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Ramolen Laruan and Sepideh Dashti

Double-Edged

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Upending Grids

At the age of 10, one of my closest friends' father began the—I'm assuming—exhausting journey of teaching her how to play chess. He walked his young daughter through each of the pieces: their roles, their failings and their constrictions, and explained to her how the pieces were predestined to move in certain ways inside of the grid. My friend tells me the story half smiling; "I kept moving everything wherever I wanted and he gave up on teaching me a bit later." We both laugh, her because she's never really been able to grasp the game, me, because I quietly see the logic of her ten-year-old self: Why should any of the pieces have predestined roles in the first place? Why should the grid trap them at all? Can't I just save them from it and take them away? Let them make their own decisions beyond the rules of a mere pattern?

As one might have guessed, I do not find much comfort in grids. They're too orderly, constricting, often a simplification and foreshadowing of linear structures of control, and more than anything, they give me a headache if I look at them too long. The irony was therefore not lost on me that when introducing their exhibition, artists Sepideh Dashti and Ramolen Laruan tell me that grids were the beginning of their conversations when first discussing their collaboration.

On a glitchy zoom call, Dashti shares her screen and showcases an image of her hands holding a larger needle as she embroiders hair into an off-white piece of fabric, a working shot of her piece *Tangled*. Dashti speaks about the Keffiyeh, a patterned square scarf that has symbolized the resistance of the Palestinian people for as long as I have been a witness to the occupation of their lands¹, and even decades before I was born.

Dashti, however, sees the pattern as it has been adopted by one of Iran's military divisions—a symbol of warning. In Iran, a Keffiyeh means that the Basij militia were coming. The Basij militia, a division responsible for controlling the Iranian female body, redefines a grid that has historically embodied the survival of a colonized people as a method to enforce control over Iranian womanhood. This context is essential in understanding how a work like *Tangled* becomes an act of protest. Reclaiming symbols is often an impossible act—how do we unsee the images that have marked our traumas? Dashti chooses to reclaim the Keffiyeh by embroidering her own hair into the intersecting lines of the pattern. The very hair that Iranian women have to cover when they witness these limits is now used to create it. Using the grid as a means of insurgence, Dashti breaks down this pattern into its bare essentials: intersecting lines that are controlled by their creator, not a entrapment that is enforced upon her.

¹ For more information on the historical origins and symbolism of the Keffiyeh, see: [The Palestinian keffiyeh: All you need to know about its origins](#)

Visually similar, Laruan offers her work *follow* as a counterpart to Dashti's *Tangled*. On a large off-white thrifted bed sheet, *follow* offers deconstructed embroidered lines that hold their audience inside of the work as the lines lead the eye from pattern to pattern, never allowing your sight to stray from the mazelike embroidery. With loose threads bleeding from the fabric which forms a pattern reminiscent of a traditional Filipino house, Laruan creates a grid with linework that carries the viewer gently from line to line as they build a home with one another. During our Zoom call, Laruan comments on her years-long investigation of the grid and her relation to it—How does a Filipina Woman of Colour adopt and challenge a historically patriarchal and formalist pattern? *follow* responds to this question by offering an alternative to the confining nature of grids. Their military formations get unpacked and displaced, carving space through structures rather than around them. In many ways, *follow* serves a similar function to the audience that *Tangled* does: by disrupting the pattern and shaking the repetition, we spotlight the potential for cracking and rebuilding anew. In order to break the grids and the structures that govern us, we must upend them into creations that prioritize us.

These two works root *Double Edged*, both as a conversation and as an exhibition. The rest of the installations orbit *Tangled* and *follow* the way planets orbit the sun. Dashti's *No East No West*, a photograph of a human figure with sewn in hair balls on its face, plays off the notions of the Iranian Keffiyeh. The figure wears a shirt with the words No East No West embroidered into a grid in both English and Farsi once again distributing the grid by introducing language and text into the stitches. Detached from Dashti, the hair adorning the figure's face becomes lifeless and therefore outside the bounds of control. Using the repetition of patterns and the recreation of the stitch, Dashti reintroduces the grid as both a visual and a conceptual trapping.

This is echoed once more in Laruan's *that could dream without a thought*. Creating overlapping pieces of bleached salvaged denim, Laruan abstracts grids to create

a sky-like visual that encourages the audience to envision their dreamings and findings. As the work engulfs audience members in both height and width, *that could dream without a thought* envelops the onlooker into looking beyond the pattern to manifest a world where they are free from its confines. Laruan creates an escapism for her audience from the grids and prisons that chain us to our everyday, giving her work the space to both trap and let go of the viewer. *duplicates*, a series of photographs formed as replicas of themselves, similarly invites the viewer once more into an empty world they could occupy. These photos, taken on Laruan's trips to the Philippines, capturing haunting and mundane emptiness, are also void of humans and their presence, making space for the audience to occupy them as a method of creation beyond the multiple repetition of the photographs themselves.

As Laruan's photographs make space for the audience to occupy the empty spaces, Dashti's *Zolf*, a two Channel video featuring the artist swallowing and unswallowing her own hair, does the same in the opposite direction. The video has a visceral physical effect that disrupts our very occupation with the work in the first place yet traps us into witnessing Dashti as she expels the hair that has trapped her in grids—visually through a dual Channel video and metaphorically through her confinement to the action. We cannot see the artist's eyes and general features beyond her mouth, pushing the viewer to replace themselves with the articles, inserting themselves in her stead as she produces more of her thick braided hair.

In one of our Zoom calls, Laruan explains: "The contrast of breaking the rule is most stark beside the rule itself, no matter how small the act." And this statement stands true when presenting the above works. The circularity of the grid, of the shifting of repetition, the way a square can make a circle, how a straight line makes a connection and then collapses, and the way it leaves space for emptiness, for dreamings, and for rupture.

As we take a needle to stab into a piece of fabric then stab it back pointing towards us, *Double Edged* presents artists who choose to use the same sharp edge that they create with to point at themselves and wonder, Why should any of us have predestined roles in the first place? Why should the grid trap us at all? What rules can we break now?

- Yasmeen Nematt Alla