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"Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter" at Museum of Modern Art, New York

Posted on 21/11/2016



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An exhibition at MoMA addresses the global refugee crisis and notions of displacement and shelter.

"Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter", running until 22 January 2017 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, explores the ways in which contemporary architecture and design have addressed notions of shelter in light of global refugee emergencies.



Brendan Bannon, 'Ifo-2, Dadaab Refugee Camp', 2011, chromogenic print, 40 × 60 in (101.6 × 152.4 cm). Image courtesy the artist.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben described contemporary political order as defined by the normalisation of the "state of exception": what was once the suspension of the rule of law by a sovereign is now simply how the law operates; emergency measures – martial law, suspension of citizens' rights, statelessness – are now the paradigm of how contemporary politics sustains inequality, and therefore sustains itself.

For thinkers such as Agamben, the management of this state of exception is manifest directly in the treatment of the stateless and refugees – those he considered to be persons reduced to "bare life", allowed to function as humans without political mobility. The logic of the refugee camp realises the state of exception as the continuation of territorialising power: this is *where* the state of exception takes shape.



"Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter", 1 October 2016 – 22 January 2017, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Installation view. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

In the exhibition **"Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter"** at New York's **Museum of Modern Art**, the question of *where* is put through a prism, and examined through multiple works by contemporary artists, architects and designers, to consider how displacement and shelter are re-formulated and reconstructed through multiple nodes of thought. Touching on themes of security, borders, globalisation and national identity, the exhibition is organised by Sean Anderson, Associate Curator and Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA.

The exhibition is a continuation of the series "Citizens and Borders", and is supported by the museum's International Council. In addition to the exhibition held at the museum, MoMA has also **published a series of essays and propositions** that address the contemporary migrant crisis and propose solutions for resolving the problems that refugee camps place as they are continually populated and re-populated.



Henk Wildschut, 'Dunkirk, France, May 2010', 2010, chromogenic print, 27 x 36 in (68.6 x 91.4 cm).
Image courtesy the artist.



"Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter", 1 October 2016 – 22 January 2017, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Installation view. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

Given the scope of the exhibition – musing on borders and refugee camps is no small order, no matter who takes on the task – it is beneficial to group, or catalogue, the works to focus one's attention more sharply to the many proposals and problems at hand. The works fall broadly under the categories of borders, shelters and camps, and largely interact with speculative reality, imagining how borders could be reimagined, shelters improved and camps determined as functional cities.



Tiffany Chung, 'finding one's shadow in ruins and rubble', 2014. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

With regards to borders, **Tiffany Chung's** oil and ink works make use of data from the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) records to remap regional movements and diasporas in detailed cartographic representations that trace the hundreds and thousands of refugees from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey since 1975.

Her lightbox installation represents the ruined landscape of a city, and specifically the city of Homs in Syria, a meeting point for ancient and modern cultures. The images in the wooden boxes depict the remains of the city of Homs and its refugee

crisis.

Herself a forced migrant from Vietnam, Chung's work provides a visual accountability of both distance and time: layering histories of migration from the past and the present, her maps speak to the geopolitical strands that connect and sever people from homelands, all the while establishing new spatial imaginaries from which to consider notions of identity.



Tiffany Chung, '13 Oct 2013 NY Times/UNHCR: Syria 4,250,000; Jordan 543,000; Turkey 504,000; Lebanon 790,000; Iraq 197,000; Egypt 126,000', 2014, oil and ink on vellum and paper, 31 1/8 x 39 3/8 in (79 x 100 cm). Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York.



Reena Saini Kallat, 'Woven Chronicle', 2016, circuit boards, speakers, electrical wires, and fittings; single-channel audio (10 min), 132 × 456 in (335.3 × 1158.2 cm). © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

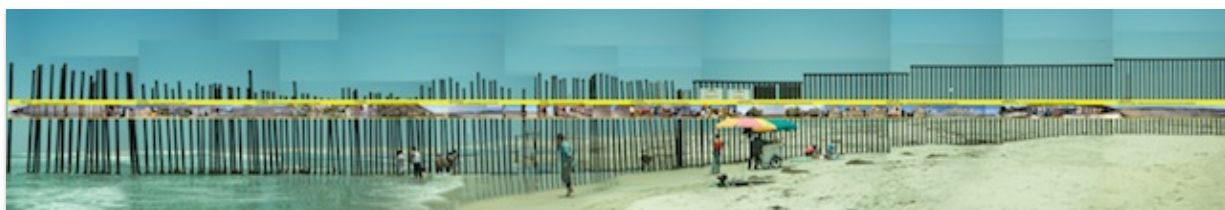
Likewise, **Reena Saini Kallat's** installation *Woven Chronicle* (2016) is a literal and material representation of these strands: migratory paths are realised in electric wire rather than yarn, moulding into electric and barbed wire fences that define territorial borders. Interspersed throughout the map are speakers that play sounds of factory sirens, telephone signals, birds and ship horns, which suggest the interconnected global network of labour and migration that effectively redraws maps and borders.

Kallat and Chung's works are a necessary framing of the larger discussion on displacement and shelter because they posit that constant stability is difficult, if not impossible, in a contemporary political landscape.



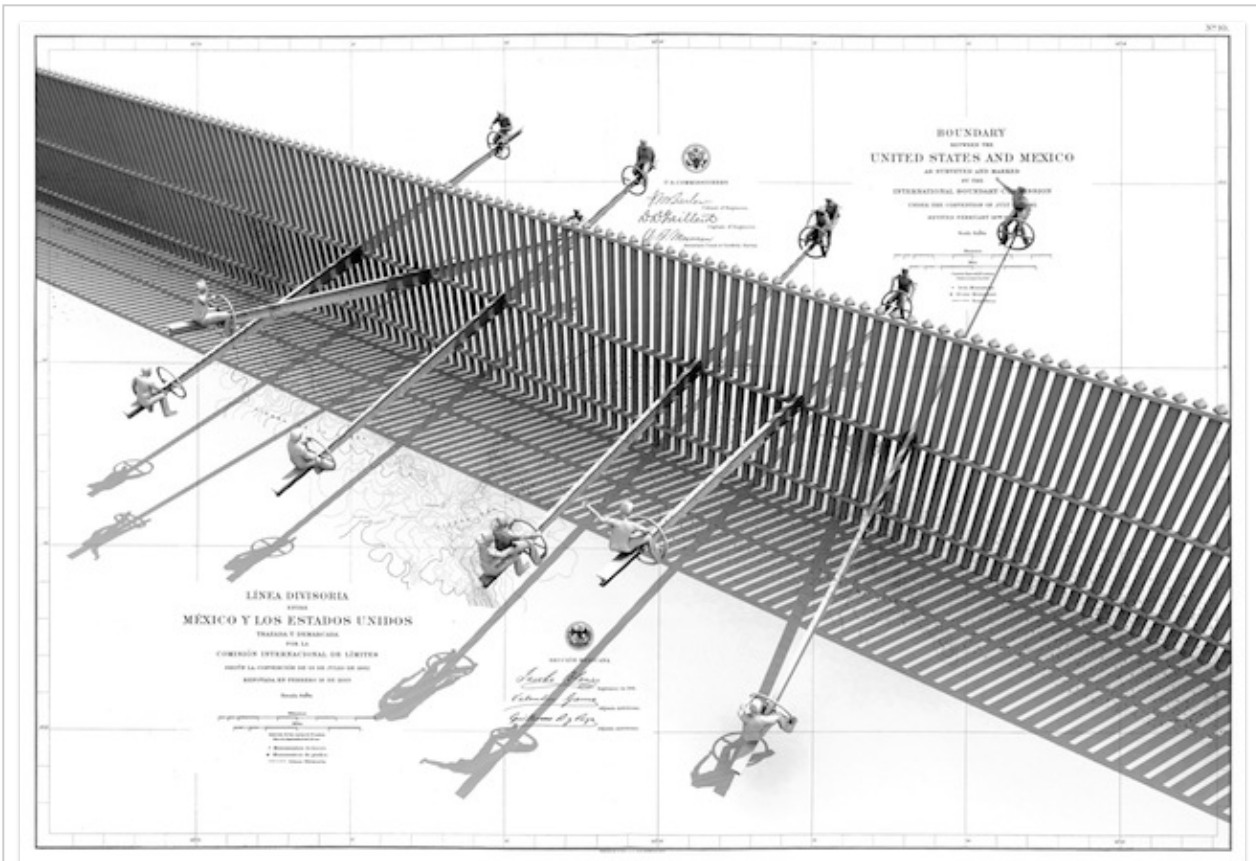
Reena Saini Kallat, 'Woven Chronicle' (detail), 2016, circuit boards, speakers, electrical wires, and fittings; single-channel audio (10 min), 132 × 456 in (335.3 × 1158.2 cm). © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

Teddy Cruz, in his photograph *Radicalizing the Local: 60 Miles of Trans-Border Urban Conflict*, examines boundary tensions between the United States and Mexico through collage. Cruz combines images of residential homes 30 miles above and below the border between San Diego and Tijuana, juxtaposing the private gated communities of San Diego with the density and urban sprawl of Tijuana. Shots of these residential communities are then further juxtaposed against the background of a wooden fence along the beach, which stretches for the length of the project, establishing the photographic print/collage as a border in itself.

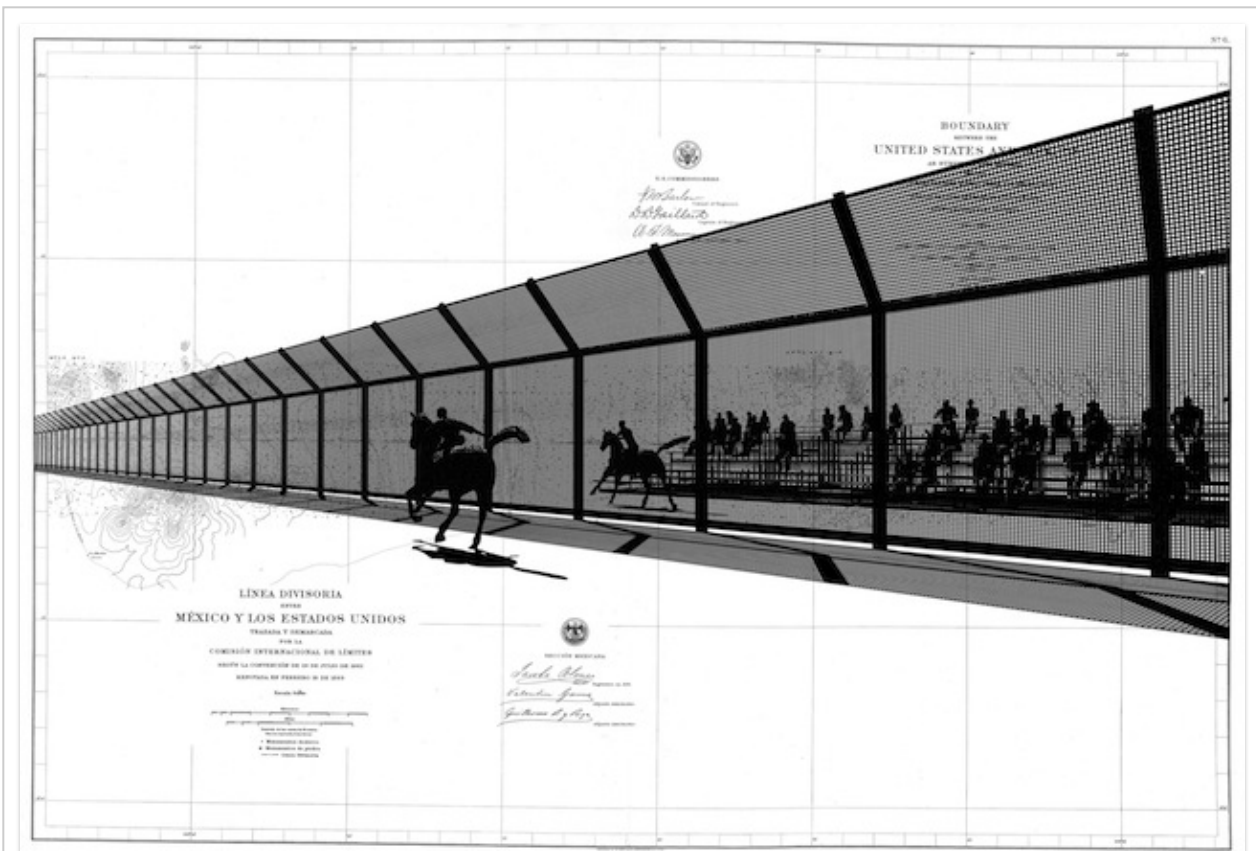


Teddy Cruz, 'Radicalizing the Local: 60 Miles of Trans-Border Urban Conflict, Project', 2008, print from digital file, dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the PARC Foundation.

Cruz's project suggests that the arbitrary definitions of such divisions have real, lasting material impacts on the lives of its inhabitants despite shared natural topographies; in turn, these topographies are shaped by the inhabitants that often make the divides across borders even wider.



Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, 'Teeter-Totter Wall', 2014, print from copper plate, 24 x 30 in (61 x 76.2 cm). Image courtesy the architects.



Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, 'Horse Racing Wall', 2014, print from copper plate, 24 x 30 in (61 x 76.2 cm). Image courtesy the architects.

In a similar vein, Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael's copper plate prints depict typologies of border walls that imagine walls less as militarised and restrictive structures than of whimsy: xylophone walls on which one can play scales, see-saw walls with guards on either sides sitting atop them, and horse-racing walls for competitive sport.

The same forward-thinking ethos is the force behind works that address refugee camps and their inhabitants in the exhibition, though some that engage directly with the political reality of refugees' lives in no uncertain terms.



Tobias Hutzler, 'Nizip II, Container Camp', 2014, digital print, 20 x 30 in (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Image courtesy the artist.

Photographers such as Brendan Bannon, who photographed the Dadaab Refugee Camp in 2011, and Tobias Hutzler, who has **photographed** "container camps" in Turkey, explicate the reality of identical housing structures and the vastness of these camps by examining them from a wider angle, while Henk Wildschut's photographs of Calais take a more intimate approach.

Wildschut's photographs are harrowing as they rely solely on material evidence of bare life: the small space within a tent on which sweaters and blankets are piled, an upturned shelter in Calais whose walls are an assemblage of fabrics and sheets. Wildschut's photographs impress upon the viewer the inhabited and embodied elements of the lives of refugees. Their emptied homes and unworn sweaters give the viewer pause to consider how displacement excavates the dignity and humanity of these refugees in a manner less maudlin than it is sympathetic.



Henk Wildschut, 'Calais, France, March 2016', 2016, chromogenic print, 27 x 36 in (68.6 x 91.4 cm).

Image courtesy the artist.

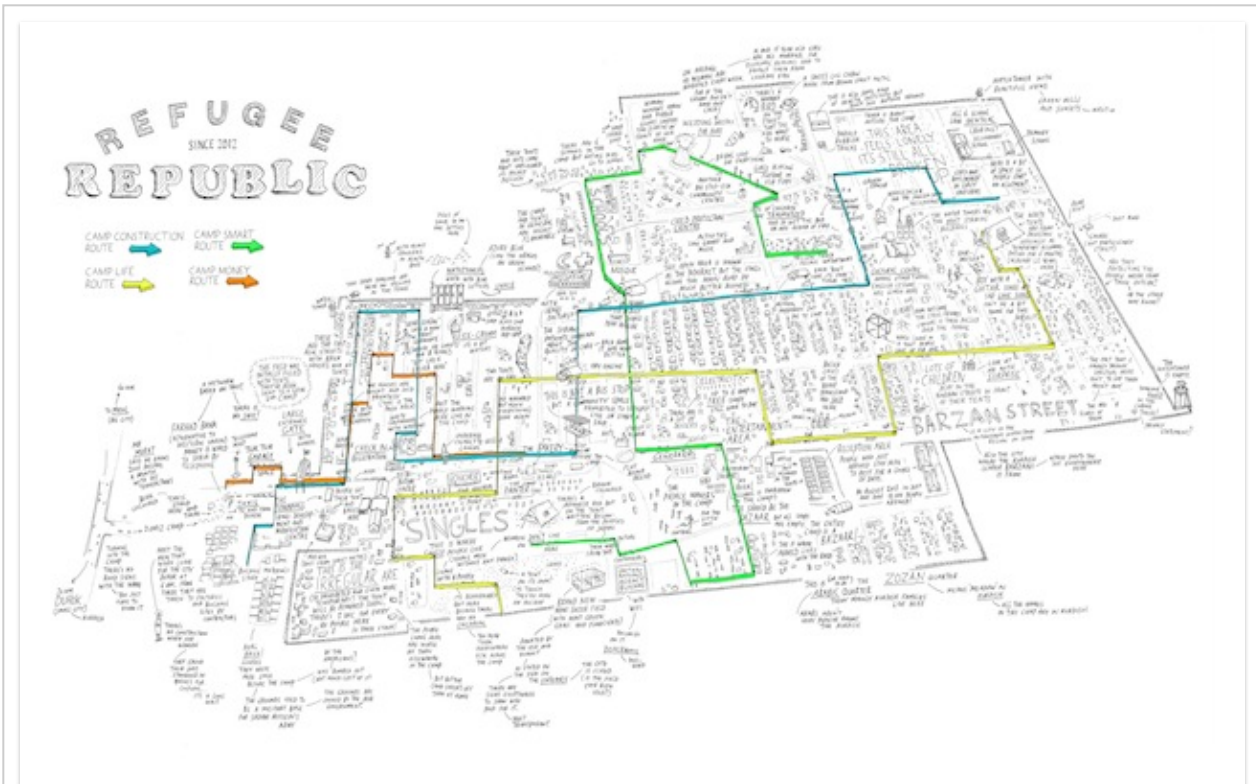
A return to dignity girds the Better Shelter project's mission. A Swedish design and innovation social enterprise founded in 2010, Better Shelter partners with IKEA Foundation and the UNHCR to work with designers and engineers to prototype temporary shelters that are designed to last at least three years.

The exhibition also showcases other products used by UNICEF in the field to highlight design that centres the needs of crisis populations, including water purification tablets and water containers, tarpaulin sheets and tools that attend to the social and psychological welfare of children, such as the Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation, and School-in-a-Box. By highlighting these products, the exhibition suggests that these displaced persons are capable of a future that is not limited by their migrant or refugee status.

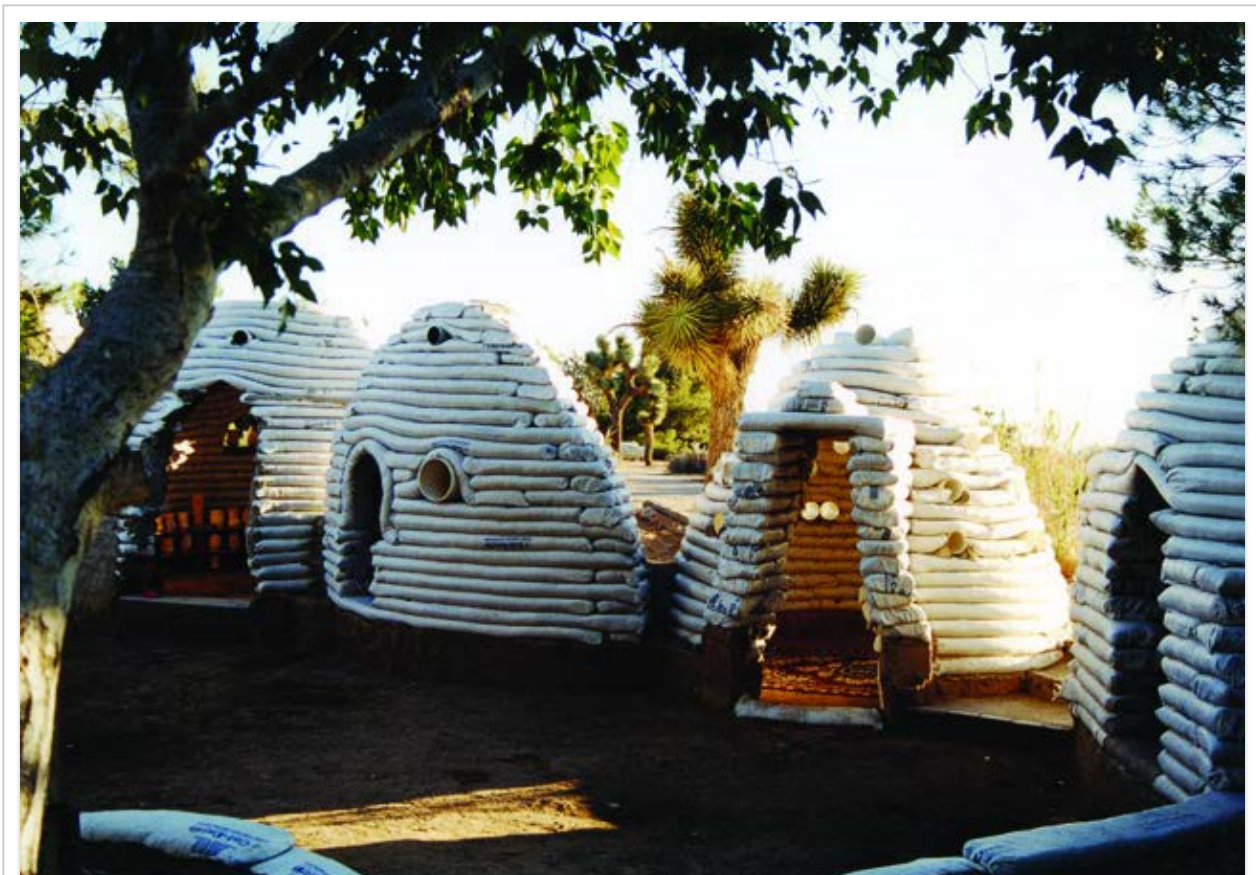


Better Shelter, 2015, interior of a Better Shelter prototype in Kawergosk Refugee Camp, Erbil, Iraq.

The Dutch artists, journalists and photographers behind Submarine Channel – Jan Rothuizen, Martijn van Tol and Dirk Jan Visser, respectively – established the interactive online platform Refugee Republic to provide further insight into the daily lives of Syrian refugees in Camp Domiz, located in northern Iraq. Through a combination of video, drawings, maps and text, the project aims to return the power of narrative to the refugees themselves.



Submarine Channel, 'Refugee Republic', 2014, interactive online platform. Image courtesy Submarine Channel.



Nader Khalili, 'Sandbag Shelter', 1995, digital print, 20 x 30 in (50.8 x 76.2 cm). Image courtesy the California Institute of Earth Art and Architecture.

Aesthetic responses to political problems are difficult to evaluate on a single register; necessarily they exclude certain elements, or their reception simplifies complexity. Nuanced and informed efforts, however, allow the possibility of exploring the issues at hand, and MoMA's "Insecurities" is an exercise in wading through and contending with the attendant dynamics of displacement.

Tausif Noor

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