

Unpacked Cases: Migratory Aesthetics as a Mode of Participation and Agency

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ABSTRACT

The manifold notion of migratory aesthetics serves as the critical grounding for this analysis focusing on Mohamad Hafez's and Ahmed Badr's multimedia installation, *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* (2017-2020), a socially and politically committed artistic project. Migratory aesthetics as a conceptual frame can encompass artifacts reflecting upon the experience of forced migration, displacement, and uprootedness. However, the concept also proposes the engendering of a platform for the confluence of art and the political. In accordance with the theories of Mieke Bal, Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, and Jacques Rancière, "political" is meant to signify a space of generative conflict, an active, communal, participatory encounter between sentient bodies and artworks. *UNPACKED* confronts the audience on many levels: physically, by leaving them in limbo, suspended between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, safety and threat; conceptually (owing to the phenomenal, embodied experience of the viewers), by provoking a sense of dislocation and homelessness, resulting in the potential for identification with the status of being a refugee, a migrant, and an asylum seeker. *UNPACKED* encapsulates, both spatially and temporally, the invisible and silenced trauma of forced migration, eventually effectuating collective understanding in the constitutive political space of art. (GM)

KEYWORDS: migratory aesthetics, art and the political, space as political, phenomenology, collage, assemblage

A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a birdcage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in mid air.

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)

Being a refugee is not a choice. . . . The war starts. Where can you go? What are you supposed to do? You'll stay here and die or you take your family and live. Full stop.

Joseph, Democratic Republic of Congo, *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* (audio narration, excerpt)

“Because everything is in my life in Sudan, it’s like, I want to take it everywhere”¹

The term “migratory aesthetics” bears a conspicuous duplicity,² and is not devoid of palpable tension, either. “Migratory,” on the one hand, apparently defines a set of characteristics of artworks that attempt to represent the experience of a forced dislocation, the desperate process that stretches for an unforeseeable time and space between two points of extremes—the familiarity of the surroundings left behind and the gaping unknowability of apparent destinations—and, on the other hand, introduces aesthetics itself as being on the move across genres, styles, and media.³ It might seem tempting to imagine a pool of artistic qualities that determine and subsequently distinguish a collection of works as migratory art, owing to an almost automatic urge to classify, to define, to set apart one group of things or entities from another. This approach, however, would risk essentialism, set up hierarchies as well as echo overtones of the colonial practice of othering; colonialism, if not directly blamed for, but viewed

from a wider historical perspective, still appears to be one of the contributing factors to migration and the refugee crisis in our contemporary world.

“Migratory aesthetics,” a diversely applicable notion, serves as a twofold critical context for this paper. On a primary level, it refers to artworks reflecting directly on the experience of forced migration, displacement, dislocation; works touching upon the liminal experience of being caught in-between two worlds of the not-anymore and the not-yet.⁴ Such artworks, being concerned with the very condition of migration as an emphatically spatial disposition, often generate space literally. In the gallery, as a result of the installation design or the artifact itself, recreating the illusion of domestic space, the interiority of a home, the private space that formerly embodied everything the migratory status by definition negates, such as solid ground, protection, identity; the list could go on endlessly.

Even more importantly, however, certain artworks or artistic projects render space political, whether that be the space proper of the exhibition, the museum or gallery as institutions of arts, culture, and ideology, or a more abstract engendering of a conjunctural space understood as a communal and phenomenal experience of art and as acts of participation. What provoked my interest in migratory aesthetics and in works of art dealing with the experience of migration is exactly this realization of the political capacity as the confluence of bodies in spaces sharing a collective moment of understanding. My study intends to explore the socially, culturally, and politically committed artistic project of Mohamad Hafez’s and Ahmed Badr’s *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* (2017-2020), a multimedia installation located at the juncture of the migratory experience and the political, in all potential senses of the term, whether the creation of an event for participation and active involvement, a phenomenological encounter of the self and the other, the inside and the outside, or the enhancement of the visibility and audibility of those being deprived of such privileges.

Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro in the introduction to their edited volume *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency* (2011) advance the shared qualities of art and the political. They claim that “both art and the political are domains of agency: realms where action is possible and can have effects. In the case of the political effect of art, that agency is one and the same; art ‘works’ as art because it works politically” (Bal, Introduction 9). Based on Chantal Mouffe’s conceptual distinction between the “political” and “politics,” Bal and Hernández-Navarro highlight that “the political is where conflict ‘happens’” (9). Naturally, conflict in this context is welcome, it is “a desirable, if not essential, dimension of social organization” (9), it generates debate, confrontation, even adversary, which, however, is not identical with animosity; the latter inciting the practice of exclusion and singularity, while the former, ultimately resulting in negotiation, plurality, and inclusivity (10).

Besides the aforementioned aspects of the political—participation, communal experience, agency, and confrontation—Jacques Rancière’s delineation of the potentials of art and politics can enrich our understanding of the underlying outcomes of art making:

There is thus an “aesthetics” at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin’s discussion of the “aestheticization of politics” specific to the “age of the masses.” . . . Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. . . . Artistic practices are “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. (13)

The givenness, the accessibility of the (socially and culturally) sentient in a particular space (the geo-political dimension) and time (the era or regime), which ultimately and

dominantly is controlled by the actual structure of power, is what Rancière believes can be influenced by artistic practices, not only by creating art, but also by the audience's becoming engaged with art works, which results in an active, participatory culture, eventually granting agency to the individuals concerned.

“I always feel, I’m living out of my suitcase”⁵

UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage, while overtly reflecting on the embodied experience of running away from sites of war, provides a constitutive stand for action, participation, or what Rancière terms as “the distribution of the sensible” (12). The two artists built upon their own ways of making sense of being a refugee, an asylum seeker, a migrant, while creating *UNPACKED*. Hafez was born in Damascus, Syria, raised in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whereas the years of his higher education were mostly completed in the US. Being an immigrant himself, he arrived in the US in 2003, shortly after 9/11, the historic moment unprecedentedly marked by cultural, religious, and political tensions between the East and the West. His jarring experience of in-betweenness has served him as a compelling resource for this artistic project in particular, and for his further artistic manifestations, up until today. Hafez’s dexterity with architectural topography—a distinctive quality of his art works—is a natural outcome of graduating as an architect, the field he also actively pursues in addition to his involvement in visual arts. His sculptural assemblages encapsulate cityscapes and/or domestic scenes as miniaturized spatial and condensed temporal entities. At the same time, Iraqi-born Ahmed Badr, co-founder of *UNPACKED*, has not only experienced migration, but the trauma of fleeing a war-stricken homeland, coupled with the unsettling status of being a refugee for years, before he and his family were finally allowed to enter the US. The author, poet, and social entrepreneur Badr, a graduate of Wesleyan University with a degree in anthropology, contributed to their

shared artistic and social initiative with his faith in the power of narratives and the healing act of storytelling.

The spatial and the temporal arts in *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* simultaneously embody/envisage and voice/narrate the trauma of leaving behind a home and the experience of enforced movement, offering a variety of entanglements of conflicting forces, indisputably confronting the audience on many levels. The project started in 2017 and apparently reached its final form by 2020, the date which was originally set for its completion, albeit with a somewhat different vision of its realization. Back in 2017, Hafez and Badr delineated a more ambitious plan for their artistic initiative by which they proposed to convey an overtly political commentary through the symbolic number and the date: “The goal is to have 50 suitcases total—one suitcase and one interview in every state—by the end of President Trump’s term” (Petronzio).

In its most recent appearance, the installation design incorporates nine suitcases. The last exhibition in physical space was organized at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, by the Middle East Studies Program, in the Lynn Mecklenburg Textile Gallery, between February and April 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition was transferred onto a virtual platform, to the website of the gallery where it is still available in the early autumn of 2021. The exhibition changes from time to time, along with the curatorial concept, which keeps *UNPACKED* in constant movement, depending on the dialogue the suitcases and the narrations pursue with the other exhibits on display. Currently, the suitcases are accompanied by fascinating pieces of material culture, textiles of various nature—wrapped garments and headscarves from Kenya, Palestinian embroidered table runners, Tibetan saddle blankets, Hmong “story cloths,” just to mention a few—all provided by the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection (Center for Design and Material Culture, University of Wisconsin-Madison). These artifacts encompassing a large cultural, ethnic, and temporal diversity and the suitcases of

UNPACKED promote an immensely rich collection of stories, traumas, and personal and collective histories to be recounted. The virtual tour offers a surprisingly vivid experience of textures of all sorts. Additionally, Hafez and Badr encourage other institutions of education and culture to host the exhibition, eventuating in an unforeseeable complexity of the narratives of *UNPACKED*.

The art project incorporates the baggage of migrants and facilitates multifarious readings of the suitcase as the pivotal material motif. In an interview published in *YLS Today*, Hafez revealed the origin of the suitcases he integrated into the project:

What caught me by surprise is that when word got out that we were doing this project, a lot of the immigrant communities in the United States donated to us their parents' and grandparents' suitcases. These were Jewish communities, Irish communities, Indian, German, and so on. They had come here a couple generations ago, and they could relate and resonate with the pushback you see today because some of their parents and grandparents had been through it when they first arrived here. As an artist and an activist, you hope that by highlighting that similarity, you can say, let's not repeat our mistakes. ("Unpacking 'UNPACKED' with Mohamed Hafez")

The suitcases connect several generations' stories of migration arching over numerous historical incidents as well as cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. The very motif of the suitcase functions as a meeting point of divergent temporal and spatial experience linking these people and narratives together.⁶

The suitcases of *UNPACKED*—not the sleek contemporary ones that instantly conjure up the pleasant image of holidays, or the phenomenon of travel as a form of consumption, but old-fashioned ones that by their mere design bring up the past, presumably and most visibly,

the 1960s and 1970s—serve as containers of frozen moments, suspended acts, vacuous and wounded spaces of either street scenes or, more emphatically, interiors of homes. The nine open suitcases fixed to the walls at eye level, representing abandoned scenes of war-induced attacks and devastation, are accompanied by nine life stories in the form of audio-narrations accessible via headphones,⁷ told by the refugees whose homes and cityscapes are framed by the interiority of the suitcases. The interviewed refugees, including Hafez and Badr, whose stories come alive in the idiosyncratic audio-visual installation have arrived in America from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Congo. Badr, who conducted the interviews, often recorded six or seven hours of conversations, which were finalized, mostly, in the form of about two-minute long audio-narrations. These can still grasp the intensity of the experience the people sharing them had to undergo, without the listener feeling that there are considerable gaps in the narrations. “‘That was our challenge,’ Hafez says. ‘People’s attention spans are milliseconds these days. You only have them for 60 seconds, and those 60 seconds better be good’” (Petronzio). Hafez reflected on the pragmatic consideration they had to face regarding the ideal length of the audio-narrations with crude honesty, however, the density of the oral histories due to their juxtaposition with the sculptural realizations of the scenes naturally resonates with the latter’s spatial concentration. *UNPACKED* condenses the life-changing incidents both on the spatial and the temporal levels, by embodying the split second the everyday routine of these people got disrupted and suspended. This double encapsulation automatically amplifies the power of the otherwise often untold and invisible traumas, which, along with the tactile presence of the sculpted art works, convey a fully-fledged phenomenological encounter for the audience. Playing upon the spectators’ multi-sensory engagement with the artifacts, in close association with what was previously introduced as a communal, participatory practice, the very aesthetic experience ultimately results in the emergence of the political.

“In Iraq, we are allowed to have guns but we are not allowed to have camera”⁸

There is a tangible performative element in the careful design of the suitcases, all offering a surprisingly detailed, miniaturized version of the mental snapshots the audio narratives doubly summon, since the recreated scenes resemble theatrical stages, welcoming the audience by often deconstructing the fourth wall of the inhabited space. The absurdity of the moment of encountering these spaces, however, lies in the conflicting realization that the fourth wall is not removed for the sake of satisfying our voyeuristic curiosity, hence offering an undisturbed direct viewpoint, but because a bomb did actually devastate half of the house. The sudden exposure to the sight of the intimacy of these domestic spaces triggers mixed feelings in the viewers, who become mesmerized by the beauty of Hafez’s meticulous recreation of the tiniest little detail of, for instance, the patterns of the upholstery of a settee. Nonetheless, they are simultaneously overwhelmed by guilt, catching themselves in the act of feeding their eyes similarly to participants in disaster tourism.

Whether such a confrontation between form and content has been intentional or not on the artists’ part is difficult to tell, yet the previously suggested attitude to the political as the terrain of clashing standpoints, to evoke Bal and Hernández-Navarro’s approach to the concept, seems to gain a new level in this context of perceiving and subsequently apprehending the suitcases and their contents. The conflict is all the more tangible since the recreated scenes actually protrude into the space of the viewer: the planes functioning as the stage—often imitating the disemboweled structure of walls and floors, with steel wires poking into the air, electric cables dangling—cut into the viewer’s personal space, intimidating his or her approach, on the one hand, and bridging the two dimensions, on the other. It seems that the viewers’ reception of the individual works keeps them constantly in limbo, in relentless oscillation between being drawn, or rather, dragged in, and, almost by the same movement, being thrown out and kept at a distance. The fluctuation between being in the belly of a suitcase—actually

displayed half open, creating the anxiety of a sudden closure and eventual exclusion at any unexpected moment—and simultaneously encountering the pervading sense of the position of the outsider, generates a dynamic, perhaps even playful, yet disheartening experience. By being kept at the edge, viewers identify with the refugees—whose lives become liminal the very moment their homes or their environment explode—not only as a result of making sense of the viewed exhibits, but also through an embodied, phenomenal relationality to the art work.

The title of the project is not any less confronting or equivocal. “Unpacked,” especially by evoking the context of traveling, primarily refers to the moment of arriving at one’s destination, an experience of fulfillment of a kind. “Refugee baggage,” however, can rarely reach that point of gratification. Thus, Hafez and Badr rather ironically allude to the unpackedness of personal tragedies as well as of historical moments. Yet, due to the torn facades, the cavities bullets left on the innermost walls of a home, the title plays upon the constant fluctuation between the internal and the external. The wounds the dwelling spaces suffered are unpacked, enfolding spaces turn inside out, erasing the boundary between private and public dimensions. Refugee baggage is loaded with the burdens of personal histories and global conflicts that need to be unpacked, revealed, put on display to be engaged with and talked about.

“The love for that room boils down to the memories that it held”⁹

My initial encounter with *UNPACKED* provoked reminiscences of Cornell boxes, even if the unique assemblages of bric-a-brac of a lifetime are not exactly, either formally or aesthetically, identical with Hafez’s and Badr’s project. Still, the lingering memory of receptacles of things as the “crystallization of the past for the present” (Ambroży 290) proffered an oneiric quality in me, in Gaston Bachelard’s understanding of the term. Memories of a home—memories themselves also bearing a noteworthy spatial quality—like dream images

fuse all houses, all spaces inhabited by us together. “Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood . . .” (Bachelard 5). Immersing ourselves in the series of suitcases of *UNPACKED* and taking a mental journey back to our childhood home, we simultaneously re-visit Joseph Cornell’s assemblage works, eventually prompting a plethora of unexpected parallels between the two art projects. According to Kimberly Mair, who explores Cornell’s oeuvre from an embodied phenomenal stance, the collages, the boxes, and the act of collecting appear as “express[ions] [of] a theoretically rich phenomenology of everyday life that emphasizes a corporeal consciousness . . . a methodological privileging of sensory experience” (707), “the collectible materials of the self to others” (710), “a form experiencing and engaging in the world,” “capturing the flux of things” (711), and “the paradoxical senses of miniature and vastness as well as that of the interior and exterior” (713). The qualities of Cornell’s works asserted exemplify the numerous intricate intersections between the two otherwise culturally and temporally distanced artistic realizations, echoing *UNPACKED*’s thematic and aesthetic concerns, too.

Although Cornell’s boxes cannot, strictly speaking, be defined as collages, owing to the protean appearances and conceptualizations of the art form, a rich ground emerges for making sense of works that employ this mode of assembling collectibles, which I, personally, found fascinating. Besides becoming a means of democratization by the “linking of disparate phenomena,” from a much wider perspective, as Rona Cran defines it, “[c]ollage is about encounters . . . [by] bringing ideas into conversation with one another . . . [as well as] [prompting] the deconstruction of old barriers between language and art” (4). From the very beginning of Picasso’s and Braque’s experimenting with collage “and for the collagists who would follow them, the role of art was to embody life, rather than just to document it” (Cran 5).

The gesture of embodiment radically exceeds the more conventional inclination of “documenting” or representing reality; as Cran continues to argue, “for Picasso the role of art was to ‘become’ reality, rather than merely recording it” (7). The former allows the audience a much more extensive space for the perceptive engagement with the embodied reality conveyed by the work of art, “enabl[ing] the spectator to experience and participate in the tensions of a nonconsensual society” (Bal and Hernández-Navarro, Introduction 11).

“It was a secret basement”¹⁰

I started out from the critical standpoint of art being regarded as the force field of action and agency, of “doing and making,” of furthering the space of the political. Collage from its advent, at the beginning of the twentieth century, integrates the political. Democratization does not only pertain to the blending of disparate elements of life engendering a socio-cultural plurality or to bridging the mundane and the secluded sphere of art, but it also incorporates “the experience of looking . . . regardless of their [the interpreters’] artistic background, educational training, or social standing” (Cran 6). Although the disparity of the spectators’ social, financial, educational backgrounds and their subsequent leveling is not a prominent goal of *UNPACKED*, the ethnic and cultural discrepancies can be definitely tackled and brought together by the objects—like books or decorative pieces with Arabic inscriptions—and scenes assembled in the suitcases. However, this effect is but a corollary to the more significant objectives of such art works, namely, the engagement of the audience in a communal experience and the creation of bridges of understanding. Hafez and Badr, on the website of *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage*, also state that they intended “[to] seek to humanize the word ‘refugee’.”

“Cornell’s boxes—or ‘enactments’, as he referred to them—are . . . events in themselves. The works are experiences; . . . While they are external to language and without narration, Cornell’s practices of collection, assemblage and collage found and organize spaces,

initiating events that are reiterative” (Mair 713). What appears striking about the corporeal aesthetics and the phenomenological quality of Cornell’s works is how the apparent stasis is resolved by the arrangement of spaces and objects that populate these spaces. As enactments and events on their own—by conveying actual incidents of life, fragments of human experience—the boxes also elicit the temporal, the narrative potential. They become spaces of communication, first, as a result of the countless lives and personal histories assembled through and evoked by the found objects, second, due to the encounter of the spectator and the boxes. Mair attributes the communicative quality of the boxes to “the rich media of the senses,” eventually to assert that “Cornell’s assemblages take up a grammar of the senses” (715).

The bodily experience of things and objects in spaces resonates with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the relationship between the sentient body and its circumambient reality. In “Eye and Mind,” by evaluating the painter’s vision and his ability to translate reality to paintings, Merleau-Ponty establishes the connection between the visible and the mobile, subsequently, also between the spatial and the temporal as well as the internal and the external: “[v]isible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. . . . [T]he world is made of the same stuff as the body” (Merleau-Ponty 163). This enables the viewer to apprehend his or her own bodily presence and givenness, by recognizing and acknowledging the organic relationship of one to the other, their sharing and being identical with the same existential space, and ultimately to find that everything which appears to be given as external to the sensible body—through its immersion in the world from the inside—occurs, at the same time, as interior: “beings . . . are yet absolutely *together*, are ‘simultaneity’” (187, emphasis in the original).

Rachel McCann develops Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the sentient and the sensible body as the “intertwining of vision and movement” (Merleau-Ponty 162) in the field of architecture. The move from the illusory depth of the painterly canvas to architecture, the

latter even more intricately combining notions of space, body, visibility, movement, embodied experience, and temporality, seems more than justified in the critical context of Hafez's and Badr's multiply committed project. Through the "architectural design as carnal echo, the world 'sees itself,' and also feels its own spatiality, in the embodied gaze of the designer. . . . The resultant architectural design is present, visible, and spatial, but is also a transformation of the architect's understanding of him/herself being present, visible, motile, and temporal" (McCann 268). Hafez's architectural eye and sensitivity to spatial constructions, his flair for the dynamics between interior and exterior spaces, his profound knowledge of the constituents of architectural designs such as light, movement, the interaction of bodies and objects in space, the kinesthetic and haptic experience, all contribute to the production of events (cf. Cornell and his assemblages), to occurrences of becoming (cf. Picasso and the collage technique), and to the confluence of conflicting categories of spatial and temporal, inside and outside, self and other, citizen and immigrant (cf. Mieke Bal and Hernández-Navarro on the political as a space of conflict and confrontation).

"It was a mixed feeling between extreme happiness, and it was also an extreme fear"¹¹

UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage wants to bring us into proximity with the experience of dislocation, uprootedness, forced migration, displacement, exile, homelessness, and liminality by enabling the subject to come to terms with the notion of constitutive space as embodied consciousness and understanding. As Elizabeth Grosz examines the relationship between subject formation and spaces, our "perspectival access to space" (92), from the position of the onlooker, the viewer, the one who has command over his or her corporeal/spatial interconnectedness, is as inevitable as becoming "an object for others in space" (92). She adds: "space, does not become comprehensible to the subject by its being the space of movements; rather, it becomes space through movement, and as such, it acquires specific properties from

the subject's constitutive functioning in it" (92). Migratory aesthetics, both as a mode of artistic articulation and an apprehensive condition, make our spatio-corporeal givenness for each other accessible as well as our sharing the same environment and being integral to that intelligible. Following the realization of what Grosz terms as "the subject's constitutive functioning" (92), conflicting identities, ideological convictions, and cultural practices can enter a dialogic space that catalyzes participation, involvement, action, and, eventually, agency.

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Notes

¹ The subtitles are a selection of quotes from the interviews of the central artwork of the study, Mohamad Hafez's and Ahmed Badr's *UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage* (2017-2020), a multisensory sculptural project incorporating elements of personal histories. This confessional utterance comes from Azhaar's "A Father's Pride" (Sudan).

² I encountered the term "migratory aesthetics" for the first time in Mieke Bal's texts as well as in a number of volumes of the *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race* series she co-edited and/or contributed to, the individual collections of essays being devoted to the phenomenon of migration, its aesthetic considerations and artistic manifestations. Bal reflects on her own relatedness to the concept in her article "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement" (2008), and reveals how she developed an interest in the notion of movement that outlines both video as a medium and migration, "referring to the traces, equally sensorial, of the movements of migration that characterise contemporary culture" (152). Besides being a cultural theorist, critic, and scholar of visual arts, she has turned towards video art and has directed several works herself as well as curated exhibitions.

³ As two examples for this consideration of aesthetics as migratory, I would suggest Sudeep Dasgupta's article, "The Aesthetics of Displacement and the Performance of Migration" that discusses "aesthetic migrations" by analyzing Ritwik Ghatak's film, *Komal Gandhar* (1961) "through a series of displacements between different forms of art, migration between the arts [being] related to the experience of human migration" (93). In "Heterochronotopia," Mieke Bal "propose[s] to consider video as a migratory medium and the migratory in culture as videographic" (36). She explores the tripartite node of aesthetics (as related to the sensory field), migration (as movement per se), and the medium of video art (as the blending of these two).

⁴ Here I would like to refer to Jill Bennett's chapter, "Migratory Aesthetics: Art and Politics beyond Identity," in which she claims the opposite of my approach, stating that "migratory aesthetics cannot be synonymous with art about migration, or art by migrants . . . [instead] the cumulative effect of the aesthetic engagement with migration is to engender a politics of contemporary culture as 'migrant'; that is, a culture transformed by migration but emphatically not a separable minority culture" (120). One reason behind Bennett's refraining from works literally being engaged with migration is justified by the fact that she focuses on exhibitions and/or curatorial practices—for instance, *Contemporary Commonwealth* (Melbourne, 2006)—that do not classify the exhibits as directly related to migration. Yet, as the phrasing by Bennett suggests, she creates the critical distance for the sake of not committing any exclusionary act, not conceptualizing migratory aesthetics, migrant artists, or their works as marginal, as representatives of a minority, which naturally is in harmony with my own analytic approach.

⁵ Mohamad, "A Regal Living Room" (Syria), in *UNPACKED*.

⁶ The suitcase happens to be the leitmotif of Irit Rogoff's chapter, "Luggage" in *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (2000), introduced and analyzed in the context of

exhibitions and works of art as a “signifier of mobility, displacement, duality . . . a multiple marker: of memory, nostalgia and access to other histories. . . . [also] associated with flight, exile and immigration. . . . [or] the main metaphor of ‘sadness at leaving’” (36-37).

⁷ Actually, there are eleven people interviewed: Azhaar and Fouad, a couple from Sudan, and teenage siblings, Ayman and Ghena, enrich the individual recounting of painful memories, whereas Ahmed Badr represents his whole family through his own narration.

⁸ Maher, “A Broken Camera” (Iraq), in *UNPACKED*.

⁹ Mohamad, “A Regal Living Room” (Syria), in *UNPACKED*.

¹⁰ Fereshteh, “A Secret School” (Afghanistan), in *UNPACKED*.

¹¹ Amjad, “A White Car,” (Syria), in *UNPACKED*.

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