

In the Presence of Absence and other works

Khadija Baker, visual artist.

As a Montreal-based, multi-disciplinary artist of Kurdish – Syrian descent, my installations investigate social and political themes centered on the uncertainty of home as it relates to persecution, identity, displacement, and memory. As a witness to traumatic events, and now resident in a new land, these unsettled feelings of home are a part of my own experience. Therefore, I started to experiment with various media and processes to involve storytelling that is concentrated on human rights. I created a body of work reflecting on the theme of home, through stories about memories and displacement and loss. My multi-disciplinary installations (textile, sculpture, audio/video) involve participative storytelling and performance to create active spaces of empathy, interrogation, and greater understanding. My most recent work explores the social aspects of violence in the Arab world and specifically how it affects women and children.

In the past, when I started collecting stories and interviewing witnesses, I did it out of necessity; for me it was important to use the voices of people who had lived the experience to ground and authenticate the work, and I was unsure how to conceptualize and theorize my own practice. With time, however, I realized that these “authentic” voices were only traces of the experience and began to explore absence and ineffability as a central aspect of traumatic experience.

My 2008 project, *Behind Walls-Maps* (See Fig. 1.), deals with the stories of stateless Kurds in Syria and the artificial nature of the existing map. This installation includes fibers, sculpture, and video. I created a map-like structure made from a net of crisscrossing strings about 2 meters from the ground. Viewers can walk around and through the sculpture. The net has suspended strings attached to small weighted clay spheres on the ground that are inscribed with the names of Kurdish cities that have been renamed in Arabic by the Syrian government. This structure is lit in a way that creates complicated criss-crossing shadows of this “map” on the gallery floor. Moreover, there will be a video projected onto the floor in which the new Arabic names will fade in and out. Finally, *Behind Walls-Maps* includes an audio component including testimonies in Kurdish, English, and French by diasporic Kurds as they discuss personal and shared stories of their experiences as Kurds, the removal of their citizenship, and the suppression of their basic human rights. One way this has occurred in Syria, where I was born, has been the official renaming of Kurdish towns by the government. For older people who used to know these places, they have had to

change a part of their own history and memory of place. On the other hand, younger generations are only familiar with the new names identified on the state-sanctioned maps. The installation evokes how the original names of the Kurdish cities are being eliminated only to exist in the recesses of peoples' memories. I also want to represent the map as essentially an arbitrary, artificial notion that does not necessarily correspond to people's day-to-day reality.



Fig. 1. *Behind Walls-Maps* (2008). Photo courtesy of artist.

I created *My Little Voice Can't Lie* in 2009 (See Fig. 2.) and continue to perform this experimental work with different participants and in different places, such as on the street, at schools, in the library, and even on a ferry. In the performance, I invite viewers/participants to hear recorded texts created from stories of displaced women (including my own story), by listening to speakers embedded at the ends of my braided hair. The sound track is looped, and to listen to the stories, viewers/participants need to press the ends of my hair to their ears. The text draws traces in other people's memories. What remains in our mind are these memories, which I want to exchange through this performance. I stand in the space and wait for people to approach me and collect these memories I am giving away through a sound track, which is embedded in my hair. Participants can listen to my voice, and physically touch my hair to be able to listen to the story. I aim to

create a complex and intimate connection, where the viewers and I interact through my artwork on various levels.



Fig. 2. *My Little Voice Can't Lie* (2009). Photo courtesy of artist.

For the 2013 performance piece *In the Presence of Absence* (See Fig. 3), I collect names of people lost to violence. The names are then chosen randomly from a box and carved or drawn in ink into blocks of ice. The names disappear as the ice melts, leaving a memory trace on the cloth upon which the ice was placed. Once the process is complete, families of victims will get to take home the cloth as a memorial piece should they desire. Viewers are asked to stay for the time it takes for the ice to melt. Time acts a metaphor for the grieving process and for the recovery period for loss and trauma.

In another iteration of this work I added the names of loved ones who were taken away in the Middle East and Syria civil war (I choose names were popular through social media during the Arabic Spring and the Syrian revolution). The final work comprises two different pieces: 1) *Mapping memories*, in which the inscribed names of victims in ink onto blocks of ice placed on pieces of linen become drawings and are used in the installation. 2) *Tracing Traces*, documentation of the ice as it melts, the names will fade and leave a subtle and poetic trace on the linen and a video installation screening the melting of the names will be mounted in the space including more than 20 clips.

In this project, what people left behind after loss is my point of departure. More specifically, I recycle the collection of different people's memories within

personal one, like recycling stories I have experienced or heard. These stories are about people who were taken from us from their families and about the traces they have left in our lives, traces of ideas; their names that heighten their absence within the common memory space. The traces of what we have in our mind for these people--admiration, longing, and surviving-through their memories are what I exchange with the viewers and that connect me with them.



Fig. 3. *In the Presence of Absence* (2013). Photo courtesy of artist.

Because the social aspects of the work are my overarching concern, finding effective ways to provoke viewers' empathy and make them witnesses is the principal focus of any piece. Therefore, I am more focused on the core of the work, on its meaning and its truthfulness than simply its aesthetics. I also examine the effectiveness of art in communicating knowledge. For me, the most important thing is to show the real meaning of things from a very intimate perspective; to get closer and feel the experience as if the participant/viewer is living it. These experiments in participation create traces of collected memories and generate new witnesses to the past and the living present through stories. In another sense, I allow the story to become part of a larger memory diaspora through the

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engagement of the participants. They, too will own the story, or, if they cannot directly relate to it, they will become witnesses. Through art we share and create relations that might not be possible with other forms of connection. We highlight these relations and bring these experiences to each other. Creations like these past projects allow me to further investigate the relationships between my pieces and the public and informs and nourishes my future work. By sharing our stories through installation and storytelling, I aim to create the potential for increased empathy; an active empathy that could lead to further actions and awareness.