

ZAÏRA POURIER — RESONANCE IN DISPLACEMENT: UNEARTHING THE SOUL OF DIASPORIC ARTEFACTS

What was the starting point for your research project?

The research project emerged from a personal quest to understand the profound connections between my Caribbean heritage and the objects that surround us in our daily lives. Growing up in a diasporic context, I often found myself pondering the stories embedded in seemingly mundane items, wondering about their histories and the meanings they held for those who interacted with them. This curiosity became the impetus for my exploration into the material conditions that relate to home, diasporic existence, and displacement.

In the initial stages, I came across many abandoned objects treated with various craft methodologies that instilled distinct material characteristics. It became evident that these objects had traversed continents from Africa and the Caribbean, no longer found a place in households, and were, in a sense, homeless. I started to source objects from thrift stores, waste points, and an online marketplace, while delving deeper into collecting—salvaging as much as possible and learning about their role in “society”.

What has been your approach for the fellowship research project and how does it relate to the role of research in your practice?

The fellowship research project has involved a combination of collecting, learning, and engaging with the artefacts based on their materiality and craftsmanship. This aligns with the core principles of my practice, where research forms a foundational element. Through collecting, I aimed to unearth artefacts that resonated with diasporic experiences, revealing nuanced narratives within their materiality. This process required an in-depth examination of their physical composition, and though that, a delving into of their cultural and historical contexts. At the core of my artistic practice lies

We are the echoes of history, a collection of displaced artefacts from the African and Caribbean diaspora. Drums adorned with the vivid pigments of ancestral dances, chairs bearing engravings steeped in the weight of centuries, and baskets woven with the artistry of calligraphy—all once integral to our homelands, now resting in western homes.

In this dedicated journey, led by our custodian, Zaïra Florance Pourier, who has diligently curated these objects from various sources, we unveil the stories etched into each grain of wood and thread of fabric, exploring the soft language of craftsmanship and the resonance of diaspora. This endeavor captures not only objects but the sonorous echoes of history, melodies, and conversations traversing continents, weaving a tapestry of memory, and offering a deeper resonance, an intimate connection to our origins.

*Resonance in Displacement* seeks to emphasize the enduring significance of these artefacts, harmonizing in the space between displacement and belonging.



About the Image

The calabash is nestled within a box, gently cushioned by newspapers, just as it was received from shipment. On one side of the calabash, an article with a picture of Bob Marley is visible, symbolizing the messenger of peace and the

a fundamental principle: the exploration of abandoned items and spaces as profound sources of inspiration and meaning. I am drawn to these relics of human existence, for they bear the traces of lives lived, stories told, and emotions felt. Each abandoned object or space carries with it a silent narrative, a testament to the passage of time, and the inevitable cycles of creation and dissolution. Whether it be a forgotten artefact or an abandoned building, I am captivated by the layers of history and significance embedded within. To me, these abandoned remnants represent more than just physical objects or spaces; they are tangible connections to the past, offering glimpses into the complexities of human existence. By engaging with these abandoned elements, I seek to breathe new life into forgotten stories, inviting viewers to reconsider their perceptions of value, ownership, and legacy.

Instead of immediately extracting resources, I chose to honor their embedded knowledge.

This began with meticulous documentation, shedding light on their existence and gathering extensive information about their origins and histories. This approach refrained from premature creation, recognizing the richness and depth within the artefacts themselves.

This methodological shift played a crucial role in my research practice, prioritizing learning and understanding over immediate creation. Immersing myself in the artefacts' history and essence deepened my connection to the material, enhancing the authenticity and resonance of my investigation. After living with the collected objects for a period of time, it felt almost dishonest to create new objects with the knowledge I had obtained; it seemed as if it would betray the wealth of knowledge already present in the objects. This hesitation led me to focus on documenting their existence and gathering as much information as possible. This underscored the importance of learning about their history beforehand.

You firmly established the core of your research as an exploration of the material conditions at the junction of home, diasporic existence, and displacement, considering ancestral artefacts as complex carriers of these notions. You proposed a combined methodology of collecting objects, learning from their material makeup, and applying those acquired observations to

connection to Zion Africa. The calabash's head is covered with a cardboard cracker box labeled "Hollandia," referencing the Netherlands, the country from which these objects were collected. This juxtaposition speaks to Marley's profound connections to the Caribbean and Africa, where his music served as a beacon of cultural pride and activism. As a symbol of the diaspora's resilience, Marley's image resonates deeply with the artefact's narrative. Additionally, the presence of the "Hollandia" cardboard box covering the calabash's head evokes reflections on the Netherlands' colonial legacy and its enduring impact on diasporic communities. Through this image, the complexities of diasporic material culture are brought to the forefront, inviting viewers to consider the intertwined histories of migration, displacement, and cultural exchange within a global context. This image encapsulates the complex layers of meaning embedded within the artefacts and their journey of displacement, serving as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of cultures and the narratives woven into everyday objects. As we contemplate the future of these artefacts and their potential exposure to the outside world, this image prompts reflection on the ethical considerations and responsibilities inherent in sharing diasporic material culture with broader audiences.

The image selected for this publication is one of over 33 objects collected during this research journey.

an experimental set of prototypes through making and crafting. Can you explain how your methodology has changed throughout the past year as well as how it informed your research?

Over the past year, my methodology for this research project has undergone a substantial transformation. Previously, my practice primarily revolved around collecting objects based on their aesthetic appeal. However, for this endeavor, I shifted toward a more profound focus on objects with deep-seated historical and ancestral significance. These items were originally integral to households in the Caribbean and African regions, intricately woven into rituals, traditions, and the rhythms of daily life—serving as vessels of nurture and care. Their narrative took an unexpected turn when they found themselves displaced in western European households, where they assumed an entirely different meaning and function. Here, they often stood as prized possessions, adorning interiors and transitioning from utilitarian functionality to a state of stasis. The process of collecting was primarily facilitated through an online marketplace, chosen intentionally for the direct access it granted me to the owners of these objects. This approach, in contrast to acquiring them from auction sites or antique- and second-hand shops, allowed for a more intimate engagement with the stories and histories embedded within the voyage of each item. I pursued the possibility of obtaining the objects as gifts or donations, yet this proposition was never realized. From there, I engaged in deliberate and measured negotiations over the sale price—not to undervalue the objects, but rather to address my discomfort with the idea of reacquiring them at an overpriced cost from western households.

Throughout this process, I invested extensive time engaging in dialogues with the owners, occasionally conducting additional research to ascertain the prevailing market values of similar objects. It became apparent that some sellers were profiting from these objects, often without a comprehensive understanding of their traditional use or symbolic importance—an observation that I found pertinent to this study. Several of the items had been passed down from parents—grandparents who served as missionaries, and were offered the objects as gifts upon their return to their homeland.

In essence, this shift in methodology not only deepened the personal core of my investigation but also enriched the broader discourse surrounding diasporic material culture. It illuminated the profound significance embedded within the act of crafting these objects and shed light on the complexities of ownership, value, and the treatment of cultural artefacts in our globalized world.

Could you explain how this methodological approach allows the deeply personal core of your investigation to engage with and reach broader discourse in the arts and design as well as the communities implicated in your research?

This experience yielded fresh insights, highlighting not only the displacement of the objects themselves, but also the inherent displacement of the materials from which they were crafted—materials ranging from clay and wood to textiles, seeds, shells, silver jewelry, and glass beads. It underscored the profound significance embedded within the act of crafting these objects. Much like the ongoing discussions surrounding the repatriation of artefacts held in western museums, my research indicated a similar, albeit on a different scale, dynamic at play as everyday individuals—tourists, travelers—carry objects across borders. Consequently, I approached my findings with the same gravity, aiming to foster an awareness of how we engage with our fascinations, notions of ownership, and the treatment of the objects we hold within our households. This methodological approach not only deepens the personal core of my investigation but also allows it to resonate within broader discourses in the arts and design, as well as in the communities implicated in my research.

At the heart of your investigations, you seem to have a fascination with materials. However, direct engagement with the material becomes secondary in the outcomes. With this observation in mind, how should a research group at Gerrit Rietveld Academie relate to materials?

In the realm of creative exploration, materials transcend mere physicality: they embody narratives, cultural meanings, and historical contexts. They are not static entities but dynamic

vessels for storytelling and sensory experiences. A comprehensive engagement with materials necessitates

a multifaceted approach, acknowledging their capacity to shape broader narratives and meanings. At Gerrit Rietveld Academie, our research group should embrace materials as more than just tools of artistic expression. We should delve deep into their stories, considering their origins, production processes, and cultural significances. By exploring the experiential dimensions of materials, we tap into their ability to evoke emotions and engage the senses, enriching our creative endeavors. Moreover, our engagement with materials should extend beyond disciplinary boundaries, fostering collaboration and exchange across diverse fields. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, we can uncover new insights into the intersectionality of materials and their influences on human experiences and societal dynamics.

Ethical considerations must also underpin our engagement with materials. We must reflect on the ethical implications of our sourcing, production methods, and disposal practices, ensuring that our creative endeavors are environmentally sustainable, socially responsible, and culturally sensitive. Personal introspection is paramount in our relationship with materials. We must critically examine our motivations, values, and intentions, cultivating a reflective practice that guides our creative journey. This introspective process compels us to consider the significance of our relationship with materials and how we handle them, fostering responsible stewardship and ethical decision-making. Ultimately, our approach to materials should be adaptive and responsive, embracing experimentation, iteration, and improvisation. By remaining open to new possibilities and perspectives, we can push the boundaries of creative expression and contribute meaningfully to the discourse on materiality.