks on meaning-making in art.

[5] Ibid, 69.

Part 1.

Structures for misplaced, erased, and violent histories

> *"I must say that even at that stage it did not occur to me to declare my mother tongue as a foreign language which people do all the time these days to get into Comp Lit and I think that the politics of that gesture is deeply suspect. In a foreign country to get money you call your mother tongue a foreign language? So I said <u>English</u>."*

> — Gayatri Spivak[6]

In 1998 there was a widespread surge of violence against Chinese-Indonesians in Java and North Sumatra due to the fall of Suharto's regime. At four years old, I only remember the ethnic riot as the days we were not allowed to leave the house. My mother, a Chinese-Dutch-Javanese woman, who had studied agriculture and food science, was fortunate to find work in Singapore where my family and I migrated to in 1999. The same society which economically favoured my mother as a mixed-race woman, periodically attempts to expel her for it[7] — this is one way in which, self-reflexively, I frame an understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of cultural integration.

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[6] Spivak, Gayatri. "More Thoughts on Cultural Translation," http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en (November 10, 2017).

[7] Although the history of discrimination and violence against the Chinese minority in Indonesia goes back to before Dutch-colonial times, because Europeans and Chinese are stereotyped as more educated/wealthy than Native/*Pribumi* folks (Javanese, Malay, Balinese etc.) in Indonesia, Suharto's regime increased violence towards Chinese-Indonesians through the passing of numerous discriminative laws which sought to oppress individual freedom, economic mobility, as well as cultural and linguistic practices in order to elevate the social and economic status of Natives.

Scott Benesiinaabandan, Jawa El-Khash, Marcus A. Gordon, Qendrim Hoti, and Mariam Magsi, each engage with specific kinds of misplaced, erased, and/or violent history in their practice with the acknowledgement of the communicative value of personal memory and self-reflexivity. The selected works in *Liminal Forms* exemplify how the artists connect these vulnerable histories and memories with different histories as well as various contemporary symbols, aesthetics, and contexts. By addressing the works' distinct yet comparable sociopolitical issues, as well as their projections of imagined futures, *Part 1* suggests the importance of memory as a political tool.

Arguing that cultural memory is conceptualized as a practice of imagining, Diana Taylor writes in her essay "Memory as Cultural Practice: Mestizaje, Hybridity, Transculturation," that such a mnemonic function is relayed between the individual and their social sphere. In the context of mestizas (Latin American women of mixed race), Taylor illustrates the importance of the body as a site of cultural memory; which integrates the history of a society in which citizens are immersed in with the memories of lived experience. In the way, the body can be posited as a nexus for the convergence of oneself with society, as well as private and public histories.[8] Taylor's theorization is especially useful in the consideration of both marginalized subjects, and subjects of cultural mixing, because their cultural memory is not a product of institutionalized socialization; it is literally embodied in their existence.

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[8] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Duke University Press, 2003), 82.

Mariam Magsi, a Pakistani-Canadian artist, frames the body similarly in her practice. Primarily through photographic images, her works focus on the challenging relationship between the self and the public for particularly marginalized identities. For example, in her ongoing exploration of purdah (the cultural and religious practice of veiling and secluding oneself), Magsi investigates and documents the stories of veil wearers in the East and the West without categorizing them as oppressed or liberated, complicating and problematizing prescribed societal identities. Through this semi-journalistic and ethnographic method, Magsi amplifies the voices of diverse of Muslim subjects. Among these chronicled lives are queer and transgender Muslims, some of whom choose to use the veil to retain anonymity. These stories form a relationship between Islamic, feminist and queer histories. From these archived stories Magsi then creates artwork (video, photography, performance, and installation) which act as interventions into the politics of religious and cultural garb.

Go back to where you came from (figure 1) is a video work in which a laterally-split screen frames two veiled figures walking into the horizon. The title refers to the sound which accompanies the moving image; Magsi's voice uttering the words she and her subjects have all heard before in the locales of their displacement, "go back to where you came from." For some the act of going "back" is unattainable, and for others it's simply illogical as they may not be "from" anywhere else. As in Taylor's discussion of embodied memory, it is the individual body that holds knowledge of the manifestations of cultural discord.

Figure 1. Mariam Magsi, *Go back to where you came from* **(2016), single-channel video, screenshot.**

The idea of embodied memory can also be used to explicate issues of knowledge centres and cultural negotiation for Indigenous individuals. Due to the state of Canada's persistent history of violence and erasure of Indigenous cultures, the survival of certain bodies of knowledge and its use in contemporary society is largely dependent on intentional acts of insurgency or compromise. In his most recent body of work, Scott Benesiinaabandan explores Anishinaabe symbols and stories that resonate with recent scientific theories about the non-linearity of space and time. He analyzes the psychological dimensions of contested bodies and landscape through photography, video, mark-making, technological/computational processes, and virtual reality.

His virtual-reality short film *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* (figure 2), functions as an assemblage of intersecting knowledge systems. Motivated by the artist's own embodied cultural memory, it highlights this intersection's existing manifestations as well as its possible ones. The title refers to the introduction of blueberry pie in more recent Indigenous history (blueberries having been around since time immemorial, but not pie). The work itself is a surreal realm in which the viewer is moved around as the artist narrates a story. It is one Benesiinaabandan was told by Cree Elder Wilfred Buck about Spider Woman, who wove a long thread that the Anishinaabe people used to travel to Earth.
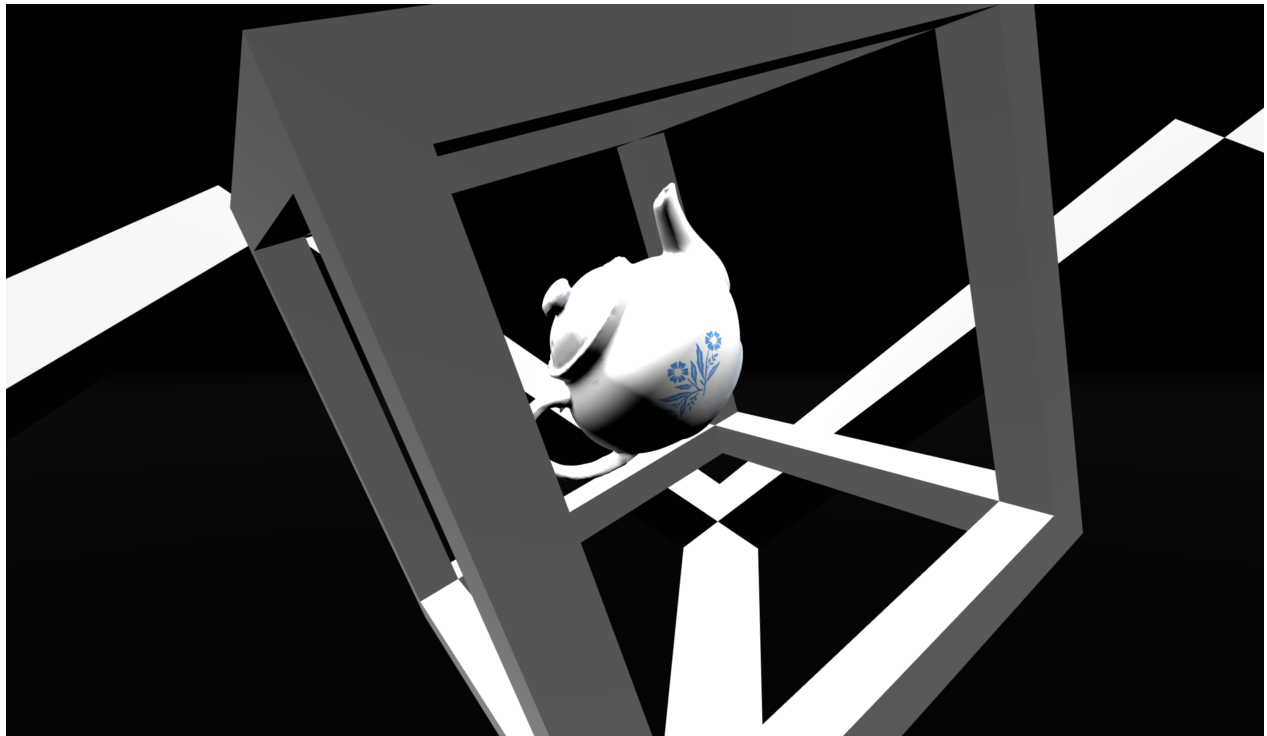
Figure 2. Scott Benesiinaabandan, *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* (2016), virtual-reality, screenshot.

Some modern interpretations see this thread as a metaphor for wormholes, and through moving imagery Benesiinaabandan's filmic suturing of this story directly references scientific theories that suggest time is like a blanket with the ability to fold, in which two points can be connected via a wormhole. In *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky*, there is a recognition of the importance of developing new ways of engaging with history, tradition and culture. Benesiinaabandan reminds us that humans have always come up with stories to explain the nature of the universe, from Spider Woman to String Theory. He harmonizes Indigenous knowledge and stories with advances in technology and science to point out that those things are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 3. Marcus A. Gordon, *Latimer's Box* (2017), holographic installation.

Similar to Benesiinaabandan's adaptation of Indigenous stories into virtual-reality, the work *Latimer's Box* (figure 3) by Marcus A. Gordon, monumentalizes history using holography, and in both a gestural and literal sense, highlights the fact that Black histories and the histories of technology are not mutually exclusive. Gordon, a Jamaican-Canadian multidisciplinary artist, favours technological processes — especially the foundations of photography and spatial imaging — to explore the invisible yet extremely visceral relationship between body and landscape. He explores the spatial qualities of holography and contextualizes it as an expressive medium that can contribute to archival methods and interventions in public memory. *Latimer's Box* was created to bring to life the electric circuit drawings and schematics of African-American Edison pioneer, Lewis Latimer, a pioneering engineer and peer of inventor Thomas Edison. Latimer's design for a light filament changed the course of mechanized illumination in 1881. Through Gordon's concept of a holographic archive, he proposes a new form of remembering to combat the erasure of Black histories.

New media technologies have been shown to have considerable effect on how memory is generated and retained. For example, the phenomenon of citizen journalism ensures the inclusion of on-the-ground documentation into official narratives, bridging the gap between the actuality of an incident and public knowledge of it, as well as between what is defined as private or public memory.[9] For Syrian artist Jawa El-Khash, readily available online content provides a rich source of material which, significantly, is

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[9] Maier-Rothe, Jens, Dina Kafafi, and Azin Feizabadi. "Citizens Reporting and the Fabrication of Collective Memory," https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/50, (November 10, 2017).

ripe for picking and manipulation. By focusing her efforts on issues around immigrants and refugees, she reconstructs and re-imagines realms for lost cultural relics and architecture.

El-Khash often attempts to create expansive, unfamiliar, and alien spaces which she refers to as "digital worlds."[10] Visiting these worlds constitutes a departure from the chaos and unresolvable tensions of the real world. By digitally preserving particular artifacts, symbols and remixed objects, El-Khash creates a place for herself that she can "call home."[11] While her practice brings attention to the current devastation of her home country (occasioned by an on-going, complicated civil war), it also contemplates alternate worlds in which harmony is prioritized.

Through some presumably universal symbolic cues of digital realms (digital user interface, RGB palette, grids), El-Khash expresses her interest in ideas of borderless spaces, freedom, accessibility, and cultural development through connection and mutual understanding. *Palette* (figure 4) is a series of digital collages that serve as a glimpse into El-Khash's processes of making. Images, both collected and created by the artist herself, are organized into groups of correlated shapes and colour. *Palette* represents a type of contemporary diaspora enhanced by digital realms, in which geographically separated descendants of a community can accumulate and share culturally-specific content online. Through the ongoing work, she builds a foundation of loosely related images for lost and contested bodies, while making them a subject of

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[10] Jawa El-Khash, personal interview, December 20, 2017

[11] Ibid.

interest by aestheticizing them. The spacing of the grid points to the format of a smartphone camera roll, making use of a common digital language that translates these geopolitically specific images across different cultures.
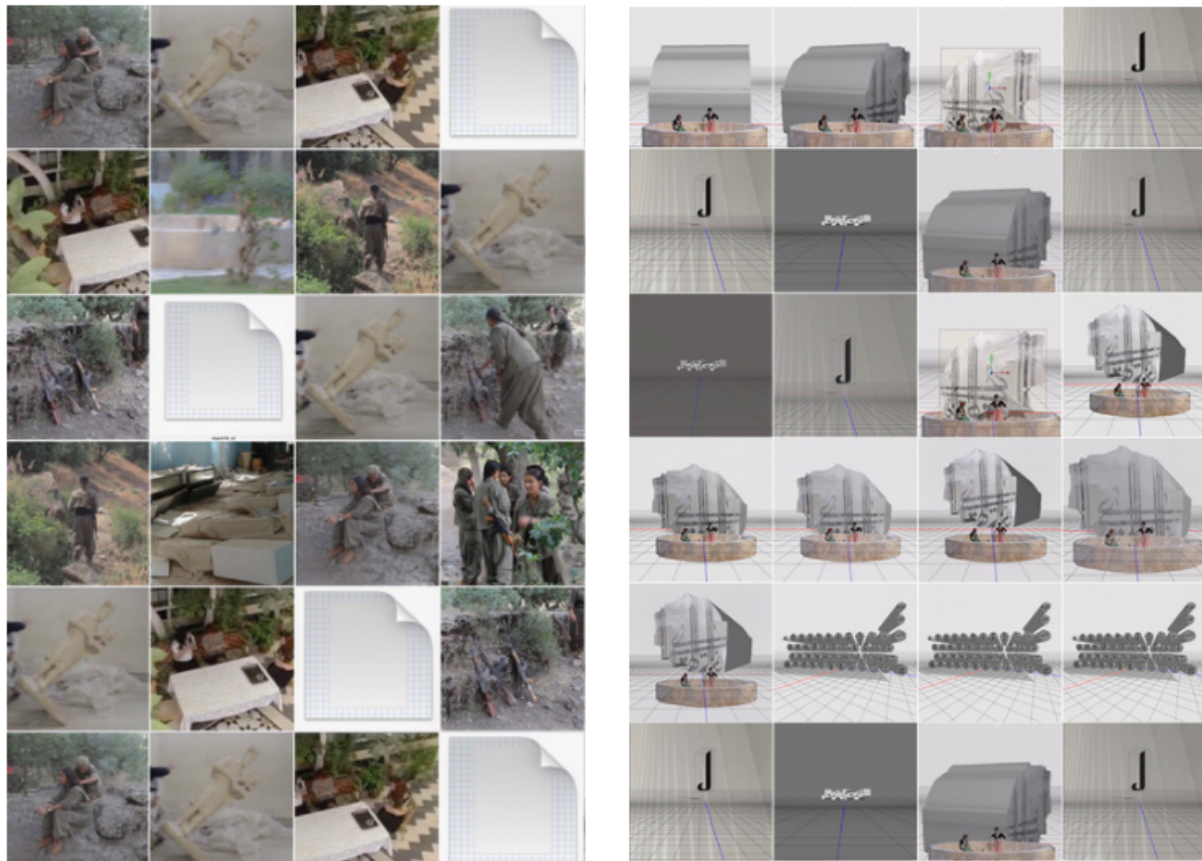
Figure 4. Jawa El-Khash, *Palette* **(2017), digital collage.**

The idea of contemporary digital diasporas is also significant for Kosovar-Albanian and Canadian artist Qendrim Hoti. In an era of globalised, proliferating and mutating digital images, new tools and methods for art-making rapidly develop. In Hoti's practice, video games, found objects and digital detritus can be materials or tools for image-making. Hoti's hybrid assemblages are often created by puzzling

together elements from Kosovo-Albanian material culture and Western consumer technology. He describes his making process as "serious play time" in which technologies are used as "mnemonic couriers of loss and memory."[12] Hoti effectively merges radically different symbols and objects, forming thoughtful interrogations of the experience of multi-locality and displacement, which at first glance is often masked by a jovial aura.

Figure 5. Qendrim Hoti, *Enemy or Ally* (2017), print, installation shot.

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[12] Qendrim Hoti, personal interview, January 12, 2018.

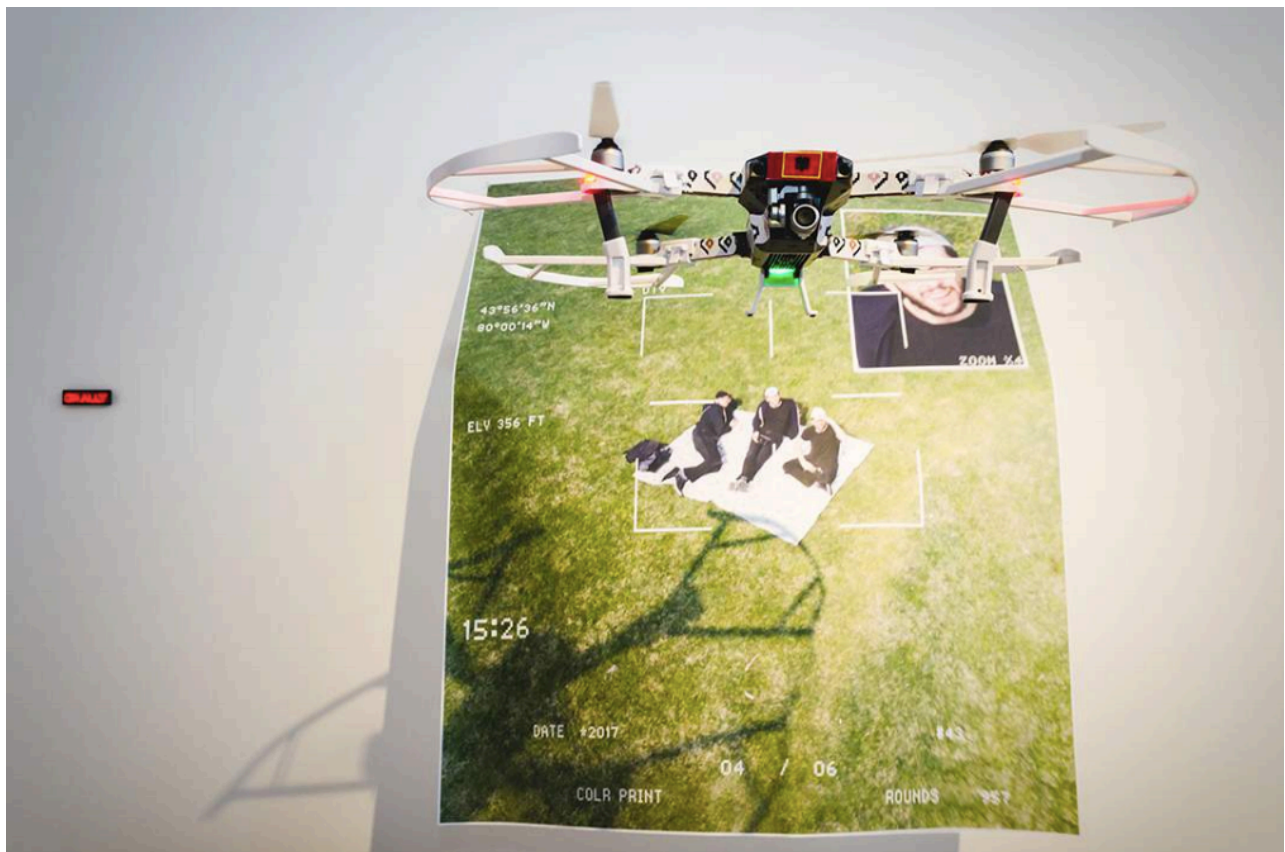*Enemy or Ally* (figure 5) is a digitally manipulated self-portrait that alludes to how war (something that has greatly affected Kosovo's material culture) is a playground for weapon testing that often finds civilians trapped in the crossfire. This is especially troubling when aircraft and drone strikes rely on cameras for reconnaissance, at times incorrectly distinguishing enemy from ally based on physical appearance in photographs.[13] Using a commercially available drone, Hoti presents himself fragmented into three bodies (North American, Muslim, and Albanian), each distinguished by culturally and religiously-specific head coverings. *Enemy or Ally* highlights the projection of identity through military surveillance while also challenging the impression that an individual or group is somehow a stable entity. Hoti's self-portrait reminds us that bodies (which cannot be separated from cultural identity and memory) are specific, pivotal, and subject to negotiation and change.

Through the distinct but linked works discussed thus far, technology and digital tools are clearly important components for Magsi, Benesiinaabandan, Gordon, El-Khash and Hoti in developing tactical modes of remembering misplaced, erased, and violent histories. Using video work, virtual reality, spatial imaging, online archives, digital rendering and photo-manipulation, the artists adapt vulnerable and difficult histories not just to other histories, but also to technological processes, and contemporary symbols/contexts, strengthening them by turning them into hybrid and therefore elastic forms.

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[13] Hoti, Qendrim. *Super Toys Last All Summer Long* (OCAD University, 2017), 50.

Part 2.

Forming relationships with culturally and geographically specific issues

> *"I'm always interested in culture. That's always where I begin. I take elements that I mainly find online and I try to break them down and also make them more approachable to a Western audience — how do I make people connect to a place, or connect to things in a place that is so far away? How do I make it come closer?"*

— Jawa El-Khash[14]

> *"We're not revolutionaries, what we are is artists. We're trying to mediate complexity."*

— Cristóbal Martínez[15]

Cultural memory and digital networks alike blur the line between private and public histories. When scrolling down one's Facebook page, content can include local and international news, on-the-ground coverage of events, as well as which of one's friends recently got married or ate a meal. Although the idea that the Internet is extra-spatial/extra-temporal is prevalent, the contemporary moment in which we live presents a paradoxical world-system that adheres to ideologies of division (national borders, fragmentation, ghettoization) while participating in the most pervasive global network (new kinds of virtual space based on multifaceted connections). Accordingly, in a global cultural economy that is complex, overlapping and disjunctive, issues of power and oppression can no longer be framed in terms of existing centre-periphery

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[14] Jawa El-Khash, personal interview, December 20, 2017

[15] "Land: Postcommodity" *Creative Time Summit* video, 14:03, October 18, 2017, http://creativetime.org/summit/2017/10/18/postcommodity/

models. In the text *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, Arjun Appadurai notes that the central conflict of this paradoxical world-system is "the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas."[16] This mutual cannibalization manifests in riots, refugee flows and ethnocide.

Our current capacity to see and experience almost the entire world at once establishes just how discordant we truly are. In order to make sense of conflicting sociocultural manifestations, Appadurai proposes that we must complicate the binaries of perpetrator/victim and colonizer/colonized: instead, he says, the focus should be on disjunctures in the narrative of global imagination. He illustrates a geometric metaphor for cultural formation "which [we] should strive to represent as fully fractal." This fractal metaphor for the shape of cultures is then combined with a "polythetic account of their overlaps and resemblances."[17]

In *Part 2,* processes of translation are considered — both in culture and artistic medium — as a frame through which to compare disparate, culturally and geographically specific issues. In the book *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* Matthew Reynolds defines translating as a simultaneous act of foreignization and domestication, and thus operates in the condition of between-ness, and inhabiting a

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[16] Arjun Appadurai. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*. no. 7 (1990): 296

[17] Ibid.

"no-man's land" middle-ground.[18] Although each artist discussed thus far speak to deeply individualized and seemingly disparate issues, they all engage in various processes of translation in order to mediate the complexity and in-between-ness of their social location. By focusing on ideas of translation in the context of works by Benesiinaabandan, El-Khash, Hoti, Magsi and Gordon we can begin to illustrate an fluid negotiation between sites of agency (on an individual level) and globally defined fields of possibility.

As mentioned, the world is marked by ideologies of deep separation as well as pervasive networks. Within these networks are communities that can be mapped out in relation not just to geography, but also through cultural and ideological affinities. In the "post-public"[19] space of digital networks, servers and programming format serve as infrastructure, making it possible for artists like Benesiinaabandan to thread Indigenous resistance and collaboration between Canada and Australia. *Mii omaa ayaad* "someone lives here" (figure 6) is a three-minute video that is part of a larger series of video and print work which Benesiinaabandan created during a residency at Parramatta Artist Studios, Sydney, Australia in 2012. Multiple iterations of photographic and filmic collage were created collaboratively with Indigenous artists in Geraldton, Western Australia which explores the symbolically charged and politically laden practice of dot painting.[20] *Mii omaa ayaad* interweaves atypical dot painting, aerial footage of land,

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[18] Matthew Reynolds, *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.

[19] Lina Malfona, "Architecture of Network vs. Geometry of Separation" in *esse,* 2016.

[20] Aboriginal Australian dot painting was developed by Papunya Tula artists in the 1970s by merging spiritual motifs and European art-making tools such as acrylic paint. Similar to other Indigenous cultural practices, there is a history exploitation, misappropriation and unequal assimilation into a commodity-driven, Euro-colonial economic system.

and maps, repeatedly deconstructing and re-composing their elements in order to illustrate the multiple layers of history, land, language and the points of contact that exist in one place. Thus, Benesiinaabandan translates a symbolically and politically dense cultural practice into a tool of empowerment that connects globally separated Indigenous communities.
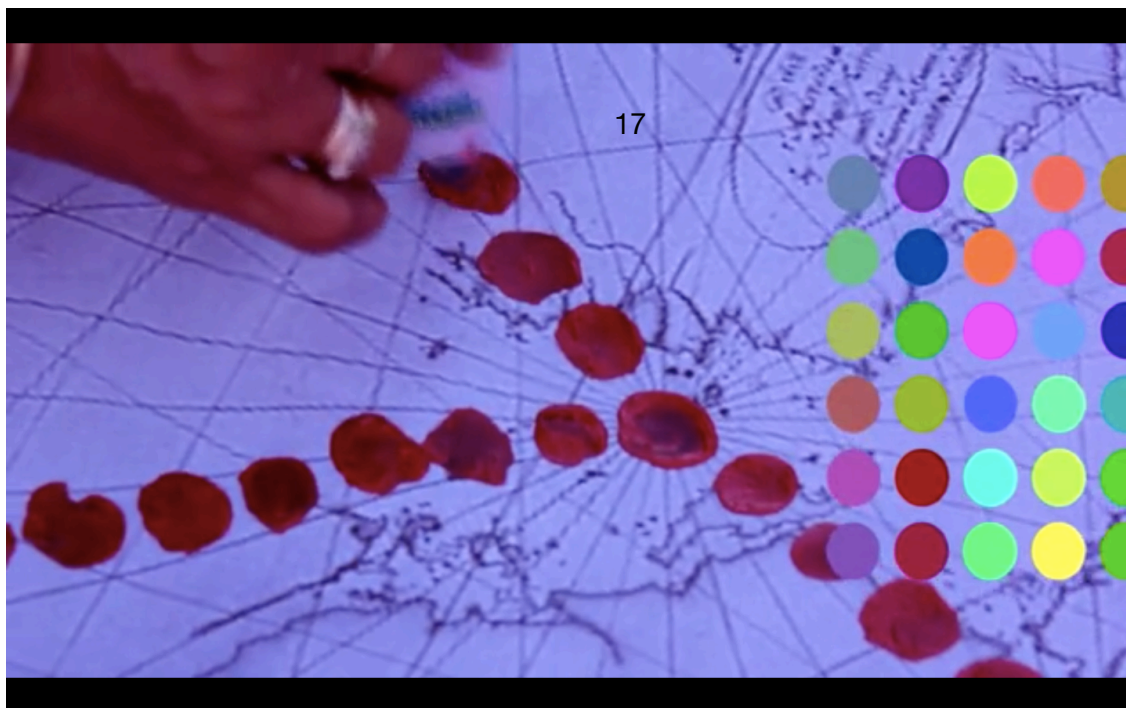
Figure 6. Scott Benesiinaabandan, *Mii omaa ayaad* **"someone lives here" (2012), single-channel video, screenshot.**

Waiting for Spring (figure 7) is a video installation by El-Khash that deconstructs a culturally significant symbol by isolating and presenting its formal qualities in order to communicate a specific experience. On a screen, Arabic text — which appear in sequence to form the sentence "waiting for spring" — floats in a virtual limbo. By

expanding on the formal qualities of Arabic typography, El-Khash is able to firstly express her affinity to the language; she states, "I want to be able to share the beauty of it with other people, even if they don't understand it."[21] Moreover, the video is accompanied by music and furniture reminiscent of a waiting lounge. El-Khash seeks to communicate the experience of refugees and migrants in *Waiting for Spring* by creating a sensorially immersive environment that intends to be strategically invasive of both the artist's and the viewer's psychology. Through the design of this atmospheric space (including dimmed lighting, repetitive and ambient music), the artist attempts to replicate an accessible state of displacement, waiting, and uncertainty.

Figure 7. Jawa El-Khash, *Waiting For Spring* **(2017), single-channel video, screenshot.**

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[21] Jawa El-Khash, personal interview, December 20, 2017

Figure 8. Qendrim Hoti, *Pocket Man* (2017), video game installation.

Hoti's video game installation, titled *Pocket Man* (figure 8), also attempts to evokes empathy by centralizing the experience of the viewer. The interactive assemblage adapts the format of the game *Pokémon*. Within the game, the participant gets to experience Hoti's life as an undocumented immigrant teenager in the United States. As the player moves around in the world and engages with the characters that inhabit it, she is given clues about where she could go next. The player is also confronted with strikingly polar opinions about immigration, social and institutional

discrimination, as well as friends and allies. Hoti draws on a personal experience that for many is familiar, and if the experience is not familiar, he makes it so through the use of an internationally popular consumer product and through the appealing and accessible form of a game. *Pocket Man* is an example of how Hoti's art practice uses technological and cultural competency to frame a sociopolitically specific issue in a tactically experiential and relatable way.

While Hoti uses consumer technology as means to convey the experience of marginalized bodies, Magsi adopts a specific aesthetic (refined, polished, editorial) to create an appeal for them. Coming from a background in fashion and journalism, Magsi favours controlled and ordered compositions, and this is evident in the photo series *I'm Still Here* (figure 9) which showcases brightly coloured, and patterned burqas in Canadian landscapes. Although the textile's colours (pale yellow and camouflage) match the scenery, it fails to assimilate into the landscape because of how contested the veiled body is:

> The hypocrisy of the west is revealed when faced with a veiled, Muslim woman: […] a visible, politicized and marginalized 'other' that exists. The veiled Muslim woman also faces persecution from liberal Muslims, patriarchal structures and western hegemony and feminism that label the practice of veiling as oppressive and outdated.[22]

As neither she nor her subjects can ever truly assimilate, Magsi's focus on the figurative form reminds us that cultural memory and identity (and its transmissions) are impossible to consider as disembodied. The body is in the centre of social, political and cultural flows. "I have been obsessed," Magsi writes, "with exploring the body, the

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[22] Magsi, Mariam. *Purdah* (OCAD University, 2017), 28.

boundaries that govern it, the clothing we place on it, the role several patriarchies play in establishing how it functions in society."[23]

Figure 9. Mariam Magsi, *I'm Still Here* (2017), photographic prints.

Hoti and Magsi are able to utilize their personal experiences of struggle as a way to connect with others and as a dialectic frame for larger sociopolitical issues. *Pocket Man* and *I'm Still Here* remind us of the power of self-reflexivity to enhance the communicative capacity of art. For Gordon however, it was the project *Latimer's Box* that sparked a self-reflexive turn in his art practice. Through an ongoing investigation into the manipulation of light to capture and occupy space as well as the body's relationship to that space, Gordon is able to meditate upon his own multifaceted relationship to specific sites as a Jamaican-Canadian and Franco-Ontarian. "There is a relationship between landscape and body that isn't necessarily physical," he says, "instead, it is a visceral feeling that I search for through experimentation."[24] For Gordon, the body, and all of its embedded histories, behaviours and emotions is a functional locus for image-making.

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[23] Mariam Magsi, personal interview, December 15, 2017
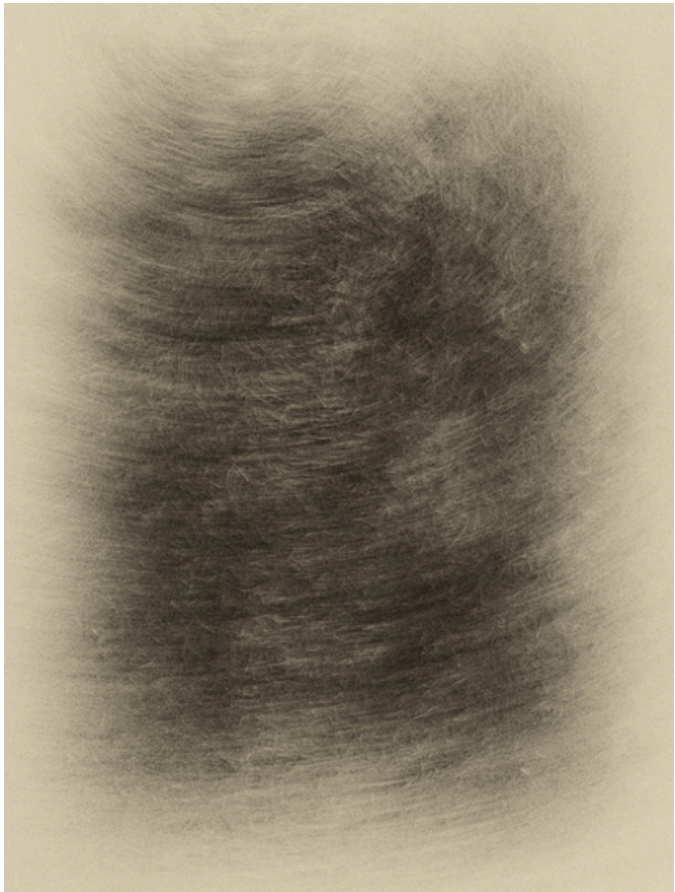
[24] Marcus A. Gordon, personal interview, December 5, 2017

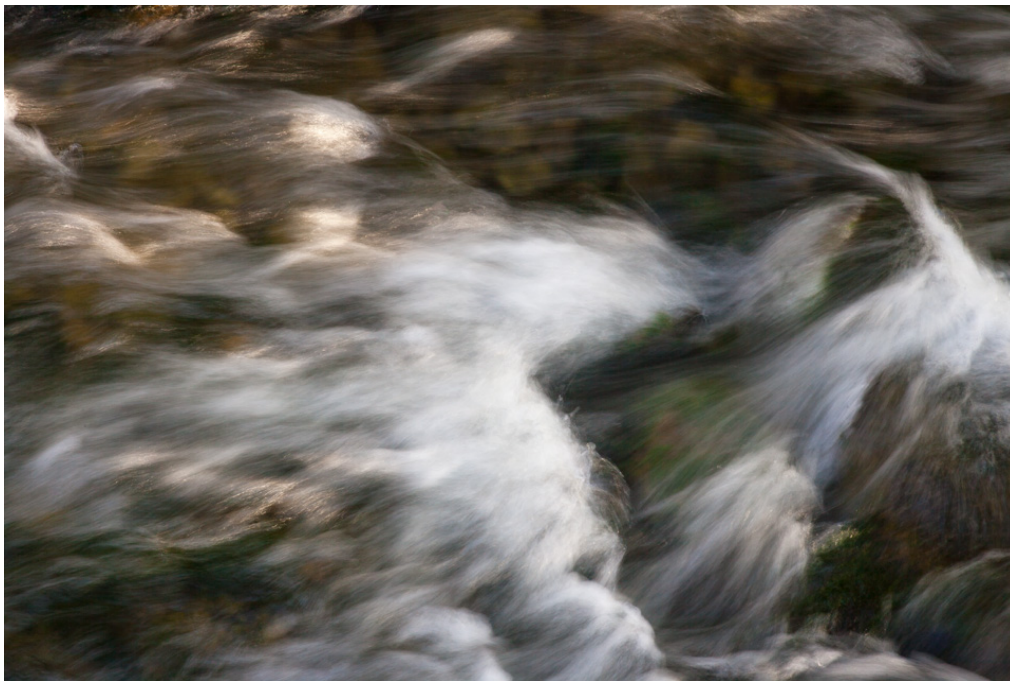**Figure 9. Marcus A. Gordon,** *Qi* **(2017), photographic print.**

Figure 10. Marcus A. Gordon, *North River* **(2017), photographic print.**

Qi (figure 9) and *North River* (figure 10) are examples of works he refers to as kinetic photographs. While the former captures the movement of body in landscape, the latter captures the movement of landscape itself. Gordon's kinetic photographs are produced through experimentation with film and digital photography as well as physical and digital manipulation. As a result, he translates the nuanced qualities of movement into a photograph, ultimately expressing the relationship between the environment and the self.

In considering art and technology as vehicles for imagining private and public histories, we can begin to narrow a frame in which we can compare Appadurai's largely untameable concept of "fractal shaped cultural forms" and their "polythetic overlapping."[25] Through their artworks, Benesiinaabandan, El-Khash, Hoti, Magsi and Gordon add a dimension of elasticity to cultural memory of a hybrid kind. They do this by integrating culturally and geographically specific issues to processes in science and technology, contemporary symbols, immersive environment, and consumer objects. Moreover, each artist explores the body's reaction to spatial dimensions (both physical and digital) in their work in order to create access points for empathy. Thus, through efforts in inter-cultural and cross-medium translation that address aesthetic and sensory connection, the artworks discussed offer an emotionally impactful understanding of fractal, polythetically overlapping cultural forms.

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[25] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs, (April 10, 2017).

Part 3. Conclusion:

The effect of pervasive information networks on meaning-making in art

"Is there only value in ephemerality?

Nothing is comfortable. Nothing fits.
There is a lack of sincerity.
Information isn't always correct.

Efficient communication is a miracle
of empty spaces
resonating with meaning."

— Ashley Opheim, *OPUS SEED IRIS OMEGA*

A large part of the Western modernist movement was — in hindsight — a type of longing for utopia. This utopia lies in the desire to escape the nominal self, discover the "true" self, and for that true self to be socially recognized.[26] Museums offered artists a chance to transcend their time in order to escape the nominal and instead stand for universal experiences. However it betrays universal ideals by way of exclusivity, as time and again we read the same names, dates and nationalities on gallery walls. Consequently, what has identified as the postmodern condition, Boris Groys notes, radicalizes the struggle for the true self by posing its search as futile.[27] Thus, postmodern ideas favour pluralism and entropy over universalism.

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[26] Boris Groys. "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," http://www.e-flux.com/journal/45/60134/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/, (April 10, 2017).

[27] Ibid.

In his text "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," Groys offers an insight: that the Internet has created a contemporary condition in which pluralism and universality can simultaneously exist in an observable way. There exists a tendency to think of the Internet as an infinite flow of data that transcends the limits of our individual control, however digital reproduction is always topologically determined. Each digital file is dated and located to an IP address somewhere in the world. This fundamentally changes the relationship between an original and its copy, as the anonymous process of production and reproduction becomes completely calculable. Moreover, he notes that in the Internet age, contemporary subjectivity is no longer fazed by dissolution in the flow of signifiers, because in the context of digital exchanges, this flow has become controllable and radically democratized. Based on this observation, Groys theorizes that a new post-postmodern utopian thinking emerges, one in which contradictory, pluralistic forms of knowledge can coexist, and yet be universalized by traceable, subjective choices.

In the face of the proliferation of images and information, artists are availed countless resources and exposure to cultural forms of all kinds, proving to be beneficial for developing ways of remembering and examining vulnerable histories, and communicating culturally and geographically specific issues. However, this prompts an increase in the labor of negotiation in meaning-making, namely with respect to decisions about what is excluded or included in one's roster of symbols. Moreover, with profound accessibility to a diverse range of voices, "the demand for compelling

stories," as Magsi notes, "is higher than ever."[28] By paying attention to the presentation of consequential issues through impactful spatial/empathic narratives, as well as strategic processes of translation and transmission in the works of Benesiinaabandan, El-Khash, Gordon, Hoti, and Magsi, we can imagine the multifaceted ways cultural formations overlap and contemplate their complex and hybrid manifestations. If we are to agree with Groys in the fact that we are simultaneously uni-vocal and pluri-vocal, and that assemblages of meaning will continue to be predictably unpredictable, then focusing on the formation of intentionally hybrid forms encourages the acceptance of different histories — knowing that they will always mutate and combine in unexpected ways.

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[28] Mariam Magsi, personal interview, December 15, 2017

Support Paper

Introduction

The following is a support paper for *Liminal Forms*. It outlines the various philosophical influences, theoretical frameworks and creative precedents that informed this curatorial project. It includes a review of relevant literature, exhibitions, and artworks, an outline of the project's methodology, as well as preparatory installation designs.

As an exhibition, *Liminal Forms* explores imagined genealogies of culturally hybrid forms that exist in contemporary art, ultimately in order to alleviate the tension between ideologies of division and pervasive global networks. It is firstly grounded in the perspective of different types of diasporic identity; focusing on individuals who are in especially strategic positions to address this topic because their understanding of inter-cultural exchange comes from lived experience.

The literature review is predicated on a foundational understanding of post-colonial/global power dynamics through theorists such as Arjun Appadurai, Benedict Anderson, and Walter Mignolo. This knowledge helped shape the following readings about current global networks and its effects on material culture, meaning-making and art (Ruth Phillips, Esra Akcan). Theoretical writings about cultural hybridity (Peter Burke, Diana Taylor), translation (Gayatri Spivak, Kathleen Davis), and issues around art

and technology (Walter Benjamin, Hito Steyerl, Boris Groys) have been essential for assembling a cohesive discourse between the diverse and specific issues addressed by the selected artists. Moreover, I takes into account essays, fiction and poetry that have helped in shaping my own understanding of cultural hybridity as well as contemporary Indigenous, Black and immigrant diasporas — contexts which are relevant to the art works.

Particular exhibitions and art practices played an influential role in the conceptualization of *Liminal Forms*. Some of these include *An Atlas of Mirrors: Singapore Biennale 2016*, as well as projects by Postcommodity, and Isaac Julien. These examples illustrate various types of hybrid forms via an assemblage of radically different symbols, media, and cultural contexts. This exposes the true complexity and ambiguity of globalized interculturality. Lastly, *Liminal Forms* highlights the importance the role of the artist (or curator) in mediating complexity and ambiguity through self-reflexivity, these are reflected in some notes about curatorial decisions and conversations with the artists.

Literature Review

i. Hierarchies of Knowledge: understanding post-colonial, global systems

Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities* (1983), was crucial for deconstructing the complexities of nationalism and cultural boundaries, as well as developing ideas around exclusivity and inclusivity between societies. He initially frames nationality as a cultural artefact that is riddled with complex, paradoxical conditions. For example, its reliance on formal universality (because in the modern world one *must* have a nationality) versus the "irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations." Anderson delineates how nations are imagined through and modelled after an alignment with "self-consciously held political and religious ideologies"[29] as well as the larger cultural system that precedes it.

In *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* (1990), Appadurai describes the modern world as a process of overlapping interactive systems, which has been accelerated by technology transfers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which created "complex colonial orders entered on European capitals and spread throughout the non-European world." Moreover, Appadurai comments on how this increased technological and inter-cultural exchange has led to the development of something critical and new in global processes; imagination as a social practice. "No longer elite pastime, the imagination has become an organized field of practices, a form of work (in labor and culturally organized practice) — also a form of negotiation

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[29] Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. (New York: Verso, 1983), (OCAD University, 2017), 5-6.

between sites of agency (on an individual level) and globally defined fields of possibility."[30]

The term "coloniality of power," developed by Peruvian cultural theorist and writer Anibal Quijano, is of particular relevance and refers to the remaining living legacies of European colonialism in contemporary societies.[31] These legacies take form in social orders and epistemologies, and helps to illustrate configurations of the world imaginary in relation to Western modernity. This configuration is the tradition of Euro-Christian communities deciding for other cultural groups what is best for them, often disguising economic extortion for good will.[32] The exercise of coloniality of power extends to the establishment of particular standards of global knowledge production and its mass exportation — including global designs of intercultural, social, and economic exchange that are brewed locally in the histories of Western metropolitan cities, and then enacted in various ways around the world.

In Mieke Bal's essay, *The Discourse of the Museum*, she discusses coloniality of power and its effect on issues of cultural property and standards of universal aesthetics. At the base of her argument is a semiotic problem of cultural objects: the work of art versus the artefact. While art is a metaphor with the ability to transcend time and be imposed in many different contexts, artefacts are a synecdoche, trapped

[30] Arjun Appadurai. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*. no. 7 (1990): 296-300.

[31] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 67.

[32] Firth-Eagland, Alissa. "An Appeal to White People: Relearning Our Concepts of Good Will, Intention, and Inclusion," in Musagetes. 2014.

within a specific context, conceived as an informant of a larger whole, and ultimately belonging to the past.[33] In other words, the former is authoritative and the latter is submissive. Similarly, in the text *Art, Authenticity, and The Baggage of the Cultural Encounter* by Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, the categories of art, artefact and commodity are convolutedly pitted against one another according to these universal standards of aesthetics.

On the other hand, Walter Mignolo extends the argument of coloniality of power in the book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* by pointing to the inadequacy of current practice in the social sciences. He calls for a redistribution of power in the geopolitics of knowledge through a method called "border thinking," a type of critical thinking that weaves in and out of philosophical influences belonging to the East and the West. It problematises the notion of binaries in epistemology; particularly East versus West (or Islam versus Christianity). This leads to a process of "an Other thinking," which is based on the acceptance of spatial confrontations between different concepts of history.[34] Through these concepts, Mignolo confronts power relations in cross-cultural interaction, promoting plurality and intellectual entropy as an ideological construct for the geopolitics of epistemology.

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[33] Mieke Bal. "The Discourse of the Museum," *Thinking About Exhibitions*. (1999): 206.

[34] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 69-70.

While Appadurai also vouches for the complicating of binaries (especially that of colonized/colonizer), he also points out that cultural forms are confrontational, and that "the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas." Nonetheless, in the move towards an increasingly transnational world, it becomes difficult to draw a line between "us" and "them." In an effort to alleviate this tension between ideologies of division and pervasive global networks, Appadurai encourages us to think of cultural forms as fully fractal, malleable and capable of "polythetically overlapping" with each other.[35]

Often a part of subaltern studies, "intra-cultural" refers to the study of diverse behaviours within on cultural group or between cultural groups with a degree of similarity. It connotes not just cultural contact, but also hybridity and symbiosis. For Mignolo, diasporic thinkers (immigrants, expats and refugees) that have roots in previously colonised states and have located themselves in the Western world that are in a special strategic position for "border thinking" because their understanding of intra-cultural exchange comes from lived experience.[36]

ii. On hybridity, translation, art and technology

In the book *Deconstruction and Translation*, Kathleen Davis uses a reading and interpretation of work by Jacques Derrida to address various practical and theoretical

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[35] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*. no. 7 (1990): 305.

[36] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 71.

concerns in practices of linguistic translation. For example, the limitations of linguistic translatability, issues of singularity, plurality and generality, stability versus instability, and the duality of original and copy. These issues — which were contextualized through an understanding of language in connection to culture and identity — allude to how translation as a way to transfer meaning can never be thought of as passive reproduction.

As a diasporic scholar who writes in multiple languages, Gayatri Spivak sets a new standard for self-reflexivity in her English translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. In the 79-page translator's preface, she makes notes on the specific decisions in her translation (intersections of personal, culturally specific, and adapted interpretations) by doing so brings attention to the characteristic gestures of deconstruction. Spivak makes clear her own position (as well as the reader's position) as co-author by embodying Derrida's framework for transfers and "différance" in language: "And all said and done, that is the sort of reader I would hope for. A reader who would fasten upon my mistranslations, and with that leverage deconstruct Derrida's text beyond what Derrida as controlling subject has directed in it."[37]

Walter Benjamin's text T*he Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1939) discusses the consequences of mechanical reproduction (specifically photography and cinema) on art and its place in capitalist society, providing many influential concepts in the field of cultural studies and art history.

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[37] Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology*. (Princeton University Press, 2000), xxxvii.

Benjamin frames the idea of the authentic art object and reproduction in a way that is grounded to the sociopolitical context of his time. He explains that what is missing from a reproduction or copy is an aura, the "here and now"[38] of a work of art. The aura of an art object with its qualities of creativity and genius, eternal value, and mystery, retains authority and sociopolitical power. These qualities are inseparable from ritualistic or traditional practices and can be manipulated in the interest of fascism.

Today, there is a contemporary hierarchy of reproducible images that is based on sharpness and resolution. *In Defense of the Poor Image* is an essay by German artist and cultural critic Hito Steyerl which suggests that aura (with its power and authority) is re-established in the form of new developments in brilliant, impressive high-resolution images. In contrast, the poor (low-resolution) image is "a copy in motion,"[39] degraded in quality due to the amount of times it has been replicated by being downloaded, compressed, re-uploaded, copy and pasted, ripped, edited, remixed and so on. Steyerl takes the idea of technological reproducibility on a new level of digital reality whereby it is the poor image, or the low-resolution file that is akin to Benjamin's celebration of the reproducible art its tendency towards a more democratic direction.

In the text *Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive*, Boris Groys theorises that the internet has created a contemporary condition in which pluralism and

[38] Walter Benjamin. "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations (*New york: Hartcourt, Brace & World, 1968). 73.

[39] Steyerl, Hito. *In Defense of the Poor Image*. E-Flux, Nov. 2009. Web. 7 Feb. 2017.

universality can simultaneously exist in an observable way. We tend to think of the Internet as an infinite flow of data that transcends the limits of our individual control, however, digital reproduction is always topologically determined. Each digital file is dated and located to an IP address somewhere in the world. This fundamentally changes the relationship between an original and its copy (as Walter Benjamin understood it), making the anonymous process of production and reproduction completely calculable. In the Internet age, contemporary subjectivity is no longer phased by dissolution in the flow of signifiers (as Derrida and Deleuze would suggest), because in the context of digital exchanges, this flow has become controllable and radically democratised.[40] Thus, for Groys, a new post-postmodern utopia[41] emerges, one in which contradictory, pluralistic forms of knowledge can coexist, and yet be universalised by traceable, subjective choices.

iii. Contexts: essays, fiction and poetry

Bumi Manusia ("This Earth of Mankind") is a novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, an Indonesian author (and ex-political prisoner) whose works reflect Indonesia at the time of its struggle for Independence from Dutch colonizers, occupation by Japan during World War II, as well as Sukarno's and Suharto's dictatorial regimes. The book's protagonist — a Javanese boy named Minke — navigates a romantic relationship with

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[40] Boris Groys. "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015). 360.

[41] Groys explains that, to a large extent, modernity was (in hindsight) a time for utopia and the desire to escape the nominal self to discover the "true"/"universal" self. Through archives, museums offer artists a chance to transcend their time in order to escape the nominal and instead stand for "universal" experiences. However it betrays universal ideals by way of exclusivity. Consequently, the postmodern condition radicalises the struggle for the true self by posing its search as futile. It encourages us to dispose of our illusions of identifying and stabilising subjectivity. Thus, postmodern ideas favour pluralism and entropy over universalism.

a mixed-race woman, and his position of inferiority against Europeans as a Native scholar. *Bumi Manusia* was originally composed as an oral narrative in 1973, which Pramoedya told to his fellow prison inmates. After it spread amongst all the prisoners, he was granted permission to write it down in 1975. Today, the novel exists in 33 languages. The story itself, along with the circumstantially fluid manner in which it was formed, inspired much of my thinking about translation in relation to colonially of power, and the complexity and ambiguity of cultural contact. Other works of fiction that influenced me in this realm of thinking includes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's book of short stories, *This Accident of Being Lost*, and *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King.

Lastly, the essay *Decolonization is not a metaphor*, written by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, offers a critical perspective of the differing complexities of settler-colonialism compared to other types of colonialism. It warns the reader about how a metaphoric adaptation of decolonization (especially in reforming ideologies in school systems) can de-rail what it really means, wants and requires. Where settler-colonialism and other types of colonialism differ and overlap is very important to take note of, especially in my use of umbrella terms like "diaspora" and "hybridity." For example, the idea of Indigenous "diasporas" is based not on their own movement, but by the movement of others, as well as forced displacement.[42]

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[42] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 87.

Exhibition Review

The exhibitions and artworks that influenced this thesis project articulates an extensive and nuanced understanding of cultural hybridity, as well as themes of plurality and universality in the context of global consciousness. They work within frameworks that integrate philosophical influences from multiple geographic contexts in order to disturb the artificial (and consequential) boundaries of political and cultural difference.

An Atlas of Mirrors: Singapore Biennale 2016, curated by Susie Lingham, was an ambitious exhibition that attempts to reflect upon past, present and future imaginings of the world. With a focus on the perspective of Southeast Asian artists and thinkers, *An Atlas of Mirrors* acknowledges how terrestrial, aerial and aquatic regions bare imprints of diverse cultures. It thematically orders forty-five artist projects into nine "conceptual zones." For example, "An Everywhere of Mirrorings" explores geometry and geography in relation to maps, and place-making, "An Endlessness of Beginnings" brings to light the theme of cyclical time and ahistorical realities across traditional and contemporary myths, "A Share of Borders" analyzes nationhood and cultural boundaries, and deconstructs it through shared histories, especially in the context of overlapping territories, and "A Somewhere of Elsewheres" explores the idea of belonging through current, urgent issues of displacement, and migratory experiences.[43]

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[43] Susie Lingham. *An Atlas of Mirrors: Singapore Biennale 2016*, Exhibition Catalogue.

Postcommodity is an international artist collective comprised of three individuals: Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade Twist. Their purpose is to provide an Indigenous perspective for a multiplicity of topics and themes. They adopt and develop metaphors that can be used to rationalise our shared experiences within a world rife with complex, dividing, and urgent issues. This produces a much needed discourse between Indigenous narratives and the broader public sphere. Originally created in 2008, *The Repellent Eye* project is a 10-feet in diameter replica of a "scare eye balloon" which is used to deter unwanted and pest birds. The metaphoric significance of this object also lies in its colours — red, yellow and black are primary medicine and spiritually empowering colours among many Indigenous tribes in the Americas. Moreover, the balloon communicates with birds — mediators between the spiritual and physical world for Indigenous peoples.

The Repellent Eye is thus a semiotic vessel that alludes to a nexus of conflicting cultural signifiers, reflecting the conflicting economic and political issues within the American landscape. It has been produced and contextualized in a number of different ways, but it is always symbol for defiance against colonialism and globalism. In 2015, Postcommodity created a line of 26 balloons along the U.S./Mexico border, and it functions here as a suture that "stitches the peoples of the Americas together," connecting parts of Western Hemisphere by "recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement and communication."[44]

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[44] Postcommodity, "Repellent Fence – 2015" http://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html.

Another notable practice is Isaac Julien's. His works speak powerfully to the fluctuations and limitations of claimed identity, especially in the context of blackness, queerness and nationality. By integrating film, documentary, dance, photography, theatre and popular culture into his pieces, Julien's practice is an examination of movement between nominal signifiers of the body (class, sexuality, cultural history), which is paralleled by a movement between disciplines and methods of narrating and meaning-making. *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) is the third and final instalment of Julien's Expeditions trilogy, in which racialised and non-racialised bodies are examined in relation to geography, history, violence and desires. The leading character (performed by Vanessa Myrie) appears in all three films, representing a body that is located and dislocated in fluctuating space (Africa, the Arctic, and Europe) and time.

The three-screen video installation boasts a high-resolution quality that is antithetical to its incredibly abject subject matter: African migrants trying to enter Europe. Moreover, it presents a striking dual narrative; while at the same time adopting visual cues from the history of classic Italian cinema, depicting the journey of people coming from Northern Africa to those parts of Europe.[45] Through this elegant, fantastical imagery, urgent geopolitical issues are made impossible to ignore.

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[45] Mary Louise Schumacher. "Isaac Julien's 'True North' at the Milwaukee Art Museum," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2012. Web.

Methodology

Liminal Forms combines primary and secondary research, as well as self-reflexivity to articulate its investigation of hybrid forms. The project starts with targeted secondary research by reading and adapting the positionally of certain frameworks. Firstly, A foundational understanding of postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Walter Mignolo provided me with a critical understanding of sociocultural dynamics within systems shaped by "coloniality of power."

The title of this thesis project, "Liminal Forms," refers to my adaptation of the *border thinking* method; which is a focus on transitional identities, geographies and histories. It also alludes to new, digital forms of transitional spaces in which accelerated hybridisation of culture occurs. For Mignolo, diasporic thinkers are in an especially strategic position for *border thinking* because their understanding of inter-cultural exchange comes from lived experience. These individuals are often said to be living in constant translation. In this thesis project, I try to define a possible parameter for this state of translation. Other researched frameworks that support this project include translation theory, and critical texts on art in relation to new media, networks, and technology. Moreover, *Liminal Forms* is largely influenced by previous seminal art works and exhibitions that explore contemporary diasporas, cultural hybridity, and tactics in framing geopolitical issues.

The primary research began by seeking out and meeting with artists whose practice is informed by sociopolitically or geographically specific issues as well as an inter-cultural or culturally hybrid existence. This includes studio visits, carefully looking at work both in real life and through online portfolios. I then spent time having conversations with the final selection of artists before developing interview questions. The interviews were done through recorded face-to-face conversation as well as e-mail exchanges (Appendix).

The last method through which I seek knowledge from is self-reflexivity, because the subject I am investigating pertains to my own personal histories. By thinking about my family's as well as my own complicated experience of migration, I am able to articulate an empathetic understanding with the chosen artists. This is one way in which, through self-reflexivity, I frame an understanding of the complexity and ambiguities of cultural integration.

Installation Plan

Liminal Forms took place in OCAD U's Graduate Gallery, Experimental Media Space, and Graduate Lounge (which are all adjacent to each other, acting as one exhibition space) from 15-20 March, 2018. The following section illustrates the practical decisions that reflect curatorial intentions.
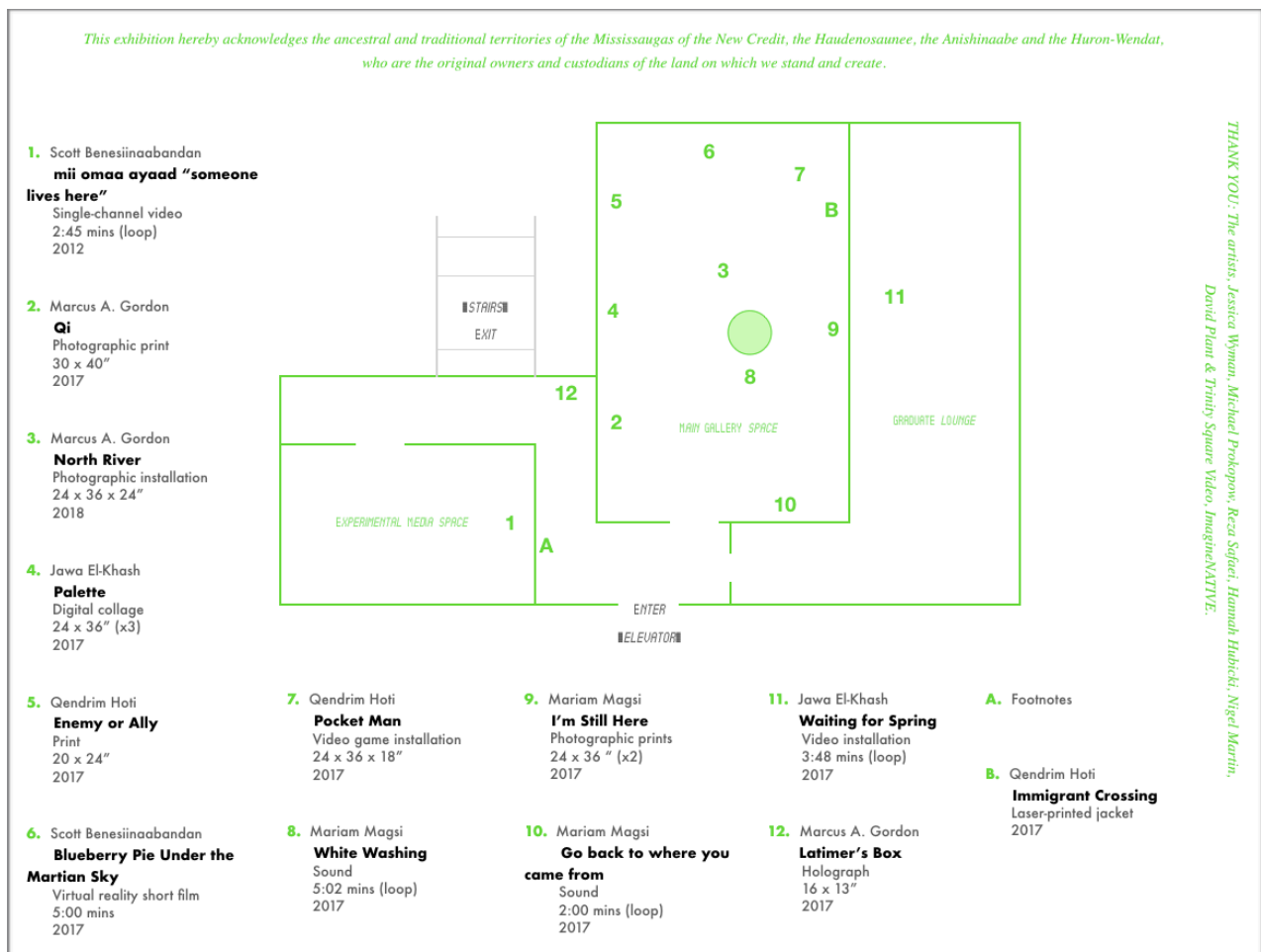

Figure 12. Map of Exhibition

Experimental Media Space

The Experimental Media Space is a screening room equipped with a new high-quality projector and sound system. There are three video works in this exhibition by El-Khash, Magsi and Benesiinaabandan. I chose to project Benesiinaabandan's *Mii omaa ayaad* because El-Khash's Waiting for Spring is site-specific and Magsi's *Go back to where you came from* had imagery and sound similar to other works placed in the main gallery space. Among all the works, *Mii omaa ayaa*d was produced the earliest (in 2012), thus I aptly marked it as "1" on the exhibition map, and ideally suggesting a possible flow for viewing the entire show.

Hallway

In my own art practice, I often seek out spaces of transition to alter (stairways, elevators, sidewalks) in order to express my position as a person who is always in transition. Given the theme of *Liminal Forms* and the artists' similar personal histories of dislocation, the metaphorical gesture of utilizing the hallway was an obvious choice. Latimer's Box is the one artwork located in the hallway (figure 13). This is a work Gordon and I have installed in various ways before, and because of its transformability, *Latimer's Box* seemed fitting for the transitional space of the hallway.

In this iteration of the work, Gordon and I created a viewing station in which the holograph stands on a shelf and can be picked up and placed under the light (strategically positioned at a 45 degree angle) to be viewed. This was a challenging decision because it needed a certain amount of space away from other works (due to

the interactive element and possibly crowding), but it also needed to be constantly monitored. I decided to install it in the hallway and made sure to frequently check on it during the opening reception and duration of the show.

Figure 13. Hallway installation view

Displayed along one wall are a collection of quotes I've accumulated from my research (appendix A). The are labelled as "footnotes" on the map and are printed on green paper in correlation with the design of the exhibition's posters, postcards and wall text (appendix B). The purpose of these is quotes is to express some of the main

themes of thesis project in a more accessible and engaging manner than the catalogue essay. This included short excerpts from essays, novels, a poem, a song, and quotes by artists and thinkers.

Figure 14. Graduate Gallery (main space) installations view 1.

Graduate Gallery (main space)

Upon entering the main gallery space, three prints along the left side of the wall are immediately noticeable They are (in order closest to the door) *Qi* by Gordon, *Palette*

by El-Khash, and *Enemy or Ally* by Hoti. Across from these prints is Gordon's photographic installation *North River*. Together, they visually present a strong theme present in all the works: the notion of movement between physical and digital ways of being, which, in this exhibition, is compared to the experience of inter-cultural movement. At the opposite end of the entrance is a swivel chair on which a visitor can sit and view Benesiinaabandan's VR piece, *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky*, with the required mobility. This piece was prioritized in the decision-making because it requires a safe space, assistance per view, and constant attention.
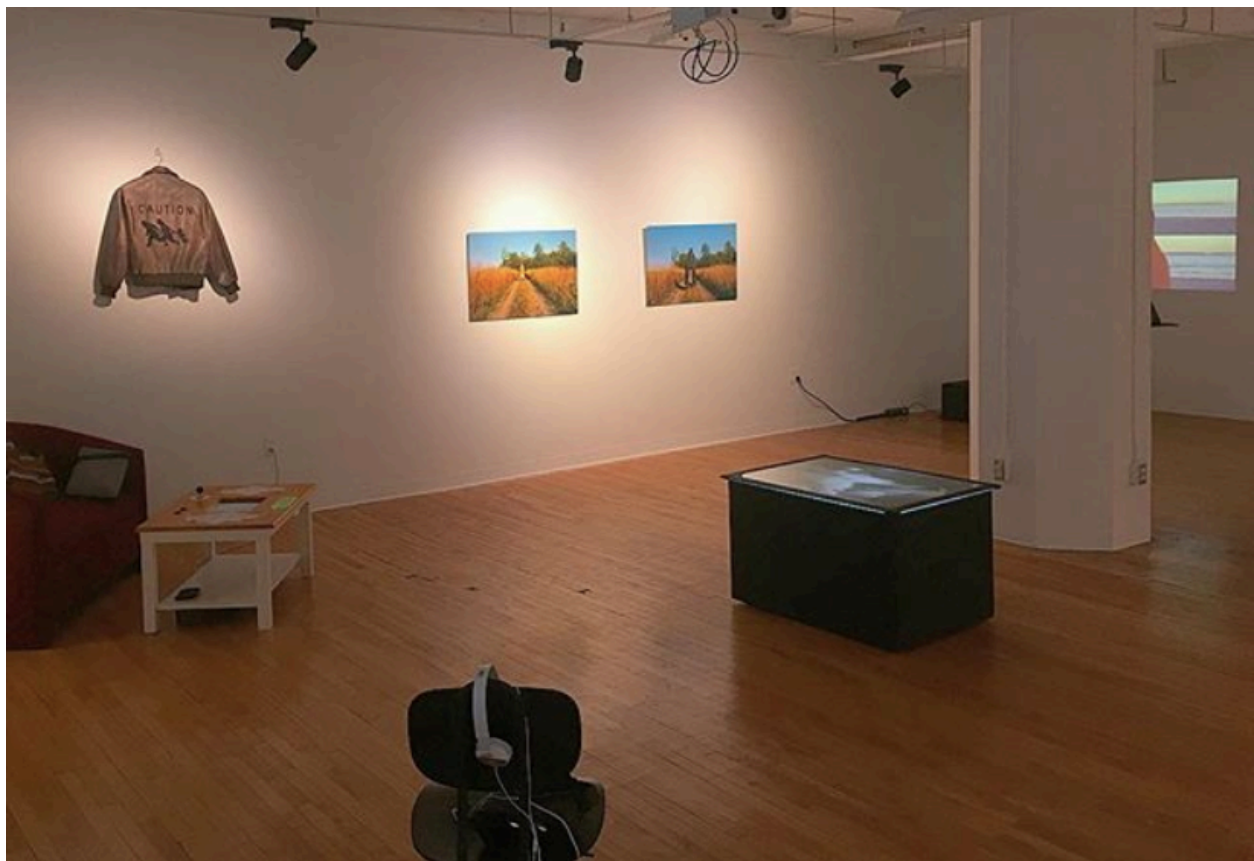

Figure 15. Graduate Gallery (main space) installations view 2.

Across the room from *Enemy or Ally* is another of Hoti's work, *Pocket Man*. This installation is made complete with a red/black patterned sofa and a dim standing lamp reminiscent of a living room. Accompanying this installation is a jacket, also by Hoti, titled *Immigrants Crossing*. To include this jacket was a last-minute decision I made because it enhances the exhibition space both aesthetically and thematically, especially when thinking about bodies and garments as identifiers, which *Enemy or Ally* mirrors. Centred on the right side of the wall (and next to *Immigrants Crossing*) is Magsi's *I'm Still Here* which address the issue of garment as identifier explicitly. On the same wall as the entrance of the gallery space is Magsi's *Go back to where you can from* which, similar to the other works along the right side of the room frames the body as a vessel for markers of identity, both self-made and prescribed.

Graduate Lounge

The last room I've utilized is the graduate lounge which, as described in the catalogue essay, is a fitting thematic choice for El-Khash's work *Waiting for Spring*. I cleared the room of excess materials, tables and chairs to set up comfortable seating for the four-minute video (figure 16).

Figure 16. Graduate Lounge installation view.

Conclusion

Through this exhibition I attempted to present and compare notions of movement and translation in both inter-cultural existence, as well as physical/digital existence. This is ultimately in order to communicate the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary diasporas, in which identities are marred and sutured by both ideologies of division and pervasive global networks. The artworks in this exhibition are placed with consideration of the following factors: the room and angles they needed for optimal viewing, aesthetic and thematic correlation, as well as meaningful connection to function and space. *Liminal Forms* offers a high level of engagement for the visitor and insight into the connectedness of seemingly disparate issues.

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Appendix A: "Footnotes"

"We're not revolutionaries, what we are is artists.
We're trying to mediate complexity."

— Cristóbal Martínez

OPUS SEED IRIS OMEGA
By Ashley Opheim

I lie to myself in order to tell the truth.
I have attempted to tell of a world that doesn't exist
in order to make it exist.

The past is only beautiful for those who weren't present.

Mystery is important,
it creates intrigue.

I am drawn to the holes in things.

The name of my wifi network is
lonesomenomore.
All of my Internet passwords are variations of the
same combination of words and numbers.

Ugg boots are for people who have
given up on life.

Our habits are future artifacts.

Soon out futures will be habitual artifacts.

You can't get away from your self by moving
from one place to another.

Reality is never as glamorous as anyone expects

The essence of things is kept untouchable.

A medium is a tool in which the world makes itself
known and seen and heard.

Our artifacts will replace us.

One time I wanted to reach out to god,
so I stuck my laptop as far into the sky
as my arms could reach.

My arms flew right off my body
And disappeared into the noosphere.

[…]

Do you know what tragedy is?
Tragedy in plastic plants and trees.

Tragedy is Visa.com.

The garbage bins overflow.
Gravity.
Shadows.
Space.

I scroll with two fingers, gliding.

Everyone loves dolphins and whales.
Eventually we will create hybrids of them
and it will be sad.
Eventually aquariums will be
retrospectives of captivity.

I crave convenient forms of compassion.
I think so I that I can know.

Everyone feels sad sometimes.

It's ok to feel sad, just don't.
It's the role of the artist to not succumb to
despair.

I play pretend that I am coated
with a prismatic, cosmic DNA.

My stomach makes a noise from the inside
that suggests emptiness.

There is no money in a world
of infinite abundance.

Yes, I know it's easy to forget
that there is life all around us.

What is wealth a side effect of?
Gravity.
Shadow.
Space.

Opus.   Seed.   Omega.

[…]

Is there only value in ephemerality?

Nothing is comfortable. Nothing fits.
There is a lack of sincerity.
Information isn't always correct.

Efficient communication is a miracle
of empty spaces
resonating with meaning.

Rush.
River.
Flow.

The only thing that's disturbing about death is
when it doesn't happen to you.

[…]

Death is something that happens to other people.

If I have to identify myself now,
it will be impossible.
If I have to identify myself
it will only be based on what I'm not.

I am not a plastic plant.

My idea of adventure is walking around
in a foreign country without a passport.

Where do I belong other than here and now?

I need a state that my spirit can live in.
I need you to encounter me.

My brain is faster that high speed Internet.

Yes I know,
echolocation is an incredible way to communicate.
Yes I know,
dolphins love and whale songs.

Yes, I know passwords.

Air bubbles.

Poetry begins everywhere and ends nowhere, or,
Poetry begins nowhere and ends everywhere, or,
Writing is an exercise in weightlessness.

Yes, helium is a form of effective poetry.

Being an artist and making art
is about being alive and finding new ways
to communicate with people.

[…]

These processes should be treasured
behind locks and passwords.

Information isn't always correct.
There is a lack of sincerity.

If people feel like they're on the outside of something
they'll start saying things about people that are on
the inside and vice versa, maybe.

Maybe there is no inside and outside.

I have abandoned billions of pixels of myself.
Enitre galaxies of pixels.
I have abandoned a piece of wind that was my
self
at on point that will never return.

Let the oceans spray their consciousness
all over our cities.

Such pastels of silken sun, such pixels of life.

We are mostly made of water, anyways.
But what the fuck are our eyeballs made of?

[…]

Magic all over our cities.
We are mostly made of water.
Our eyeballs.
Air bubbles.
Iris.
Helium.
All over the city let it spray.

All the things I have lived now live inside of me.
All the things you've lived now live inside of
you.

Now, let it adjust.

Our minds are constantly filled
so that we can never reach the bottom.

The present is only beautiful
to those who are present.

It's ok to close your eyes, but not forever, ok?

"That eternally harassing, tantalizing future. Mystery! We will all eventually get there —willing or unwilling, with all our soul and body. And too often it proves to be a great despot. And so, in the end, I arrived too. Whether the future is a kind or a cruel god is, of course, its own affair: Humanity too often claps with just one hand."

— Pramoedya, *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind)

"I must say that even at that stage it did not occur to me to declare my mother tongue as a foreign language which people do all the time these days to get into Comp Lit and I think that the politics of that gesture is deeply suspect. In a foreign country to get money you call your mother tongue a foreign language?

So I said *English*."

— Gayatri Spivak

"Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies. Therefore, settler nations are not immigrant nations."

[…]

"Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts. This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces."

— Eve Tuck and , *Decolonization is not a metaphor*

"These girls in here are the humblest
We drink out of plastic tumblers
While you see us on Tumblr's
We wanna get a job as a baroness
But they don't want no goddamn foreigners
So hey, you, you wanna marry us?
Prayers, the cross, they carry us
I wanna get out 'cause I'm curious
I'm serious, I hope you are feeling us
I'm pained by all of these periods
Where morals are running delirious
It's our dream, out of radius

I'm letting off kites over barriers
I'm letting off kites over barriers
I'm letting off kites over barriers
Letting off kites over barriers"

— MIA, *Kites*

"I'm always interested in culture. That's always where I begin. I take elements that I mainly find online and I try to break them down and also make them more approachable to a Western audience — how do I make people connect to a place, or connect to things in a place that is so far away? How do I make it come closer?"

— Jawa El-Khash

"I have been obsessed with exploring the body, the boundaries that govern it, the clothing we place on it, the role several patriarchies play in establishing how it functions in society."

— Mariam Magsi

Appendix B: Promotional Materials

Appendix C: Artist Interviews

JAWA EL-KHASH

1: Tell me a bit about how your art practice began… Were you trained in a specific medium or discipline?

My art practice began when I was 12 or 13 years old and I started taking painting classes. Before that I was also into theatre and acting, and that developed into an interest of the stage world, creating scenes and stories you can be a part of. When I got into OCAD U I studied painting, as well as experimentalism, film, animation… and now I've started to merge all of these practices.

1.a: does the word "spatial narrative" mean anything to you? Especially in relation to set design, and narratives within a constructed space,

I'm really interested in this Italian theorist, Prampolini, who was one of the first to create works which were a theatre without humans acting in them. He told stories not through humans, but by setting a scene. That enables the viewer to be more connected the world as inhabitants instead of voyeur. Also, the lack of human subjects (beside the viewers themselves) arrests the narrative in a fixed time, expanding on the gravity of a single moment.

2: What would you say are the main intentions of your current practice? (materially and/ or conceptually)

I'm always interested in culture. That's always where I begin. I take elements that I mainly find online and I try to break them down and also make them more approachable to a Western audience. I start here because that's an area that I struggle with ever since I started making art — how do I make people connect to a place, or connect to things in a place that is so far away? How do I make it come closer?
And in this sense, technology is also important in my work. and it has even vastly influenced my work, and even my painting, that's when it gets interesting, because you start thinking of the grid, my mind keeps going back to the base of the grid. When you're in a 3-D program you have have this canvas of a grid that you can do anything you want on.

2.a: Do you have any specific method of making culturally specific content more approachable in the West? Where is the gap in mis/understanding?

An example of this is that I love using Arabic typography in my work because I've always had an affinity to the language. My first language is Arabic and I want to be able to share the beauty of it with other people, even if they don't understand it. You can still enjoy the formal elements of it, or start to speculate what kind of language it is by looking at the curves and the geometry. This can be conveyed just by rendering two Arabic words.
This is a way I've been trying to merge communication. Also using the aesthetics of recent trends, or some other kind of universal language.

Arabic is also changing because of immigration, as people take the language into different contexts. But a lot of middle easterners don't really know how to speak Arabic fluently because they think English is a cooler language, and it's not cool to read books in Arabic, so I also think it's very important to the origins of the language and remember significance of it, and the beauty of it.

2.b: It's very interesting, the way you've described breaking down culturally specific content into basic shapes and text to make them aesthetically translatable through technology. The spaces you create are very geometrical… is there a similarity in your process for creating the type of environments that you paint/digitally render?

Firstly, there's something very eerie about creating within such an infinite place. Because you feel so in control and, to me, it recalls the religious idea of a single creator, and the possible psychology behind that… Especially with VR, you and literally out someone in the middle of your world.

2.c: your interest in building worlds, is also interesting to me because of your own (and many others, including myself) history of being forcibly displaced. And on the flip-side, there is digital world that is infinite. Does this create any form of anxiety?

I feel like where I struggle with digital medium is that I can't touch my painting, I like to feel the materiality of my works. And there's a new desire to be immersed in my digital world, instead of looking through a screen, and that's why I am moving on to VR projects. To be able to have control of how close you can get to digital imagery.

2.d: and the feeling of the movement of our body within the digital space itself

In this digital world, which is very unfamiliar, the anxiety of displacement can transcend. There's a crisis in the world where people feel like they don't belong anywhere or they belong in a certain place that they can't go to. So, we're also talking about the desire of countries without borders or boundaries, where everyone comes from nowhere, or everyone is from everywhere.

3: Your most recent body of work makes use of very different modes of making (e.g. archiving, collage, digital rendering, painting, animation). Are your methods/process for making art similar or different depending on the medium?

For my digital work, I always starts by building a collection of images that I find myself drawn to. I treat photoshop like I an extension of my sketch book, and that's when I start to break things apart. I collage, paint and draw both digitally and in real life for any body of work. So, the modes of making are very combined.

I've been focusing on the digital world more however, because the images I find and keep are usually of places that don't exist anymore. And I'm playing on the idea that, since it doesn't exist in the "real" world anymore, I'm going to make a place for it online. And as long as it's accessible, that's where it lives.

3.a: your works then exist fluidly in both physical and digital iterations.

Yes, and I'm currently trying to bring physical installation to be a part of the VR-worlds that I'm embarking on.

7: How does environment effect the way you create? (e.g. working in the East vs. the West)

There's definitely a huge difference depending on the environment, when I'm in the East, I don't produce as much as I produce here now because I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm only there for a limited time, and I don't know when is the next time I'll be able to go back, so I'm very focused on taking as much in as I can, or taking notes and idea drawings.

Getting to know Western VR technology has definitely upgraded my work, but I miss things some things about living in the East, especially because you are surrounded by a literal revolution and that's not something that happens in everyone's lifetime. It's something I would have liked to experience.

MARCUS A. GORDON

1: Tell me a bit about how your art practice began… Were you trained in a specific medium or discipline?

I picked up my first digital SLR in 2009 and started to explore street photography and taking landscape photos. This satisfied my leisurely interests of gazing at architecture, framing urban activity in the city, and engaging in the act of en plein air with the camera as my paint brush to create painterly landscape photos. I am untrained in this medium and fully self-taught, although I did begin some courses, some years later, that I never completed with the New York Institute of Photography. I started those courses when I knew for a fact that I wanted to begin my own practice in fine art photography. It was around that time (2012) that I began to shift away from my design career. I built a passion for art and research, and then discovered the field of holography (2014) when doing a digital art research contract. This further developed my desire to pursue an art practice and commit to pursuing an MFA and furthering my art research interests. Although holography was not part of any curriculum at my university, I remained attached to its holography research lab to build my own education on the subject matter. At the end of my first term, I knew that I wanted to create art works with light, and the combination of photography, holography and sculpture was going to allow me to do so.

2: What would you say are the main intentions of your current art practice? (materially and/or conceptually)

Using light and digital manipulation, my main intention is to capture a specific kinetic space or state. There is a relationship between landscape and body that isn't physical, but instead a visceral feeling that I search for through experimentation. These experiments use holography, photography and sculpture to make art where light often takes material form in physical space.

3: How does your background as a designer/photographer inform your art?

My background in digital design will sometimes contribute to my creative thinking, and has no formal role in my art making process. However, fine art photography remains the umbrella of

my practice and either lives within and around the process, or, "is" the art itself. Additionally, certain holographic works are often considered three dimensional photography.

4: What are the possibilities vs. limitations of working with holography as a medium?

Working with holography as a medium provides me with a multitude of ways to create visual works that shows more spatial information than what is provided by a photograph. Holography also allows me to add dimensionality, equally to a photograph or a sculpture. In my MFA thesis, I often refer to this as the duality of spaces where the intersection of the physical and virtual qualities of an image become the focus of the work. This is where I believe the materiality of light exists in its full strength, and is the kinetic space in which I seek to expose. This is where that visceral feeling is born.

Limitations of the medium can include angle of view of the holographic image for the viewer, and making traditional holograms often require the use of high powered lasers. These limitations are sometimes exaggerated in the art making, for instance making a network of holograms with very narrow angles of view but combined in a sculptural manner.

5: Explain to me about how your working process could be considered hybrid (in terms of modes of making).

My passion for photography can be said to be derived from being able to freeze a moment in time and tell a story with that capture. I feel this is the same with holography, but with a few key differences. One such difference is the ability to make a multi channel hologram that allows for the display of multiple images instead of one. Another difference that is key, which draws attention back to one of its limitations, is the fact that holograms are made with coherent light (one wavelength, one pure colour). Naturally, holograms are monochromatic, and as such, situates the art making process to work with one colour at a time. Unless you're working towards a rainbow hologram, which splits white light into multiple colours of the spectrum when reconstructing the image. The frozen moments in time created by photographs or holograms are still very much forms of encapsulated kinetic energy driven by our perception of light and colour of the image. In my view, this kinetic energy is a cyclic motion, or periodic movements that interact with physical space. And this motion is triggered simply by our gaze of the image.

6: How does environment effect the way you create? (e.g. working in Montreal vs. Toronto)

The personal connection to these qualities (previous answer) speak to my background as a teenager who went to 4 different high schools, moving back and forth between Montreal and Toronto, between French and English schools, between multiple cultural circles. The back and forth cyclical movement is also connected to the ways that holograms are made, and the way we see and experience them. Regardless of the repetitive nature of this motion, it is the differential in each cycle where lies (what i believe to be) a form of beauty that resides in that cycle. When witnessed or experienced, in my mind, time stops here and disappears for moment of tranquility in the viewer's eye. Adding these art works within architecture and the landscape I feel can contribute to the reduction of time pollution, balance (or even imbalance) the cultural tempos of an urban space.

QENDRIM HOTI

1: Tell me a bit about how your art practice began… Were you trained in a specific medium or discipline?

Played a lot, with anything around me as a kid became a toy, I think I still work in that way now. It's just more serious. Drawing and painting became my first serious interest. I was oddly good at it technically, I think it's just a system I was curious about and made myself understand it. it consumed my interests the year before and my first year of college at FIT.

2: What would you say are the main intentions of your current art practice? (materially and/or conceptually)
The main intentions of my current work the complex relationships people have with objects, specifically memorial, cultural and technological subjects. The Objects and history used are considered the materials but I must also credit the products and tools used in the creation process as material too. Collecting is really important to my practice and how I make my object assemblages. I go through my stuff frequently and try to pair objects and bits, usually I place objects around my work desk so I can see it and study it until something symbolically or practically agrees with another object.

3: Your body of work makes use of very different modes of making. Would you describe your practice either as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary?

Technically speaking, I think It is interdisciplinary that my practice falls under but I don't like to combine the different disciplines I study under one category, the important part for me is for them to be separate, different and concentrated in their own characteristics without art.

4: You often make use of numerous unconventional tools to create imagery. Does the making process for you begin with a concept or an inclination towards material?

My studio practice works as a serious play time, where computers, tools, and machinery are used to merge objects together by playing with them symbolically, physically and emotionally. It's similar to the way children play except you understand the objects you are playing with have a production process, history, design, and sentimental value. So you're able to play with those factors too.

5: How did you come to the decision to make work on Counter Strike? How much freedom do you feel you have on this platform / what are its limitations?

I was researching a particular time in my life during my visits in Kosovo, I remember being 11 and playing Counterstrike with kids in the village internet cafe. They were dealing with the trauma from the war through video games, and I connected with them but from across the world. I learned that Counterstrike had gotten a major update and came with a program to make your own maps (playing worlds). I tried it and got really into it, piecing together a virtual space based on documents, photos, and videos I was uncovering at home. My time spent making KULLA was recorded at over 400 hours of work time, besides not being able to change the base rules of shooter vs shooter, the only limitation is that the file is so large that servers are not able

to host it online. Since it is an artwork and not a conventional map for players, I had to make a sacrifice. Hopefully the future rise in storage technology will benefit me in the near future.

6: In KULLA, you built a digital playing field using personal artefacts and histories. What were your motivations for building the newer video game installations "This is how it feels like" and "Pocket man"?

"This is how it feels" and "Pocket man" are virtual creations of two points in my teenage life living as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Stories of other undocumented youth made me realize the similar lifestyle that one is subjected to with the many stressful situations we go through. You truly feel objectified as an alien compared to everyone else and you can't talk to people you don't trust about it. "Pocket man" beings in a clinic where you are denied any health care due to legal status. This happened to me when I turned 18 and wasn't covered by my fathers work visa insurance. When I became an adult I had to quit becoming a dreamer.

7: How does environment effect the way you create? (e.g. working in Eastern Europe vs. North America)

Working between Kosovo and Canada has proven difficult, but doable. Object hunting is great in Kosovo, the past is really close there. In a perfect world I'd be able to have a mobile studio to move between places because it is hard to amass research without the tools to act on it. Like I mentioned previously, the way I work requires a lot of play and it gets frustrating when you can't play with new research and stuff you have just accumulated.

MARIAM MAGSI

1: Tell me a bit about how your art practice began… Were you trained in a specific medium or discipline?

I was raised in a fairly artistic household. My mother is a poetess. She put paintbrushes into my hands when I was quite young and impressionable. **She was never without a camera, and** our home went through immense technological changes and advancements. I saw her record everything, either in still images or video formats, and began to mirror her quite early by getting my own camera and documenting home life through my eyes. Though I am formally trained in a myriad of mediums, including but not limited to, Painting, Drawing, Installation Art and Conceptual Art, my practice primarily centers around Photography. I have studied Photography during my undergraduate and post-graduate years at University of Toronto, George Brown College and OCAD University respectively.

My practice integrates knowledge from multiple genres, disciplines, methodologies and mediums. I operate a freelance business under the name of Mariam Magsi Art & Photography, providing creative and documentation services in the GTA. Alongside commissioned Portraiture, Fashion Editorials and public and private event documentation, I am consistently creating artwork, exploring themes of immigration, diaspora, sexuality, culture and identity. These are topics that I am personally invested in as a Pakistani/Canadian navigating life between my homeland and my adopted country, where based on my skin colour and ethnic

background, I am deemed a minority. I don't enjoy labels, as I find them to be restricting, but I understand the need for them to exist in order to better understand our world and each other.

2: What would you say are the main intentions of your current art practice? (materially and/or conceptually)

I enjoy using a refined and polished aesthetic while exploring topics and themes that evoke passion in my desired modes of expression. In all of my work, the aesthetic is distinct. Whether exploring the burqa conceptually through immersive installations, or embarking on durational performances that investigate Sufi funerary practices, there are some aesthetic elements that are extremely important to me. I enjoy using sharp lines and divides in my work, and even if chaos is employed there is controlled order to the chaos. I tend to steer toward creating a dramatic mood with deep, dark colours, and strong contrasts. One of the most important tools for me is light and every day is a new lesson on how to see, and how to use both staged and available lighting conditions to my advantage when creating a portrait, a tableau or a political work with a message. Through lens based mediums I enjoy turning the gaze back onto the viewer. There are a lot of reflections in my work. For example, in "The Registry" viewers walk through a hallway and encounter multiplicities of colourful burqa clad subjects lined symmetrically, shot with a commercial, studio lit aesthetic. As viewers turn away from the photographs, they meet a wall installation of the colourful burqas from the photographs. If they choose, they can wear one of the burqas themselves. The burqas are scented with flower oil extracts or ittar. Finally, a mirror is installed so that viewers may immerse fully in the installation, and also be reflected, eventually spectating themselves. This is pure psychology at play. Performance is another major element in the work and it is evident in most of my Photography and Video Art. I have been obsessed with exploring the body, the boundaries that govern it, the clothing we place on it, the role several patriarchies play in establishing how it functions in society.

I am not detached from the themes I explore and have used my own body in my practice on multiple occasions. However, on occasions that it is impossible for me to shoot and perform while also creating a visual scene that is compelling, I work with others. For example in my latest series of works "I am still here" I use the yellow burqa to symbolize a representation of the Other, the foreign, the pariah. A subject wearing the burqa and a pale coloured skirt is then placed in the centre of a Canadian landscape. Land is another important subject being explored through this work, especially in Canadian context. Land, much like the body of the Other, and the burqa, is a contested topic. There are leading lines that lead the viewer to the centered subject. Is this an invitation? Is it safe for us to go further? Is the subject we are encountering in a defensive position or are they offensive? As they look straight at us, what does this say about our position as the spectator? The subject, while standing out, is also camouflaged and one with the environment that it inhabits. Land has played a big role in the recent, large influxes of brutal migrations of people from the Middle East. Even though the subject is integrated with the environment, they are also lost in the large landscape.

I don't work alone and collaboration is a very major component of my work. I am deeply grateful for the generosity of spirit my collaborators have shown while lending their time to our projects. It is a privilege and honour indeed to work with people who can envision my vision and work with me to create pieces of work that we then share with the world.

3: Your body of work makes use of very different modes of making. Would you describe your practice either as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary?

Quite frankly, none of these buzzwords make sense to me. If I have to position myself I would say I am a Multidisciplinary or Multimedia Artist. I integrate knowledge from a variety of disciplines and methods and I stay true to the mediums I work with.

4: How does your background in fashion/editorial photography and journalism inform your methods in making art?

I don't know if this is a curse or a blessing but aesthetic perfection is hugely important to me. I enjoy using sharp lines, symmetry, pyramid and cubic compositions, and I am always looking at new angles to study the light I am working with and on the constant lookout for found objects, scenes, locations and backgrounds to capture. I attribute this to extensive experience in the fashion and photojournalism industries. Though they seem like two completely opposite worlds, in reality, there are so many parallels between them. They've undergone massive transformations like going from print to digital. The demand for compelling stories is higher than ever. Both industries are oversaturated and so one has to really stand out and bring a unique perspective to the table. Both industries are using social media as a tool for connecting with larger, global audiences. All the laws and rules of good image
making apply when making a fashion editorial piece or shooting a documentary work. Composition, lighting, the relationship between foreground, subject and background, textures and tone, drama and mood, these are elements all photographs strive to finesse and hone in their works.

Where my art and activism shows up is where my humanity aligns with topics that I am passionate about. I work with people with diverse body shapes, ethnic backgrounds, occupations and sexual orientations. I like to cover stories that are not receiving attention in the mainstream. Within those stories I look for other layers and other stories, doing an excavation of sorts. For example, with Purdah, my MFA thesis project at OCAD University, I interviewed niqab wearers in Karachi, Pakistan. I purposely chose some candidates that had more conservative views about women's clothing, and chose to live within confines of patriarchal thinking, while also being feminists in their own ways. Isn't that what intersectional feminism is about? Covering all the stories? Not just the ones we want to see and hear? We may not agree with these veil users and their thinking and rationale may seem completely out dated, but that does not mean that they should be ostracized from society.

Currently, the face we are seeing most in the mainstream that defines "Muslim" is a fair-skinned model wearing a hijab, looking coy and pious and I really want to counter that with ethnically and physically diverse people in burqa, niqab and hijab screaming at the top of their lungs, dancing, smoking a joint, singing, being queer, being loud and being proud. Most of these performances and scenes are influenced and inspired by stories from my collaborators. Some of the photographs are documentary style and others are staged like fashion editorials.

5: What is the difference for you between making a work of art and doing a performance art work?

There are so many differences between the two processes. When I make a work of art I can see it and analyze it right away. I can control it, mould it and make corrections, depending on the

medium. For example, I enjoy post-processing methods as much as I enjoy image capturing because I am able to add and subtract, erase, correct, perfect, with complete agency and meticulousness. I enjoy this persistance for perfectionism. I was raised in a creative but very strict household. Physical punishment was regularly handed out and school life was no less disciplined, being that I attended a convent governed by disciplinarian nuns. This learnt discipline forces its way into my work.

When I perform, on the other hand, I cannot see myself performing, except after, when I encounter the documentation of it. Before Marina Abramovic became a commercial performance artist, she held the view that there should be no documentation of performance and I from an artist's standpoint, I agree. It's just not the same.

Moreover, to later see mistakes that could have been fixed or avoided is a learning lesson, sure, but frustrating, nonetheless. When I make a work of art, I am focused, my brain is active and engaged throughout, I am human. When I perform, I become the art, hence becoming artwork. There is a dehumanizing element to have people stare at me with unabashed bravery. As you know staring is not considered appropriate in North American culture.

I use the burqa often in my performances. One of the reasons I use it is because it creates the barrier and distance that I need between the viewer, and myself because in many of my performances, viewers are usually in very close proximity to my body. Sometimes visitors engage with my body. I am, given the current political climate toward Muslims, quite trusting in public and indoor performances, but the fear and anxiety is definitely an element that is present. This fear and anxiety does not manifest itself when I am making works of art but it emerges before every performance. The beginning is always the worst. The middle is where I truly become one with the environment, forget the audience, disconnect with the location and physical setting and immerse myself into the performative gesture, act, happening, protest or intervention. The end of the performance is always empowering. I can only describe it as rebirth. A new slate. A fresh contract with the universe. Much like the transformative feeling after a long meditation. Abramovic accurately describes performing as sacred. This is true, for me at least.

6: Your works often make use of multimedia alongside material installations to create a fully sensorial experience. How are the senses (e.g. smell, touch) important to your work's message?

I am constantly asking myself: how do I turn the gaze back onto the viewer? How can I mirror this theme in their reflection so that they are left wondering more about themselves than the work that they are encountering and analyzing? Photography is a great method of turning the gaze back onto the viewer. You lock eyes with the portrait presented to you and that one interaction with the image can last a lifetime.

Case in point: The Afghan Girl by Steve McCurry. The subject's eyes hooked every global reader and viewer in, and the image continues to hold the title for being the most popular photograph in the world. The eyes, the act of looking, meeting the intense and sharp gaze of the subject in the photograph, this first sense of looking is important. Once I branched out to integrate installations and performances in my practice, I was able to free myself from the limitations of the photo frame and think, as clichéd as this sounds, outside the box. So, I know I can shift perspectives through my images, I know I can grab their attention, but how do I take this further? Well, what if they were wearing the burqas that they're seeing in these images?

What if they could smell the scents commonly found on these burqas, truly embodying the wearing of one?

Scent is not commonly used in art across North America and Europe. The reason for this could be sensitivity to diverse allergies found in people. However scents like sandalwood, jasmine flowers, rose, coconut and turmeric are such an integral part of the vibrant and heady South Asian culture I come from. Since I am exploring so many other elements of culture and religion, why not also explore scent, that plays a dominating role in my desi lived experience.