

Amalgamation

How can design investigate identity not as a fixed label (flag, nationality, binary) but as a dynamic, perspectival process shaped by culture, memory, values, and faith—especially in those who live between worlds?



About "Letters from Home" by Zarina

Zarina Hashmi, or professionally known simply as Zarina, was an India-born (in an area now Pakistan), New York based artist. Her particular works explored a lot on the topics of dispossession, cultural homelessness in the modern world. Her practice escapes any attempt to ground itself in social, regional, or civilizational identity and does not allow a settled filiation to any singular tradition, (Mathur, S., 2008) giving the audience of her work a sense of disillusionment and limbo, a state of in-between places. Yet it is within these places, many would call it their home. This fact resonates with the wider phenomenon in the modern world: an increase, and will continue to increase, of a stateless population due to global mass immigrations.

The "dwelling" is a common theme Zarina used in her work. She uses sitemaps of houses and cities she lived in, annotated with her mother tongue, Urdu. She showed these maps void of furniture and life, expressing a sense of isolation and "ungemütlichkeit", or discomfort. In particular, her work "Letters from Home" explores these themes even more intimately. She converts handwritten letters of grief her



sister sent from Pakistan, into woodblock prints, then interweaves these “void” maps on or around the letters. After the uprooting of her family and culture in the violent Indian-Pakistani partition in 1947, and an identity change from being Indian into Pakistani, made the place she once grew up in not exactly the same home she remembered. Therefore, these letters from “home” aren’t exactly from home.

After living three decades in New York, she adopted minimalism to express her art. Her work, however, isn’t so much about being in exile into the west in particular, but simply an exploration of identity and home with the real place of it not existing anymore. In a world where fixed points of references such as nationalities, geography, community, or objects is taken to define one’s identity, Zarina’s work directly challenges this source of identity by excluding such points of references in her work, displaying an identity that is dynamic and multifaceted. Mathur nicely summarizes the emerging critique:

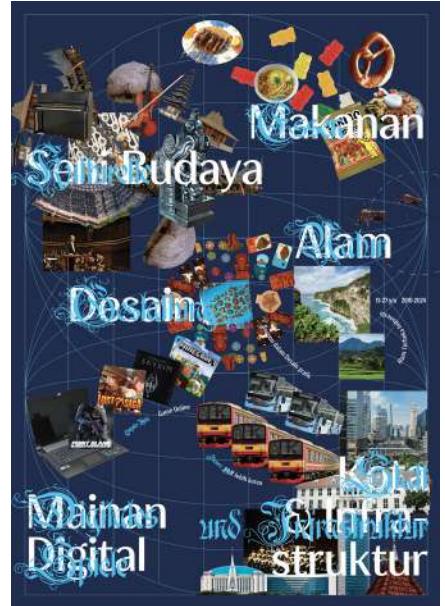
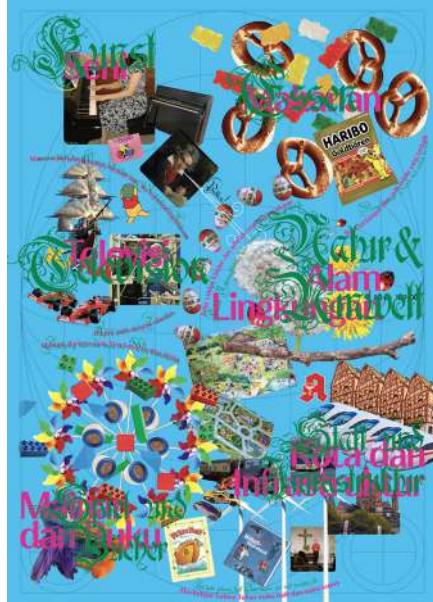
“Her work expresses a minoritarian and exilic relation to society and the world, staging a series of affiliations with similarly fraught social and political events and situations worldwide. It thus stages a critique of the structure of feeling that Said has referred to as the “quasi-religious authority of being at home among one’s people.” We might say of Zarina that each produces a distinct visual language for an unredeemed, secular, and damaged life, a life lived on the verge of disappearance but with a strange resolve and repudiation of oblivion.” (Mathur, S., 2008)

Art and literature is usually inextricably tied to histories and national development. Letters from Home ultimately explores cultural identities without these frames of references, but instead a more individual frame of references built through memories and disorientation.

Amalgamation and Its Contrast

In contrast to the sombre moods in Zarina’s work, my project embraces a vibrant and lively take on identity building. There is a parallel in the method of mapping, overlaying type, and layering between the two. Zarina used maps and the beautiful fragile Urdu script to convey a sense of profound loss and haunting nostalgia, a drawing of identity from a non-place. Her mapping is an act of mourning, preserving traces of a singular origin, a homeland fractured by borders.

In contrast, I use the method of mapping objects and overlaying it with type to display the active shaping of my own identity through different phases in time. My project maps out these objects, arranged in proximity of each other by category, and then I did the same with different phases in my life. The first phase was in Germany, the second was when I first arrived in Indonesia, the last one was when I began to embrace being Indonesian as a third culture. Seen side by side, the change of environment and conflict was made visible with changing and kept objects from previous places.



"Amalgamation" investigates a dynamic identity as a third culture kid (TCK), using my own experience as an example. Being born and raised in a country that isn't my own, moved back to a my own country that was foreign to me, and growing up in a diasporic family, I could not call any place as a proper home or origin to begin with, a similar disillusioning position like Zarina. From Zarina's point of view, instead of being dispossessed, I had nothing to possess to begin with. All were but borrowed things from a transient period and place, therefore I have no single origin to mourn. Instead, my identity has formed through accumulation and adaptation, by adopting elements from each culture I have lived within.

Looking back, there were things I would cling onto, calling it my own. Perhaps it brought joy, or acted as some sort of anchor in a foreign place. So, I explored identity from another frame of reference, by seeing hidden values made visible through the things I grew up with, objects as coordinates to navigate a definition. My project is about the constant construction of identity through different things and places. Instead of expressing loss of what once was, my project actively builds and weaves together the foreign and familiar. There is an element of adaptation and flourishing through a combination of things.

"Identity relates to basic beliefs that dictate the choices we make. These choices reflect who we are and what we value. The values we appreciate are visible in our belongings. Everything we decide to own is a representation of our fundamental values." (Kollar, Z, 2021).

Zarina's work envisions the dwelling as constantly changing and unrecoverable. My work reimagines home as constantly evolving and plural, a living network of influences. Assembling influences into an amalgamation that colors my journey.

Ultimately, both practices confront the instability of belonging with different responses. While Zarina laments the dispossession of her home caused by a dark history, my project explores how those same fragments can be re-arranged into coherence—how mapping is a tool for a construction of a set of objects, which in itself is not the defining answer to identity, but reflects the transcendental identity within oneself.

To me, this brings the question of the source of identity further. If what we value stems from our beliefs, that would mean faith is inextricably linked to the external and tangible, in turn the external exists due to the existence of the internal beliefs. Culture is shaped by values and in turn beliefs. Is beliefs then the true source of identity? Belief here should be understood more as the ultimate and unquestionable reality accepted by an individual, be that religious institutions or an atheistic position, anyone has a presumptive foundational belief or faith that shapes their worldview, biases, and perceived reality. In the Christian tradition, the "self" is tied to the human heart or the soul. A source of identity created by God, each uniquely made and inherently valueable, answering the question of the origin of the transcendental nature of belief. Could cartographic methodologies be evidence of such beliefs or the unique soul within each individual?

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ... All the days ordained for me were written in your book before on of them came to be." Psalm 139:13-14, 16.

(Connect how identity is transcendent, and cultures are just responses of that identity in different ways?)

REFERENCES

Mathur, S. (2008) *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*. Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Kollar, Z. (2021) *Object-Oriented Identity: Cultural Belongings from our Recent Past*. Gent: Art Paper Editions