



Main Space

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***Where is home?* curated by Zviko Mhakayakora**

Jessica Gaba, Karina Iskandarsjah, Zana Kozomora, Annie Patiño-Marin, Maxim Vlassenko
January 6 – February 4, 2017

Where Is Home? features the work of five artists and designers, Jessica Gaba, Karina Iskandarsjah, Žana Kozomora, Annie Patiño-Marin and Maxim Vlassenko, exploring various notions of home. The highlighted definitions of home examines themes of identity, cultural reclamation, surveillance, ancestry, survival strategies, intimacy, fear of discrimination, and tradition. This exhibition highlights the ways in which the concept of home can be heavily influenced by narratives of migration. In “Canada's largest city, Toronto, the average resident today is what used to be called a foreigner, somebody born in a very different country.”¹ As a result of displacement, colonization has had a huge influence on the ways that we as individuals view home. Many survival strategies have been used in order to maintain cultures while allowing outside influences from dominant European traditions. For example, the adoption of ‘tea time,’ by many who live in British colonies. With this in mind, how then can contemporary design and art practices be used as tools to reclaim and decolonize the concept of home?

In *Zakono*, Jessica Gaba explores themes of displacement, systemic forms of erasure such as government-endorsed ethnic cleansing, and the intimacy of ‘coffee reading’ to introduce Albanian Romani cultures and traditions to the gallery space. The installation and performance is named after “zakono yekh,” the Romani Law of purity and tradition. Tasseography, the art of reading cups, is considered an intimate act, done in the privacy of one’s home.² By presenting this practice in the space of the gallery, Gaba invites us to experience this tradition publicly.

¹ Iyer, Pico, “Where is home?” TED talk, 2013. Video. https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_iyer_where_is_home

² Gaba, J. 2016. Artist Statement. *Zakono*.

When migrating, cultural sustainability depends on various strategies of survival, identity building and adaptation. The definition of home, then begins to shift, which leads to the following question: when one migrates, does the meaning of home shift to include the cultures and traditions carried when relocating?

Like Gaba, Karina Iskandarsjah also explores themes of displacement in her work. In *LIEUTENANT MAMIYA'S INTROSPECTION ON THE MOVEMENT OF TIME*, Iskandarsjah shows us footage of Ladakh, an Indian-controlled region in Jammu and Kashmir under territorial conflict with India, Pakistan and China. Ladakh is renowned for the beauty of its remote mountains and culture, yet has also been the subject of political warfare, mostly between China and India. Though agreements were signed in 1947 to respect Ladakh as owned by India, China closed off borders with Tibet and Central Asia in the 1960s, making it difficult for those living in Ladakh to receive international trade. For Iskandarsjah, the idea that 'home' does not reside comfortably within the borders of a nation-state is very problematic and seemingly dangerous. Many immigrants continuously cross borders in search of freedom of speech including artistic freedom, political stability, and a place to call home. Home is where we expect to feel safe, but what happens when that safety is challenged by occurrences that are not within our control? Recently, we have seen the movement of populations from countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia. Our world is made up of arbitrary borders, which often dictate the land that we call home. Thus, where is home? The confusion around land ownership is one that exists in many cultures around the world. Can land truly be owned?

Prior to the colonization of Canada by Europeans in the fifteenth century, the concept of owning land did not exist. Land existed for the benefit of the First Nations people; the European concept of ownership of land for capital gains had not yet been introduced. This being said, "a reconnection to homeland and of 'traditional' indigenous land-based cultural practices [has] proven in many cases to be key to the reclamation of spiritual, physical and psychological health and to the restoration of communities characterized by peace and harmony and strength."³ The definition of home is one that continues to evolve. Writer Taiye Selasi argues that rather than ask

³ Alfred, Gerald Taiaiake, "Colonialism and state dependency," *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, November 2009.

where a person is from, ask where they are a local. This can then open up discussion on the subject of home and what it really means to individuals.⁴

Examining themes of surveillance and lived experiences in armed conflict, Žana Kozomora's piece, *Motherland*, delves into generational trauma. In the piece, Kozomora invites the viewer to rest their head on a cushioned pillow atop a vintage cabinet, this act symbolizing resting on a mother's breast. Inside the intimate sculpture, Kozomora displays digitally created postwar tourist footage juxtaposed with archived journalist footage during the 1990's Yugoslavian conflict in the Sarajevo suburb of Ilidza. It is said that the Siege of Sarajevo was the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. Kozomora investigates themes of displacement during the war, which claimed the lives of approximately 13,952.⁵

The concept of home is ever-changing for artist Annie Patiño-Marin, as she has lived in Colombia, the USA and Canada. *Ancestors* is a series of 8 photographs that explore her ancestral lineage. Using various graphic design techniques such as typography, Patiño-Marin studies each photograph in depth providing a detailed analysis of the time period, the various influences, as well as the physical and psychological similarities between herself and those before her. By handwriting on these photographs, Patiño-Marin performs a study of her own identity.⁶ The chosen images range from the 1890s to the 1980s. Through these studies, Patiño-Marin discovers the probability of an Indigenous branch of her family, that is likely to have been camouflaged by her ancestors due to this ancestry not being historically embraced in Latin American culture due to colonial mentalities. Writer Pico Iyer discusses the creation of the idea of home: "nowadays, at least some of us can choose our sense of home, create our sense of community, fashion our sense of self, and in so doing maybe step a little beyond some of the black and white divisions of our grandparents' age."⁷

⁴ Selasi, Taiye, "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local," TED talk, 2009. Video. https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local

⁵ Study of the battle and siege of Sarajevo: Final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts pursuant to security council resolution 780 (1992), 1994.

<https://www.phdn.org/archives/www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/comexpert/ANX/VI-01.htm>

⁶ Patiño-Marin, A. 2016. *Ancestors*.

⁷ Iyer 2013

Through his video, *Coming Home*, Maxim Vlassenko “deconstructs the experiences of adapting to a new setting and dealing with a different culture [and language] from childhood into adulthood”.⁸ The footage begins with shots of downtown Toronto, framed to be reminiscent of Vlassenko’s childhood spent in a small village in Kazakhstan. The footage in *Coming Home* doesn’t feature many signs of life within its frames, with the exception of Vlassenko’s voice. Vlassenko speaks of the experiences that have shaped the ways in which he views Toronto as his home, first in Russian and eventually in English as he juxtaposes the his old self with his current reality. The piece explores the power of language, and how it is possible to feel at home in a foreign place when you hear your language spoken to you. Language locates and can “define who you are to a people”.⁹

Gaba, Iskandarsjah, Kozomora, Patiño-Marin, and Vlassenko challenge the multiplicities that exist within the definition of home. When we move, either by choice or not, the meaning of home changes with us. We may need to change in order to feel at home, whether that is by learning a new language, adapting to new cultures, assimilating, using art and design to express ones’ thoughts, or learning ones’ identity to know how one fits in. Through these works we are provided with a glimpse into what home means when other factors are considered. Where is home for you?

-Zviko Mhakayakora

Where is home? is part of the Toronto Design Offsite Festival 2017



Presented by Keilhauer

⁸ Vlassenko, Maxim, artist statement, 2016

⁹ Noah, Trevor. 2016. *Born A Crime*. 1st ed. Spiegel and Grau.