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The Personal is Defiantly Political in MoMu's Latest Show of Transnational Textiles at Texture Kortrijk

Textile as Resistance: The Power of Fabrics Without Slogans is the latest offering in MoMu Antwerp's [insert: <https://www.momu.be/en/>] external programme of events whilst the fashion museum is closed for renovation and development. It is currently on display on the upmost floor of Texture Kortrijk [insert: <https://www.texturekortrijk.be/en/>], a fitting guest location given that this innovative textile museum is devoted to the international networks of exchange and influence that lie behind the local production of flax and linen in the Flemish province of West Flanders. Nestled on the River Lys, Kortrijk is home to linen damasks – originating, of course, from the Syrian capital Damascus – where locals pioneered a particular technique of production in the late 15th century, with a signature trademark of symmetrical patterns depicting hunting scenes, historical battles and biblical stories. Positioned at an apposite local/global intersection, the exhibition *Textile as Resistance* weaves together *geography* – telling stories of the land, *nationality* – telling stories of the nation, and *identity* – telling stories of the self, all narrated through the powerful storytelling medium of cloth.

Fashion and textiles are, of course, emphatically transnational phenomena, which operate *across* rather than *within* hermetically-sealed borders. We know that clothing is transformed by the different pairs of hands through which it passes – acquiring new values, serving different purposes, bearing the biographical traces of both maker and wearer. It is precisely this mobility – not least the privileged potential that fabric occupies as the connective tissue between individuals, communities, cultures and nations – which the exhibition curators take as their starting point.

Whilst photographer Mashid Mohadjerin (b. Iran, 1976) and journalist Samira Bendadi (b. Morocco, 1966) conceived of the exhibition in Antwerp, the compelling stories of migration and diversity that it narrates expand far beyond the borders of Europe, unravelling identities and histories that stretch back and forth across the world. The curators were concerned, first and foremost, with the messages that textiles embody and disseminate as an insidious form of resistance – one that is frequently mobilised by women in response to war and crisis. The exhibition thus encapsulates Shahidha Bari's acknowledgment in *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* (2019) that clothing the body is a means of 'turning out', of mobilising a critical engagement with our surrounding world. It is a pertinent topic, painfully resonant amidst the European migrant crisis, which has witnessed more than 4,000 deaths in 2018 alone. *Textiles as Resistance* interrogates how clothing and fashion can respond to social and cultural displacement, reassuring individuals who are in search of their identities and a communal sense of belonging.

What is made clear from the outset is that neither identity, nor textiles, can be easily reduced to a singular narrative. Nor can they be straightforwardly mapped onto a spinning globe – especially when considered in relation to globally distributed production and consumption networks, the lasting effects of colonialism, imperialism and decolonisation, and asylum and migration in both the past and present. The large-scale map that viewers are presented with on entering the exhibition makes this point palpably clear. Antwerp is at the epicentre. From here, needles threaded with red cotton have been stitched across the map, drawing lines to locations as far afield as Nigeria, Morocco, Iran and Mexico. Russia appears vast, whilst the USA is far smaller than cartography normally affords it. Geography is presented as a fictitious retelling. By logical conclusion, the viewer is encouraged to recognise that

using geographical boundaries as a tool to analyse religious, cultural and national identities remains ceaselessly problematic. It resonates with the remarks of geographers Martin Lewis and Karen Wigan in their seminal text *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (1996): 'we talk of African wildlife as if it constituted a distinct assemblage of animals' and yet countries and continents do not neatly denote biological and cultural groupings. Similarly, the mapping of nations encourages a false understanding of the world as a jigsaw of discreet places that can be examined in isolation. African wax print cloth, which originated in Asia inspired by Indonesian Batik and was only introduced to the African continent in the late 19th century by the Dutch company Vlisco, is a case in point. The truth is that identity is situational; it involves both insiders and outsiders to the group, acquires new meanings as it travels, and remains in an inconclusive state of continually 'becoming'.

Human stories, as the exhibition makes clear, often have the greatest currency, particularly those that give individuals the greatest prominence, both physically and emotionally. One of the subjects given a voice is Samira Salah (b. what was then Palestine, now Israel, 1945), who questions: 'What does it mean to be a Palestinian today? My daughter has French nationality and my other daughter has German nationality because their husbands have these nationalities [...] Nationality is not identity. Ultimately, the Palestinian issue is not a matter for Palestinians alone. It is a universal and human issue. You don't have to be a Palestinian to embrace the Palestinian cause'. It is the process of enquiry that appears most cathartic in many of the stories narrated and is rooted in the painstaking processes of sewing, embroidering and textile printing, which bring makers and wearers together in intimate dialogue that transcends religious, cultural and national borders. Another

story shared is that of Zena Sabbagh (b. Syria, 1971), who lives in the Lebanese capital of Beirut, where she has transformed her living room into a meeting place for women to socialise, sew and share stories. 'I don't like the word 'refugee'', she explains. 'Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their country. But why not meet and get to know the others? I'm against borders. I'm for getting people to meet.' Many of these tantalising snapshots of lives lived in the face of adversity are left deliberately untied. Whilst the exhibition catalogue provides further insight, the fragmented method of display fits the disjointed stories and memories that are recalled by the subjects, prompting speculation on the part of the viewer, who may feel inclined to fill in the gaps with his or her own thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of identity. It is this humanitarian aspect of the exhibition that resonates so profoundly with the viewer: these are human stories, and it is the very personal relationship that we have to clothing – our intimate knowledge of how it *feels* on our skin, how it *moves* on our bodies, and how it *connects* us to other people and to the world at large that the curators so expertly tap into.

Textile as Resistance is a pivotal contribution to the fashion exhibition landscape in Europe, which emphasises non-Eurocentric narratives of fashion and clothing exchange. Belgium, like most European nations, has a chequered history of colonisation, decolonisation, asylum and migration, which resonates profoundly in postcolonial present. Exhibitions such as this, by inviting a diverse range of nationalities, cultures, ethnicities, identities and histories into the museum space, provide a necessary voice and visibility to the lived experiences of Belgium's immigrant population. As MoMu Director Kaat Debo explains, 'Antwerp is home to more than 170 nationalities. 183 languages are spoken here. The exhibition is part of our mission to make MoMu meaningful for everyone and to enable social, aesthetic

and personal change'. It is a perspective that underlines the importance of global perspectives in shaping local identities, whilst reiterating that fostering strong local roots is not analogous to sharing an international outlook. Just as 'national' fashion cultures are always mediated by 'international' networks of exchange, *Textiles as Resistance* marks a systematic shift in museum curation to present histories of globalisation as *truly* histories of the globe, rather than continuing Eurocentric histories of the West. The success of the exhibition will ultimately be measured in terms of its ability to attract a substantial number of new audiences from migration backgrounds into the museum space itself, and for the stories articulated to resonate long after the exhibition closes on 16th February 2020.

Image Captions

Image 1. Campaign Image 'Textile as Resistance' (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin, Graphic design: Jelle Jespers

Image 2. Street scene depicting two portraits of the former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 3. Palestinian dolls in traditional festive dress made at the Ein El-Hilweh camp where 64 women are trained in this technique in order to preserve the Palestinian embroidery and heritage. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 4. Shatila Refugee Camp, Lebanon, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 5. Malak Bakoor, has her own embroidery workgroup involving Syrian women in Shatila Refugee Camp. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 6. Zolaykha Sherzad, Afghan-born designer wearing one of her native inspired coats. She deconstructs existing pieces and reunites the textiles into new pieces that reflect on new perspectives and hopes for a better future. Paris, France, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 7. African Fashion Weekend at the Meise Botanic Garden. Brussels, Belgium, 2019, (c) Photo: Mashid Mohadjerin

Image 8. Textile as Resistance at Texture Kortrijk, (c) MoMu Antwerp, Photo: Stany Dederen

Image 9. Textile as Resistance at Texture Kortrijk, (c) MoMu Antwerp, Photo: Stany Dederen

Image 10. Textile as Resistance at Texture Kortrijk, (c) MoMu Antwerp, Photo: Stany Dederen

Image 11. Textile as Resistance at Texture Kortrijk, (c) MoMu Antwerp, Photo: Stany Dederen