

**Displacement, decolonisation and the Domestic within Contemporary Art Practise,
Exhibition making and Video Display**

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Table of Contents

List of Referenced Art Pieces.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One: Mona Hatoum and her use of the Domestic.....	6
Chapter Two: Waffa Bilal on distance and Privacy.....	8
Chapter Three: Ben Shahn on Western History through use of Exhibition.....	10
Conclusion.....	13
Works Cited.....	14
Bibliography.....	15

List of referenced Art Pieces

[Figure One]- Hatoum, M. Grater Divide. 2002. White Cube, Hoxton Square, London.
<https://www.whitecube.com/gallery-exhibitions/grater-divide> (accessed 27/11/23)

[Figure Two]- Bilal, W. Domestic tension. 2008. Live Stream Installation.
<https://wafaabilal.com/domestic-tension/> (accessed 29/11/23)

[Figure Three]- Bilal, W. 3rdi. December 2010-2011. Series of Photos.
<https://wafaabilal.com/thirdi/> (accessed 29/11/23)

[Figure Four]- Shahn, B. Handball. 1939. Gouache on paper. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/33365> (accessed 29/11/23)

[Figure Five]- Shahn, B. Allegory. 1948. Tempura on panel. On exhibition: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/ben-shahn> (accessed 01/11/23)

[Figure Six]- Shahn, B. We Did Not Know What Happened to Us. 1960. On exhibition: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Introduction

Regarding prompt four tasking to, *'...Choose a theme or movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practise or interests and construct a 2,500-word essay.'*

This essay will focus on a theme relating to and working off past work and research. 'Displacement,' as the chosen key through line of this written piece, will entail looking into the different motifs used by artists that were forced from their homes or affected by conflict. Each piece selected will help to define the ways in which they connect and differ as artists.

Mona Hatoum and Waffa Bilal's use of the 'domestic' and Ben Shahn's progression into 'personal realism' that works to show the changes in American culture and politics, during the modern period will work as key theme explorations and will look to grasp at connecting themes of: Privacy, Land and Class. Each piece chosen will help to reflect on the history of the times and places in which they were made, with the aim of highlighting the effects concepts of empire and capital have on different countries around the world. The writings of Dr. Ali M. Kassem and Friedrich Engels (1820- 1895) will play a key role in the historical and critical aspects of this written piece.

This essay should be looking to expand ideas of class struggle across borders through the use of the earth's natural resources. British climate activist group Just Stop Oil in May 2023 has come out in support of Palestine. The group marching in London, to commemorate, '...the 75th anniversary of the Nakba – or Catastrophe – when over 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly removed from over 500 villages and cities in historic Palestine, never to return. The Nakba continues today. From Jerusalem to Gaza, via the Naqab, Israel continues its policy of human rights abuses, displacing and oppressing the indigenous Palestinian population.'

This outlook adds to a steadfast relationship between the use of fossil fuels, refugees, and conflict within the UK and in the middle east. Coal, while no longer the most used fossil fuel, has a long class and cultural history within working-class Britain. England in 1845 during a time of great globalisation due to the growth of usage in coal also was also experiencing a wave of Irish immigration. These individuals due to the Irish Potato famine moved from their home towards countries like the UK and the US. Philosopher Friedrich Engels writes in his,

'Conditions of the working class in England' on the uses of Irish immigration across the channel:

The rapid extension of English industry could not have taken place if England had not possessed in the numerous and impoverished population of Ireland a reserve at command. The Irish had nothing to lose at home, and much to gain in England; and from the time when it became known in Ireland that the east side of St. George's Channel offered steady work and good pay for strong arms, every year has brought armies of the Irish hither... nearly all of whom enter the industrial districts, especially the great cities, and there form the lowest class of the population. (Engel.F 1845, p. 81)

The increase in working class population is a benefit towards the expansion of capital, the Irish population of the seventeenth century is an example of an early industrial tool. Conflict and resource, the primary one in this essay being oil, is a continuation of past colonial life. Great Britain in its process of expanding influence as a large colonial power. Through the use of proletariat hands, and the kidnapping and enslavement of large African communities, and later in the 'retreatment' of itself as an empire has left its mark upon both itself, the middle east and those of the lower class of each country that once was a part of the British Empire. The distance of cultural ideals and the themes that bring those of different nationalities together will be explored through the art pieces mentioned within the bulk of the written task.

Leftist Ideas of dehumanisation and alienation are prevalent in the discussions of privacy in each piece. The elements brought to an audience's attention within the selection of focused work will defuse the smog of human difference bringing the mundane and universal between class, nationality, and artistic approach into the forefront.

Notions of European civilization will be questioned in its involvement in the brutality displayed in each artist's personal history. Writer Susan Sontag in, 'Regarding the pain of Others' (2004) notes on a western European outlook on conflict in the east opposed to the west:

Britain as part of the spoils of victory when the Ottoman empire was dismembered after the First World War. Between 1920 and 1924, the recently formed Royal Air Force regularly targeted Iraqi villages... raids 'carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants' crops and cattle', according to the tactics outlined by one RAF wing commander'. What horrified public opinion in the 1930s was that the slaughter of civilians from the air was happening in Spain; these sorts of things were not supposed to happen here. (Sontag, S. 2004. Pg. 26)

Chapter One: Mona Hatoum and Her Use of the Domestic

Mona Hatoum's piece, '*Grater Divide*' (2002) [Figure One], is an example of the essay's chosen theme, through her personal experience of home during an outbreak of war. Her work is described by the exhibition space, White Cube as, 'macabre' (White cube. 24 May – 22 June 2002), and yet the piece is capable of connecting people from broad cultural landscapes, through the use of the 'everyday object.'

Hatoum's combination of kitchen item and room divider transforms both the utility of the objects and places new symbolism upon the object that remains in its place. Her materiality works through transformation. The death of utility into something that showcases a grander form of destruction. Transformation of both object and the body plays a key role in the creation of many of Hatoum's pieces. Her use of the Uncanny and surreal depictions of the familiar help to display her continued exploration into the Alienation experienced through exile and the unfamiliar.



[Figure One], Hatoum, M. Grater Divide. 2002. White Cube, Hoxton Square, London.

The grater is an object of domestic utility and is capable of harm through slicing an object apart. A room divider provides privacy, the piece is able to utilise this privacy to display the vulnerability of the space in which these two objects would usually reside within. Placing the piece within the gallery space allows those who witness the piece to question ideas of the home, the separation of space and the history of conflict over land and resource, especially when shown in the capital of England.

Dr. Ali M. Kassem, researcher writing for the LSE Middle East Centre blog, comments on some of the effects colonialism has had on Lebanon, the country Hatoum was born in and later unable to return to in 1975 because of war. Kassem begins his article, ‘...few years after the declaration of its establishment, the republic witnessed a significant boom: Arab petrodollars flooded its banks, and new investments sparked various forms of tourism.’

Here establishing Lebanon’s relationship towards capital growth. He continues with introducing the incentive of global involvement in Lebanon's continual modernisation, ‘...introducing lax banking regulation and attracting foreign investment to propel its urban centres into consumer modernity. It is necessary, however, to put their deeds into perspective.’ Giving the country some background Kassem establishes its creation from

Ottoman rule into Western and how the middle east as a whole has been utilised by Western nations:

...the region was partitioned by the planet's 'superpowers'. While a 'Jewish home' was being planned in Palestine... The Mount Lebanon mutasarifiya (district in the Ottoman Empire) was expanded to become a new nation... the French crafted the Lebanese system based on French paternalism and hegemony. Feeding corruption, dysfunctional apparatuses and fragmentation with brute force, conceit and racism, the French sought to build a new state which would be in perpetual need of their support.
(Kassem, A. 2018)

The piece referenced in this chapter reflects a long history of capital struggle, the personal history of this artist, her established use of home furniture and objects builds a journey in perspectives of conflict. Each individual is motivated or compelled to view it through their cultural lens. The personal and private made public gives audiences something to compare their own life to, to reflect in the space of a gallery where the once known object is made contemplative and less known.

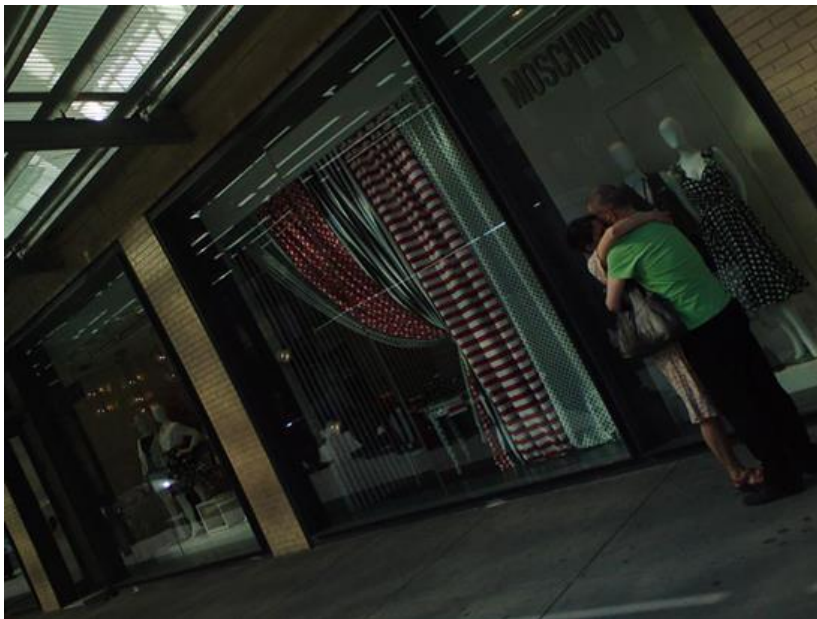
Chapter two: Wafaa Bilal's on Distance and Privacy

The gallery is utilised as space for artists in many ways. The piece '*Domestic Tension*' (2008) [Figure Two], is transformed into a living space for artist Wafaa Bilal and a paintball gun.

Like Hatoum's connection to her motifs, this long form video piece pulls heavily from Bilal's personal life. The death of his brother is a key factor in the creation of the space. Here in his use of live stream, an audience can view his day-to-day life with the only apparent distance between Bilal and his viewer, being screen and camera lens. Privacy as a concept is removed. Bilal's other work continues with his ability to use the public and private space as a tool to question both surveillance and power when confronted with violence within a space not assumed to be violence.



[Figure Two]- Bilal, W. Domestic tension. 2008. Live Stream Installation.



[Figure three]- Bilal, W. 3dri. December 2010-2011. Selected Still Image.

In his work, '3dri' (2010-2011) [Figure Three], a camera is surgically implanted into the back of the artist's head, taking a picture of his life from behind once a minute. A viewer is allowed to access elements of the artist's life, here aspects of Bilal's life (one that even he was not privy to) is captured and made for display.

This experimentation into life seen through a lens is extended even more so in 'Domestic tension.' The viewer of the piece can only watch Bilal's experience of living with an automated

paintball gun through the screen of a computer. The gun was programmed to target and shoot him when donations were made through the live stream website. The piece allows participation, the viewer is not a bystander to the violence Bilal has set up. Instead, the violence is initiated by the audience. The commentary of economics when presented with the artist's motivation for the concept, questions both western economic participation in conflict within the Middle East and the western viewer's participation in said conflict.

The piece questions the experience of gun violence in a broad way, moving to America Bilal set this piece to be presented towards an American audience, a country in which everyday gun violence is seemingly common occurrence. In 2008, the year this piece was created saw over a dozen school shootings within the US. While in Iraq, Bilal's country of origin saw, '...between 280,771-315,190 have died from direct war related violence caused by the U.S., its allies, the Iraqi military and police, and opposition forces from the time of the invasion through March 2023.' (Watson Institute International and Public Affairs. Brown University. Costs of War. March 2023).

Chapter Three: Ben Shahn on Western History Through Exhibition

The exhibition currently on show at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, '*Ben Shahn: On Nonconformity*' (Oct 2023- Feb 2024), highlights the progression of artist Ben Shahn over the decades of work production. Starting with his immigration from Lithuania to the US. His subject matter begins illustrative work from scenes of life in New York. '*Handball*,' (1939) [Figure Four] depicts the recreation time of individuals from the city.

The simplicity of the colours and shapes within this piece contrasts greatly with his later subject matter regarding the treatment of Jewish people during the second world war. His flat style and basic naming convention works to explore and enjoy moments of the mundane. The figures do not face the viewer, creating a moment of observation, Shahn here may also be reflecting the distance he has with the city in which he is working. The position of an artist forces an individual to take a step back from the scene as it plays out in order to render the image.



[Figure Four]- Shahn, B. 1939. Gouache on Paper. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In the 30s, he worked with government projects to create murals, posters, and paintings. His work produced scenes of American working-class people and prisoners. Later, his work developed with the atrocities committed during the Second world war. His piece '*Allegory*' (1948) [Figure Five], representing the holocaust, highlights the changes in style during this period, artwork began to represent more 'abstract' and symbolic expressions of the cultural period in which Shahn was living.

The exhibition text suggests symbolism within this piece, '...the paintings date of 1948 and the beast's resemblance to the she-wolf whose suckling of Romulus and Remus in Roman mythology symbolises the birth of Rome, *Allegory* may also allude to the founding of the state of Ireal. Yet the work's iconographic meanings remain elusive.' (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Ben Shahn: On Nonconformity, Oct 2023- Feb 2024.)



[Figure Five]- Shahn, B. Allegory. 1948. Tempura on panel. On exhibition: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

On Nonconformity, notes on this period and the artist's continued commitment towards both labour movements and America's later Cold War period. 'His sorrowful wartime paintings speak to the devastation of war and human atrocities, but also the renewal and regeneration. During and after the war, Shahn ardently supported the cause of labour... The cold War-era works on display embody Shahn's response to the anti-communist crusade in the United States.'

The artist's work regarding the effects of the United States's nuclear experimentation and later the post-nuclear world expanded his depictions of death, genocide, politics, and culture he was exposed to.

His poignant Lucky Dragon [Figure Six] paintings serve as warnings of nuclear dangers still with us today... At this time, he also wrote his most pointed critiques of McCarthyism's threat to liberal democracy and his strongest assertions of

nonconformity and individual freedom in both art and politics.’ (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Ben Shahn: On Nonconformity, Pg. 3)



[Figure six]- Shahn, B. We Did Not Know What Happened to Us. 1960. On exhibition: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

The above piece is based on the deaths of a Japanese fishing crew, who six years earlier had been the victims of radioactive material left over from the US testing atomic bombs within the Pacific Ocean. This act of gross destruction coming after the deaths of over 70,000 Japanese civilians during the second world war.

The progression of personal and political ideas with the exhibition works to highlight the firsthand experiences of the artist. From his life as an immigrant, his focus on the real and the ‘human’ within working class New York. To Shahn’s later work as it moved from depictions of the American ‘dustbowl’ towards allegorical styles of political and spiritual focus. His ability to express his continued beliefs within his expansion of work while simultaneously expanding his style from the more illustrative towards other movements within art history. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía reflects with the exhibition on ‘his masterful achievement in communicating to the broadest audience...’ through the use of a wide visual style.

Conclusion

Each artist cited has experienced immigration and the uprooting of their lives and families. Through these experiences they created pieces that while commenting on the conflict, death, and dehumanisation within their lives, they each bring aspects of the mundane and private to their work. Between the morbid and violence of Hatoum and Bilal's work, an audience is met with the everyday made surreal. Within the Ben Shahn exhibition a viewer is able grasp the change in theme of his work from working class day to day life to his exploration into depicting genocide and atomic destruction. The political is built into aspects of each piece and reflect how the personal is made political within visual culture.

Writer Rebecca Solnit, while discussing the 2005 essay titled 'Vermeer in Bosnia' (Weschler, L. 2005) reflects on art and its relationship to politics. The essay discusses a conversation between Lawrence Weschler and a judge at The Hague about 'how he could stand to listen to the stories of atrocities day after day... the judge, reports Weschler, brightened as he answered: 'I make my way over to the Mauritshuis museum... to spend a little time with the Vermeers.' (Solnit, R. Orwell's Roses. 2021. Pg 94.)

Here Solnit, via this essay, questions art within proximity to destruction. Art of varying clarity of meaning and diversity of process is capable of being political:

Weschler's essay suggests that the least political art may give us something that lets us plunge into politics, that human beings need reinforcement and refuge, that pleasure does not necessarily seduce us from the tasks at hand but can fortify us. (Pg. 95)

Art such as those discussed and the Vermeers in Weschler's piece reflects visual art's ability to transform symbols into more conceptual themes of exploration. Found within objects made surreal, violence made into art and the depictions of everyday life gain greater context when critically analysed through a leftist, decolonial lens. Through each artist's movement an

audience gains different histories, stories, and perspective into the results of war, empire and capital fuelled destruction. We gain an insight into experiences that seem distant to our own, granting us emotional and personal perspective from individuals who are often within media granted only a statistic.

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