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The Art of Confined Spaces

What artists trapped inside might learn from Iraqi notebooks and Lebanese comics

BY JONATHAN GUYER APRIL 17, 2020



ANTHONY DAWTON

Hanaa Malallah. 'Baghdad City: US Map.' 2007. Mixed media (ink, collage, burning, and tape on wood) 20 7/8 × 21 5/8".
Courtesy the artist and Azzawi Collection, London.

The smallest works spoke volumes at “Theater of Operations,” MoMA PS1’s monumental art exhibition on the U.S. invasions of Iraq, which closed last month. In the immense Queens satellite of the name-brand New York institution, the comparatively miniature works of Iraqi artists offered a visual diary of life under siege. Glass cases of *dafatir* (notebooks, in Arabic) were spread around the exhibition halls. Produced by several artists, notably Dia Azzawi and Kareem Risan, some of the books were burnt or ripped; others were printed with Arabic calligraphy or capped with forms figurative or abstract; some expanded while others were painted shut, or were adorned with found objects—like barbed wire.

I keep returning to these *dafatir* as I wonder what artists across the globe will create tomorrow from the discomfort of their own homes.

The *dafatir* come from the collection of Azzawi, a pioneer of Iraqi modernism, who encouraged peers to experiment with the medium as they experienced the collective trauma of U.S. violence. Iraq has a rich history of contemporary art that has rarely been showcased in American museums. Even in “Theater of Operations,” the 30 notebooks seemed a backdrop to large-scale installations like Thomas Hirschhorn’s massive gold-foiled necklace with CNN’s logo, which opened the show, or Michel Auder’s film reel *Gulf War TV War*. By comparison, *dafatir* are an “intimate space to contemplate public tragedy,” as the art historian Nada Shabout writes in the exhibition catalog. She calls them a mode of “self-preservation,” signifying the defiance that self-isolating Iraqi artists could mount while staying home to shelter from American bombs.

More from Jonathan Guyer

Today, artists worldwide are experiencing a different kind of seclusion. As the pandemic spreads, they are grappling with canceled exhibitions, events, and screenings. Still, this moment of closed public spaces presents some opportunities. For artists, the biggest test may be how to engage in the simplistic and sometimes superficial universe of social media without being beholden to it.

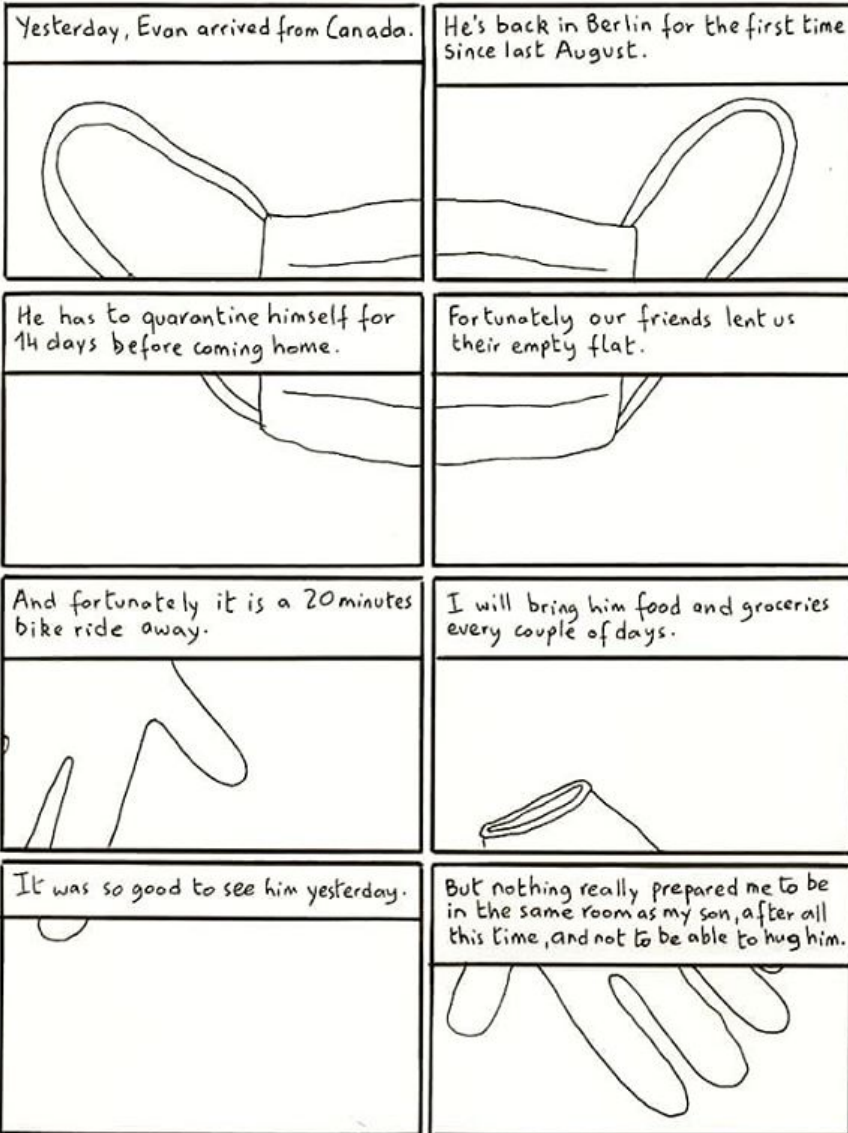
Confinement, however, can lead to personal works, and we may see a turn to journals and sketchbooks, claustrophobic time capsules of the present. At home, artists play on a smaller scale, as the critic John Yau writes in his commendation of “humble artists” who don’t depend on assistants and factories.



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Drawing is particularly well suited for this environment. The comic artist Mazen Kerbaj, for instance, endured Israel's monthlong assault on Lebanon in 2006, largely stuck indoors. He rendered these cramped days on his blog, chronicles that at the time felt remote to readers abroad. This spring, however, we are all subject to a unifying sense of self-isolation. Now living in Berlin and posting on Instagram, Kerbaj is producing a pandemic diary, capturing relatable twists and turns, like the return from Canada of his son, who having just arrived in Germany must self-quarantine for two weeks. "[N]othing really prepared me to be in the same room as my son, after all this time, and not to be able to hug him," writes Kerbaj in a recent comic. The illustration carved across the panels is not a portrait of his kid, but an empty surgical mask and gloves.

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Our dependence on technology has become a subject for illustrators, too. The Beirut-based comic artist and scholar Lina Ghaibeh has created the alter ego "Karantina Lina," who in comic strips posted to Facebook struggles with poor Wi-Fi connections and collapses into bed at 1 p.m., immediately after teaching a course on Zoom. Ghaibeh and her husband George Khoury (who works under the nom de plume JAD) drew the first Arabic comics for adults during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s, an artistic innovation in part inspired by the confines of a war-torn country. No doubt the alienation of quarantine will lead to new experiments.

But for artists, the pressure to always be *on*, and always online, may prove particularly burdensome. Perhaps the biggest downside of being an independent creator on Instagram or other social networks is competing for eyeballs with corporate design teams and promoted products. Although engineered with cool aesthetics, these digital arenas embody cutthroat capitalism at its worst. Social platforms are paradoxically dependent on artists, not just for the content that we consume for free but for their very look and feel. It's no coincidence that Snapchat filters and boldfaced text on

Instagram “stories” look strikingly similar to the work of conceptual visionaries like Jenny Holzer (who had two anti-war pieces at MoMA PS1’s “Theater of Operations”) and Barbara Kruger.

How can artists use social media without becoming social media?

As galleries and museums enter a virtual holding pattern, art-world honchos become indistinguishable from Instagram influencers. The curator [Hans Ulrich Obrist’s feed](#) offers inspirational quotes that belong on boomer Facebook.

Damien Hirst’s answers to [100 questions on Instagram](#) are pure kitsch. Jeff Koons’s [message for Italy](#)—“... such an amazing country, and as a people you’ve gone through so much”—provides what may be the lowest common denominator of concern. For ultra-wealthy practitioners like Koons and Hirst, how about establishing an emergency fund for starving artists? Celebrity artists can afford to provide macro-grants rather than the vapid videos they’re turning out, but I found no record of their actually providing assistance. This is what Roy Lichtenstein described as “a lot of style but no substance.”

Yet the shuttering of museums, galleries, and universities also presents us with a collapsing of barriers. That seminar at a blue-chip institution will now be live-streamed. That exhibition that would have cost a trans-Atlantic flight and a few nights in a European capital can now be explored virtually. That hard-to-find independent film can be streamed widely—and for free. The quarantine has exposed the hitherto suppressed fact that events can easily be telecast and made interactive. The full cinematic experience cannot be replicated, to be sure, nor can the face-to-face engagement with creators or their works. Still, it makes one wonder why much of the art world wasn’t online and accessible in the first place.

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Jonathan Guyer is managing editor of The American Prospect.

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