

Reacting the Impact of War in Yemen through Visual Arts

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Abstract

This paper is a concept paper for the project “The spirit of Yemen” which was created for visual art design subject. The aim of this project is to show the impact of the war in Yemen which started in March 2015. This war pushed the country in the midst of an acute humanitarian crisis, and there is no end in sight to this deadly conflict (UNICEF, 2016). This war has destroyed the beautiful landscapes of the country, burnt lands, and more importantly the happiness of its people. Furthermore, many areas in Yemen had limited access to internet, electricity, and clean water. The sanitation systems were destroyed. Many houses, schools, hospitals have been attacked, and all parties involved in Yemen civil war denied any humanitarian assistance. According to UNICEF (2016), the violence has forced the majority of Yemenis into destitution. An estimated 21.2 million people or 82 percent of the total population need urgent humanitarian assistance. Therefore, this visual art design will give a clear view of the crisis in Yemen especially for those who are advocates of brotherhood and humanitarian help. Moreover, every element in this art design represented the current issues in Yemen. Hence, the elements are collections of different materials and this art design has its influence from installation art: Dadaism, and Minimalism art movements.

Keywords: Hadramism, Dadaism, Minimalism, Yemen, War.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Yemen is situated at the southwestern corner of Arabian Peninsula. It is mostly mountainous and generally arid, with people speaking various dialects of Arabic and are mostly Muslims (Wenner & Burrowes, 2017). According to Tharoor (2010), for centuries, Yemen was the center of civilization and wealth in the Arabian Peninsula. The Romans referred to this area as Arabia Felix or "Happy or Fortunate Arabia". However, at present, Yemen is neither happy nor fortunate (Whitaker, 2011). It is now the location of the world's largest humanitarian crisis and the violent playground for regional and international powers (Al Jazeera, 2017).

As reported by Amnesty International, on 25th of March 2015, an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched air strikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen sparking a full-blown armed conflict. Other groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and many military officers that are the loyalists of the former president and dictator, Ali Salah have taken advantage of the chaos and contributed to the disturbance of the country. Because of this, war crimes, and horrific human right abuses are being committed throughout the country causing unbearable sufferings for civilians (BBC News, 2017). Adding to the suffering of Yemen's people, the war has wreaking major damages to the historical, religious, cultural and architectural treasures of the country (The Economist, 2015). This cultural vandalism has destroyed and displaced many artifacts and cultural heritages that show people's lives in the country before the war. Moreover, the above-mentioned groups have a desire to erase much of the past. They started destroying sites and artifacts that do not reflect their beliefs. Aside from this, they have also targeted ethnic groups, political parties, and believers of other religions, aside Islam. Sadly, this destruction of Yemen's diversity and landscape still continues. According to Abdulhakim al-Sayaghi in Los Angeles Review of Books 2017, more than 95% of sites have been destroyed by the Saudi-led coalition. The rest of the damage was caused by the Houthi groups, who have shelled areas, including a museum housing ancient manuscripts in Taiz, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is active in southern Yemen and has destroyed Sufi shrines and mausoleum (Deknatel, 2017). In addition, the war does not exclude any one or anything, which leads to higher poverty rate, high infant mortality rate, low levels of literacy, inadequate public health service, absence of sustainable livelihood and lack of essential need such as food, clean water, electricity, and growing number of civilian casualties (Tanaka, 2015; Etheredge, 2011).

However, far behind from its current state, ancient Yemen was considered as one of the greatest countries in the Arabian Peninsula. It was the hub of vast trading networks that stretched from the Indian Ocean to the European world (Caton, 2013). Also, the Northern part of Yemen is one of the main exporters of a high quality of cotton textile (Etheredge, 2011). But when the war began, many of the manufacturing industries started to close. The major ones were the spinning and weaving factory in Sana'a (Abulohoom, 2013). To compete with other countries like China, Pakistan, and Indonesia, the administration decided to upgrade their machinery. However, due to the uprising which started on 2011, the windows

of the factory has been shot out and shattered with walls spattered in bullet holes (Abulohoom, 2013).

"It was the pulse of Yemen's national industry.

But the heart stopped beating."

(Abdulatif Al-Alami, 2013 Yemen Times)

With the major industry being destroyed, the strength of informal systems through family, regional, and community ties eroded as the country's assets are depleting, income sources cut out, and the law and order collapsing, 25 million of Yemeni people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. However, unlike Syria, where news about devastation and deaths make it to the media very quickly, Yemen suffer in silence (Beirut, 2017; Deknatel, 2017). Damages to rich cultural heritages and civilian casualties receive far less attention from the international media. In addition, not everyone is aware of the crisis the people of Yemen are currently facing.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Generally, this concept paper aims to explore the impact of war in Yemen and develop an installation art to represent the crisis that the country is currently facing. Specifically, it aims to:

- Create a visual art design influenced by the artworks found in the textile of the craftsmen from Hadramout, Yemen; and
- Apply these artworks in the projected visual art design as a social phenomenon.

1.3 Significance

This paper aims to produce an artwork rooted in the textile designs with the use of art installations: Dadaism and Minimalism to deliver a message to the viewers about the humanitarian help that the people of Yemen are in desperate need. In addition, this can also serve as a way of creating awareness about the cultural devastation and humanitarian crisis that the country is currently facing. Moreover, it can serve as a material to support the need for the restoration and preservation of the cultural heritages that were damaged by the war.

1.4 Scope and Limitation

This study mainly focuses on the humanitarian crisis that the people of Yemen is facing in their own country. It does not cover any possible problems faced by Yemenis outside the borders of Yemen. Moreover, the desired installation art mainly got its inspiration from the artworks found in the textiles of the people from Hadramout, southern part of Yemen specific on men's lower garment, known as futa. It does not reflect the same designs found in the northern part of Yemen. Any differences found in the designs do not invalidate the artwork. On the other hand, all humanitarian crisis that was highlighted in the art installation reflects the crisis in all parts of Yemen, either north or south. Moreover, the timeline of events considered is from 2006 until present.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Principles of Art

As a whole, the visual art design is a part of visual communication. It is a way how people communicate with each other for the purpose of sharing information and express thoughts and ideas. In addition, the difference of expressing thoughts in terms of the visual art design is the ability to express unspoken ideas through artworks. The works of art are objects and instruments of action. Art is an instrument to carry out the intentions of the artist with respect to the world, express grief, evoke emotions, or communicate knowledge (Wolterstorff, 1980). Moreover, art functions as a cultural form within social movements to encourage social change, empower and deepen commitment, inform larger society about social issues, and provide elements of pleasure and aesthetic joy to the viewers (Milbrandt, 2010). Art not only functions to maintain social tradition and describe the world, but it also explores social issues, identity, and freedom.

The elements of art are the visual tools that the artist uses to create a composition. These elements are line, shape, color, value, form, texture, and space (Wilder, 2007). On the other hand, the principles of art represent how the artist uses the elements to create an effect and to help convey the artist's intent (Wilder, 2007). According to Marder (2017), the principles of art and design are the balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, and unity/ variety (see Figure 3).

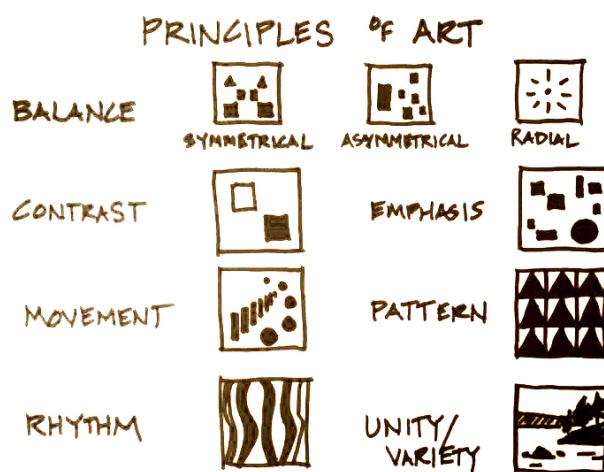


Figure 3. Examples of Design Principle
Image source: <https://goo.gl/URvmFH>

2.2 Art Concepts and Movements

In reality, art has started since the very beginning of the human history. As people adapted to their environment, they had found different ways of expressing their thoughts and ideas (Collingwood, 2016). This was the birth of different art movements in response to evolving contemporary society. The art movement is intentionally launched by a small group of artists who want to promote or provoke change. This movement is usually associated with an art style and often an ideology (Wilder, 2007). Every new art movement emerges with a new perspective and technique of how an artist can express his thoughts to the public. In addition, these movements are influenced directly by culture, theories, materials, environments, social, political, and religious conditions.

Two of the art movements that influenced this artwork are Dadaism and Minimalism. In 1916, a group of European artists met in Zurich (Germany) which changes the face of popular culture. They discussed how art could react to the ongoing horrors of the First World War, and this was the birth of a movement called Dada (Baines, 2016). Dadaism does not constitute an actual artistic style, but its proponents favored group collaboration, spontaneity, and chance.

With the desire to reject traditional modes of artistic creation, many Dadaists worked in collage, photomontage, and found-object construction, rather than in painting and sculpture (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016). The Dadaist spirit has nevertheless influenced all subsequent movements, and any future constructive position must include a Dadaist-type negative aspect as long as the social conditions that impose the repetition of rotten superstructures have not been wiped out by force (Debord, 1957).

Duchamp, the movement's most famous artist, advocated for a philosophy of total freedom in art-making that proved enormously influential for 20th-century artists—and that continues to guide artists today. Among his most radical works was Fountain, consisting of a urinal tipped onto its back, signed, "R. Mutt," dated 1917. Duchamp would call these types of found objects "ready-mades," turning them into art simply by altering their context (see Figure 4). Moreover, by incorporating the stuff of everyday life into their art, the Dadaists embraced and critiqued the signs and symbols of modernity (Kedmey, 2016).



Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, Bicycle Wheel, New York, 1913. Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm. he called this artwork an "assisted readymade," made by combining more than one utilitarian item to form a work of art. Source: <https://goo.gl/4H2DjE>

Moreover, “readymades” artwork was used by Berlin Dada artists beside their use of early forms of Assemblage art forms (ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ART HISTORY, n.d.). An Assemblage is a form of sculpture comprised of “found” objects arranged in such a way that they create a piece. The important thing about Assemblage is that it is “supposed” to be three-dimensional and different from collage which is two-dimensional (Esaak, 2017) (see Figure 5). Artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg adopted an apparently anti-aesthetic approach to making art. They used scrappy materials and found objects alongside messily applied paint to create expressionist reliefs and sculptures, earning them the name neo-dada. Moreover, Artists, such as Mario Merz, made artworks using an assemblage of throw-away natural and everyday materials including, soil, rags, and twigs. Their aim was to challenge and disrupt the values of the commercialized contemporary gallery system. (“Assemblage,” n.d.)



Figure 5. Sarah Lucas, Beyond the Pleasure Principle 2000.
Resources: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/assemblage>

Furthermore, Minimalism, as an art movement is derived from the word minimum, which in French means the least or the smallest amount needed for something (Sukriye, 2014). As its name suggests, Minimalism means using limited materials to create the desired effect. In other words, “make it pure and simple”. This brief sentence has served as the motto for Minimalism (VanEenoo, 2011) (see figure 6).

Minimalism was founded at the end of the 1960s in New York. The most important particularity of this movement in arts is its extreme simplicity and an objective approach (Sukriye, 2014). The common characteristic of this movement is simplicity in form, minimal usage of notes and lines, clarity and comprehensibility in line and texture. Therefore, one can say that the balance, color, and form in Minimalism artworks are more minimal, more simple than before as a way to relay the emotional impression better (Sukriye, 2014).

However, when Minimalism came up as an art movement, it was called “Basic Structure”. According to minimalists, a work of art represents nothing, but it is only what you see and the other things do not exist. The minimalists have an objective of quietness. They have developed a kind of symmetry and order as the sign of a rational attitude (Sukriye, cited in Antmen, 2008). It is important to realize that Minimalism is not only recognizable but visible

on many fronts. The style once considered to be subversive has over time become acceptable (VanEenoo, 2011). To sum up, Minimalism is the possibility to get rid of the too much noise and focus on the essence. With less noise, one can access the freedom he is in need of, that is, the freedom of interpretation (VanEenoo, 2011).

In short, my artwork was influenced by Dadaism art movement, in particular, the assemblage art-form which is a composition of more than one element because in Dadaism one element could stand by itself as an artwork. Moreover, I considered the simplicity of my artwork by having few elements which was influenced by Minimalism. On the other hand, the structure of the eyes which is the core of this artwork was influenced by Hadramism concept which is a translation of real natural objectives to geometrical square shapes.

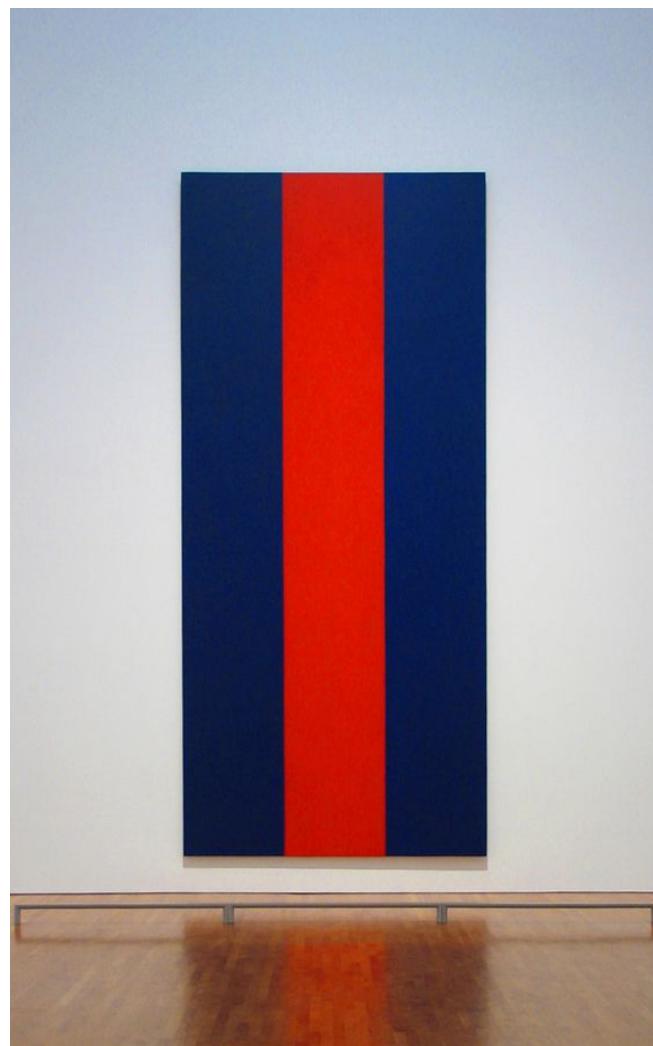


Figure 6. Barnett Newman, Voice of Fire, 1967. 540 cm × 240 cm, Minimalist Art Movement. Resources: <https://goo.gl/bFhwzn>

2.3 Hadramout Textile

Al-saher in Hadramout - southern Yemen - is one of the most famous cities in Yemen for producing local fabrics, especially Futa (see Figure 7). Until today, people in Yemen prefer wearing the Futa for the lower part of their body instead of wearing pants or jeans. The Futa's design has carried many cultural subjects, forms, and colors. It is made by local and non-academic craftsmen (see Figure 8). Because the craftsman belongs to a tribe or group, the traditional fabric represents the group's culture, beliefs, and thoughts more than that of the craftsman's. Gansu (1995) said that this art is a compliance under traditions inherited through all the generations. Their art is a collection of lines, colors, and shapes created with easy and accessible materials. This art is rich in symbols and connotations, and briefly represents the history of the nation and its traditions and customs. Moreover, it expresses the spirit of the group and goes with the taste of its people. However, the artists in this transitional art are anonymous because this art belongs to the group.

2.3.1 Features of the Textile

All forms that are used in the traditional textile are made geometrically. It is more concerned about making a simple design and to avoid the complexity of the forms found in the traditional textile. Moreover, the ratio and proportionality of the subjects are ignored. For example, in some pieces of the fabric, the size of the rose can be the same as the size of building in the design. In addition, the daytime is also ignored. Hence, the sun and the moon can be present in the same piece of textile. Additionally, most - if not all - the textile used few colors, but the white and black colors are mostly prominent, and has no background or depth, only a solid color and mostly black. Mostly, the elements were designed by observing the elements present in the surrounded environment or from a cultural myths, and were then translated to become applicable elements for the textile in making geometric shapes (see Figure 8).

- The color. First of all, the materials of making clothes and carpet comes from two local natural resources: the wool, which comes with two colors: white and black. Another material is the cotton, which is used to carry the white color. Therefore, most of the fabric colors are white are black. Other colors like blue and red are made by a traditional chemical formula, and recently, there are more colors being imported to the country.

- The Forms. The craftsman had taken his forms from his own culture, and his environment as resources for his designs. However, there are many symbols that the craftsmen used in Hadramout. For example, some of this forms are flowers, plants, and geometric lines. Moreover, the craftsman used the floral and green plants in his designs. Flowers are considered symbol of love. The green plants represents the stability and prosperity. In addition, the lines in Hadramout textiles have meaning. For example, the wavy, straight and zigzag lines could represent the plains and the different landscapes of Yemen.

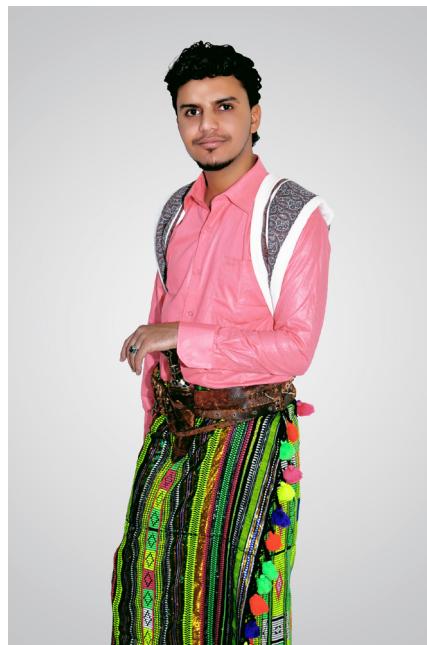


Figure 7. Man wearing Futa

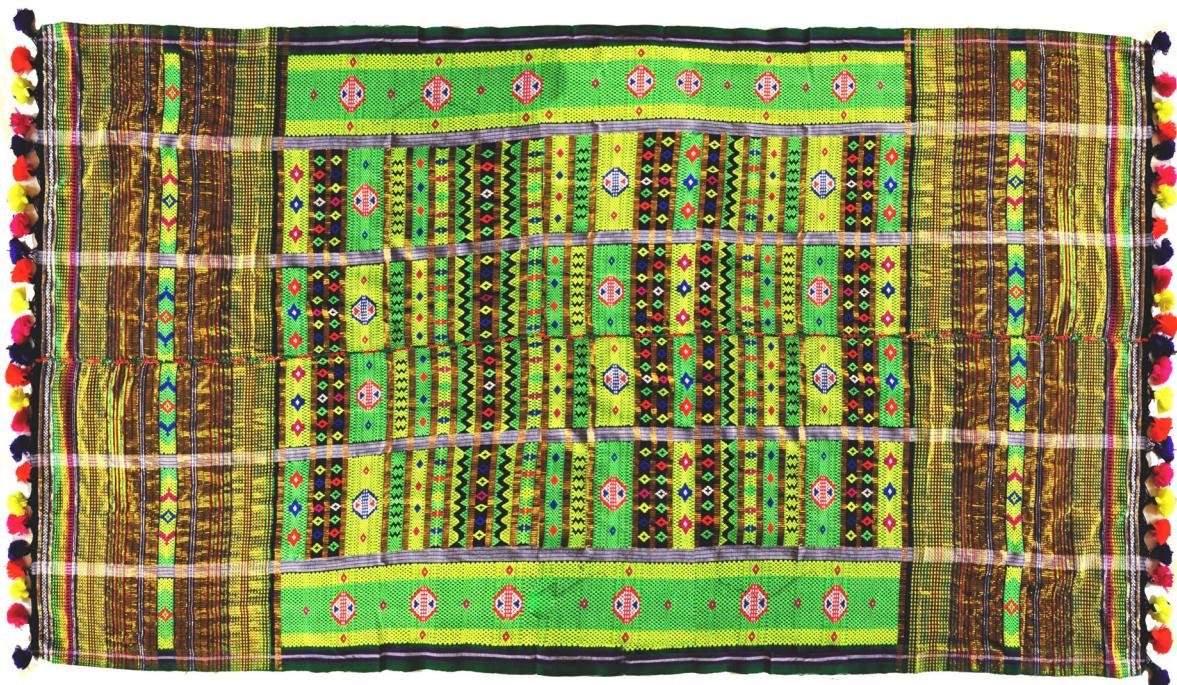


Figure 8. Elements found in the Futa

Moreover, *Hadramism* is a name of a new concept introduced by me for this visual art design subject. Hadram, the first part of the term, refers to a place in Yemen where the styles of textile used for this study came from. Moreover, the Ism is a suffix to indicate that the word represents a specific practice, system, or philosophy. Often these practices, systems, or philosophies are political ideologies or artistic movements (Gabriele, 2012).

Here, Hadramism is defined as the way of how Hadrami craftsman translates his vision of things from his environment and simplify and abstract them to make applicable mathematical elements for his textile designs. To explain, the design of a rose is not for the physical structure of the rose itself, but to represent the very own unique perspective of the craftsman (see Figure 9, 10). therefore, the main concept of Hadramism is to express the art using textile, or using the style of making the geometrical designs on the textile.

In addition, the textile is not for covering or as a clothing in many countries. It is used to show and express the people's status, identity, age, and beliefs. Moreover, the textile is used to show more conditions. For example, the peace flag because of the white color, the pirate's flag because of the skull and crossbones signs. Therefore, the textile at all times represents ideas, thoughts, and beliefs of the craftsman or of his group.

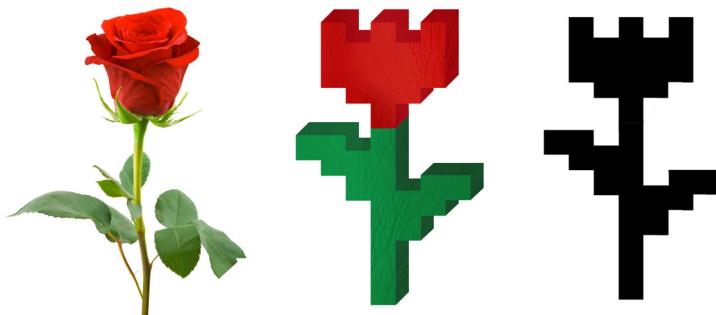


Figure 9. Structure of a Rose in the Textile

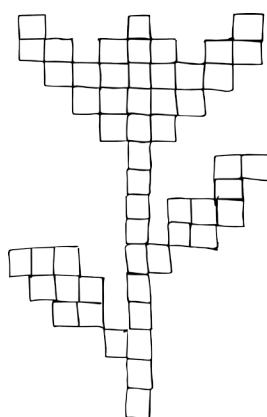


Figure 10. Dividing the rose structure into square pieces before applying it in the textile

Moreover, some of the ideas of the Hadramism concept are similar to Dadaism, and Minimalism art movements. To clarify, this design work has its inspiration from these two art movements. As is known, Dadaism movement arose as a reaction to World War I and the nationalism that many thoughts had led to the war. Moreover, Dadaists are known for their use of readymade objects - everyday objects that could be bought and presented as art with little manipulation. Hence, I applied Dadaism by using ready-made objects. On the other hand, Minimalism is a movement that simply called to pare-down the design elements. So I made this work as simple as I could, following the core concepts of the Minimalism and Dadaism movements.



Figure 11. Application of Rose in the Textile



Figure 12. Application of Arabic Typography

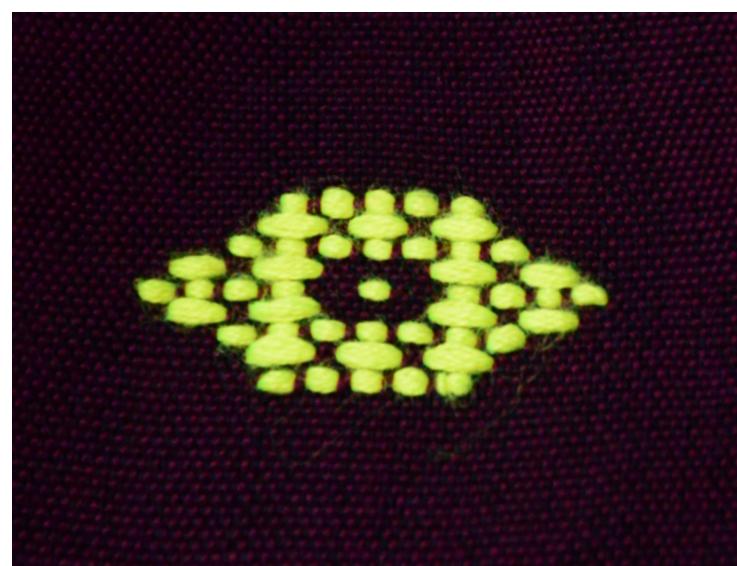


Figure 13. The eye shape as it appears in Hadrami textile

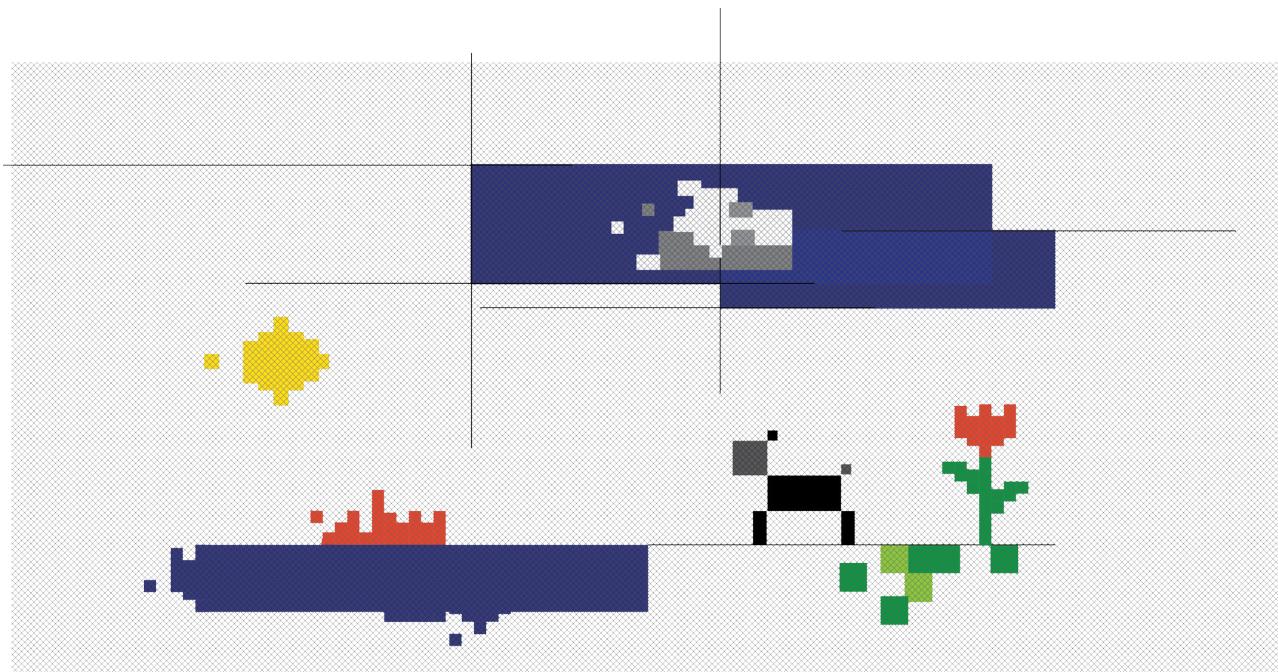


Figure 14. Artistic application of a natural landscape done under Hadramism concept

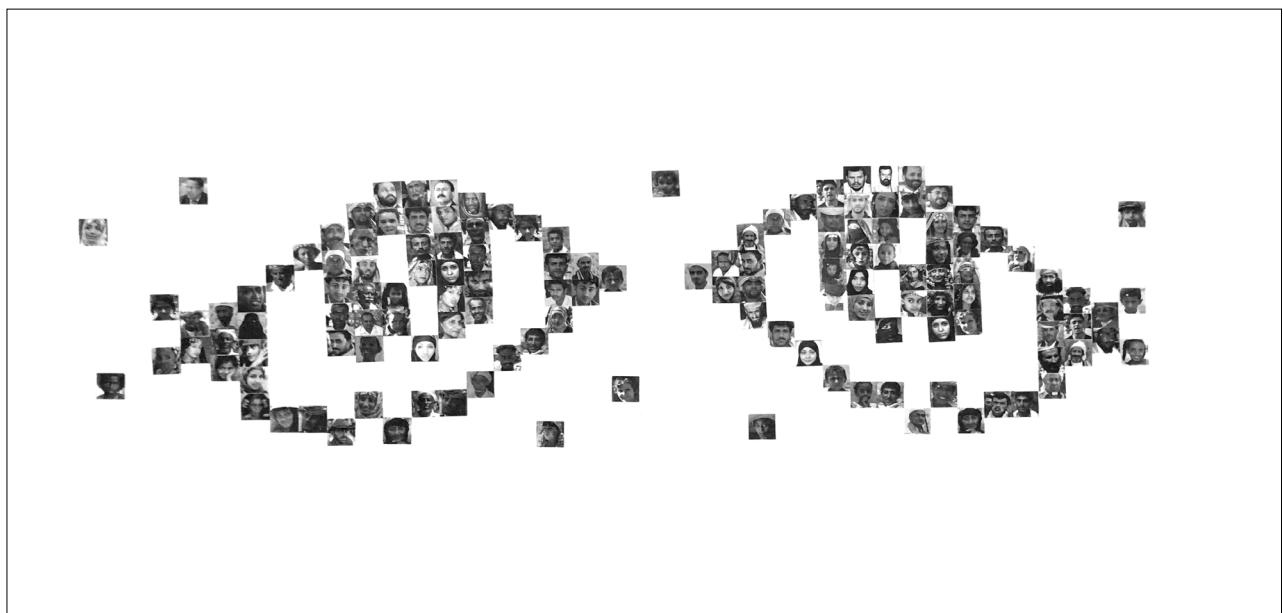
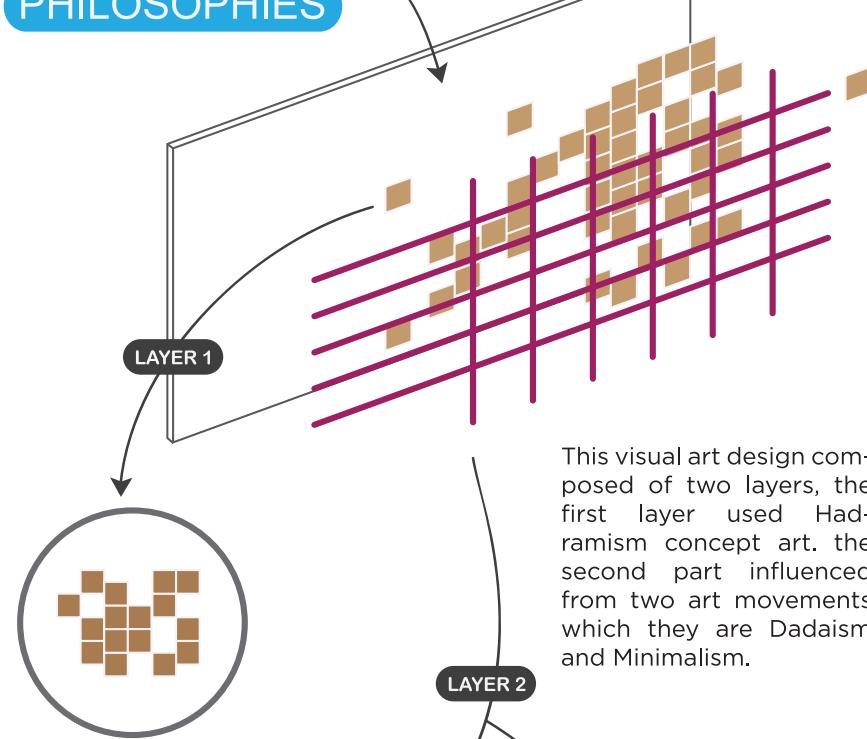


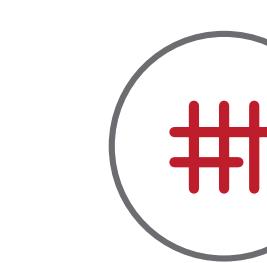
Figure 15: The final work without the front elements

THE USED PHILOSOPHIES



HADRAMISM

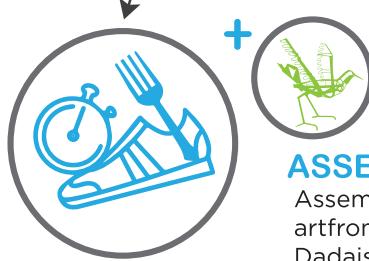
Translation of real natural objectives to geometrical square shapes.



MINIALISM

Less elements to create the desired effect

LAYER 2



DADAISM

Rejecting the traditional modes of artistic creation. And using daily-life ready-made elements.

ASSEMBLAGE

Assemblage is an artwork that some Dadaists were used by compound more than one element in one artwork.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARTWORK

3.1 The artwork

The name of this artwork is “The spirit of Yemen”. The final outcome is an Assemblage sculpture. It is composed of two layers, the first layer used Hadramism as a concept. The second layer was influenced by two art movements, Dadaism and Minimalism. Although, the most important element in this artwork is the first layer which is the eyes that was organised on the white background, the second layer or the frontal elements were applied as a secondary role- showing some of the war’s impact in Yemen. Furthermore, the second layer was made to help aid the message of the photos and to add more meaning to the artwork as a whole. Moreover, the second layer was inspired from Dadaism and Minimalism. On the other hand, the first layer or the eyes was inspired by Hadramism, the new visual art concept. These two well known art movements are enhancing the strength of using the new concept used in this artwork to deliver a clear message to the viewers.

Furthermore, all frontal elements in this artwork were combined into one white flat background, wall-mounted, and having a dimension of 90 x 200 cm. There are 17 vertical lines that represent the timeline in Yemen with the length of 80 cm, and 9 horizontal elements with the length of 176 cm. Moreover, the organisation of these elements in the artwork was inspired by the traditional piece of fabric, futa which is the most featured textile in Yemeni cultural heritage made by local craftsmen. In addition, the craftsmen incorporated many cultural symbols and signs in their fabric designs. Using wool and cotton yarns, they translated their ideas and impressions into visible art designs. However, this design work is done differently, and it is not even made by fabric. Instead, it is made by other elements such as whiteboard foam to represent the fabric, colored yarns, internet cable, electrical wire, Bamboo stalk, farming rope, hospital dextrose tube, and gold chain.

3.1.1 The First layer

The background used for this artwork is white colored. The reason is that I do not want the background to overpower the photos, and the frontal elements presented. Moreover, the background was neatly knitted together in the same way that a normal fabric is being knitted. Moreover, the background includes 138 photos of Yemeni people faces in a 4x4 cm square shape. Every face in each photo suggests a situation, feeling, and expression. They are all from different ages and areas in Yemen, and other groups that Houthi rebels want to eliminate. For example, there are men and women that are public figures fighting for women’s rights and human rights in general which make them as one of the targets of this war. Most importantly, the majority of the photos are unknown individuals whose greatest desire is to live safely in this country and have access to a decent life, education, and good health care. As can be seen, most of those people in the photos are children and young people. According to Unicef (2016) out of 26 million population of Yemen, close to 10 million are children facing fear, pain, and deprivation.

In addition, all of these photos organized into human eyes shape. According to Sykley (2012), the eyes are used as a symbol that relates to the ideas of light and the spirit and are often called the mirror of the soul. It also symbolizes powerful insight. Hence, the photos organized in this shape to represent the soul of Yemen struggling for freedom from this bloody war, especially the women and children who were greatly affected.

However, some of the photos contain happy expressions. This is to show that despite the struggle for survival and for freedom, the spirit of nationalism in Yemeni's heart is stronger than that of the war.

3.1.2 The Second layer Frontal Elements

Basically, the vertical bars represent the timeline in Yemen from 2001 up to present, with 2015 as the most recognizable year when the civil war was triggered by international powers. Moreover, the horizontal elements represent the important issues in current Yemen's society. These elements are divided into three categories. First, the people of Yemen and their rights that were given to them based on their social status. Second, the public services and daily needs mentioned in the artwork: electricity, internet, medical health care, and agricultural condition. Third, the united Republic of Yemen which started the struggle for separation since 2007. Specifically, the elements are described below:

- **Gold Chain** Which is an expensive material used to represents the few elite population in Yemen who are still privileged at the present.
- **Multicolored Yarns**. These present the national Yemeni flag (see figure 6), which is a tricolor of red, white, and black in horizontal stripes. The blue yarn represents the blue color that was added to the flag last 2007. It symbolises a protest demanding separation from the North in that year.
- **Electrical wire and Internet cable**. These represent the lack of electricity and internet services even in the cities when the war started
- **Hospital Dextrose Tube**. This element represents the lack of public health services in Yemen which causes a cholera outbreak in some areas.
- **Bamboo stalk**. This represent the agriculture in Yemen that was severely affected when the war began.
- **Farming Rope** which is a cheap material used here represents the underprivileged population in Yemen. The barbed wire was added to represent the limitation of freedom of the underprivileged Yemeni and the suppression that they are struggling with.

Some of these horizontal elements were cut in the 2015 timeline to show the absence of the services that these elements represent during that time. Moreover, these horizontal elements reappeared by 2016, but not fully connected as the services are still limited until today.

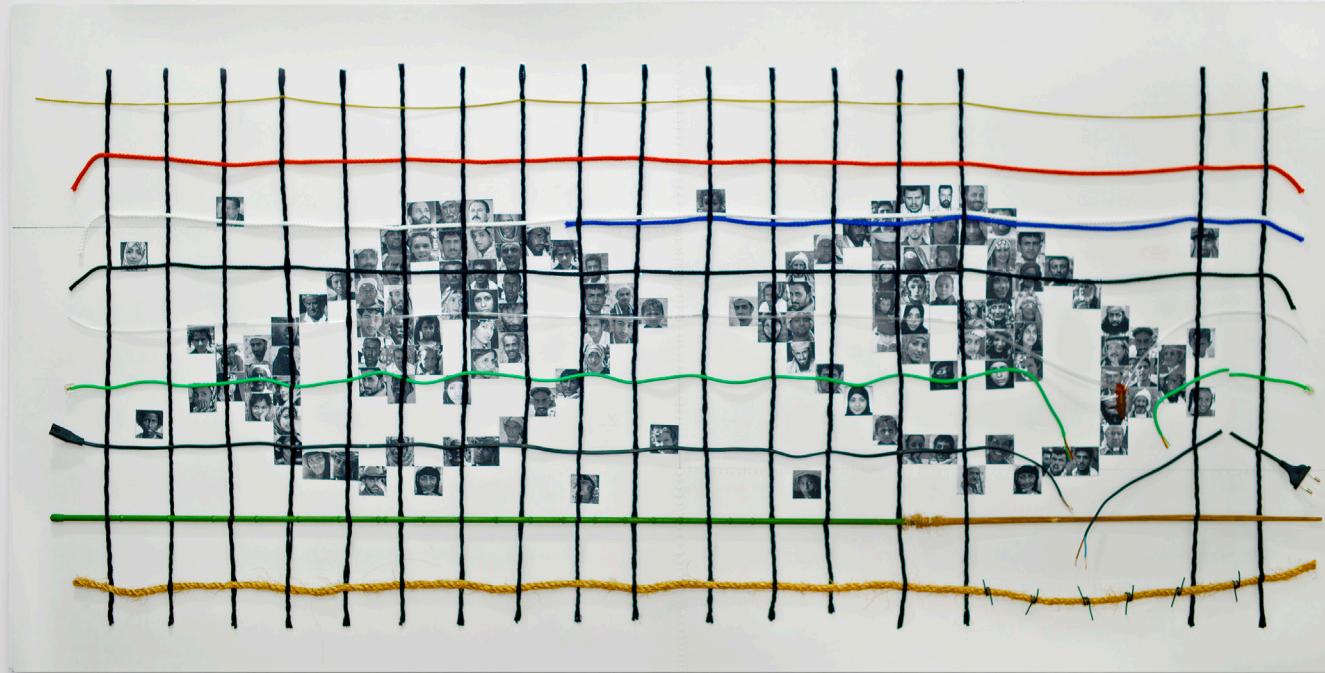
3.2 The Presentation and target

This artwork will be presented for public viewing at the third-floor hallway of KDU University College at Utropolis Glenmarie- Shah Alam, Malaysia. Therefore, the first target of this artwork will be all students and academic staff of KDU Campus who are interested in art and design. Secondly, this artwork will be published later on out of KDU campus, in social media, news websites, and other media art platforms, where this artwork will find its wide target from those people who care about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and hopefully can seek for aid and support especially from powerful individuals who can aid with the crisis.

3.3 Conclusion:

The war in Yemen is a forgotten one. Unlike other countries like Syria and Iraq, the crisis in Yemen is not being broadcast worldwide, hence receiving less aid from humanitarian agencies. Moreover, very few people are aware of the exponential increase in civilian casualties, and decrease of sources for cultural heritage that the country is experiencing. Therefore, this paper and the art display is a bridge to inform the public about my country and my people's current state and the help that they need.

In Addition, art, aside from writing or speaking is one of the mediums to communicate information, ideas, and feelings in a nontraditional way, and is usually open-ended. This means that what I feel about the artwork might be different from what other people may feel when they see the same artwork. Hence, choosing and applying the correct art movement(s) for the desired artwork serves as a guideline for the artist to properly convey his messages to the public and to make sure that they receive the right one.



THE SPIRIT OF YEMEN

YEMEN SUFFER IN SILENCE. Damages to rich cultural heritages and civilian casualties receive far less attention from the international media. Moreover, the war in Yemen is a FORGOTTEN WAR. Not everyone is aware of the crisis the people of Yemen are currently facing. Therefore, this artwork is a way to convey the impacts of war in Yemen from the artist's personal perspective.

This artwork is composed of two layers. The first layer, which is the shape of eyes is used as a symbol which relates to the spirit that is often called the mirror of the soul that visibly shows happiness, sadness, or being exhausted. Many photos of people in Yemen are shown in these eye shapes. More importantly, the photos of children represents the 10 million of them who were affected by the war.

Moreover, the philosophy used in the 1st layer is Hadramism, with the concept of translating the natural physical structure shape into geometrical shape divided into squares.

The second layer where all the materials were organized to symbolise a piece of fabric to represent unity and the harmony in a certain society. It was inspired from the Futa, the traditional Yemeni fabric. Moreover, the elements provide some national issues. First, the huge gap between the elite and the less privileged Yemeni. The elite were represented by the golden chain above the Yemeni flag which shows that some elite are above the country's law. Others are at the very bottom that were represented by a cheap rope. Second, the three yarns represent the flag of Yemen, where the unity of the country is at risk since the calling of Separation in 2007 started by the south people. Third, other issues such as lack of electricity, internet, and health care services, and damages to the agriculture sector.

Figure 16. Final Artwork, "The Spirit of Yemen" 90 x 200 cm.

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