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Exhibition Review

(a)way station

By Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 16, 2022–June 11, 2023. Curated by Daryl McCurdy, Curatorial Associate of Architecture and Design

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Where many explorations of migration focus on the origin or destination, *(a)way station*, a work by architects Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson exhibited at SFMoMA, gave rare attention to the in-between state: people between homes, upended belongings, and experiences of transition. Rather than defining edges – as architecture often seeks to do – this show was more about the state of flux experienced between the walls than it was about the container for that experience. Inadequately designed for and considered, migration is essential to how culture happens and how people live. *(a)way station* insisted on seeing this transitional human experience, presenting a view from the inside through sliced and spliced objects, attesting to the dynamic and ephemeral markings of stopping over. By chronicling migration, Wilson and Kariouk honor these transitional times and spaces.

In a small gallery nested between the museum's buildings, the exhibition space – appropriately for this show – can feel like a stop on the path from one exhibit to another. Ten tall, rectangular, irregularly-placed, plywood box towers stood in the space, with cut-out panels revealing belongings like furniture, keys, shoes, clothing, a toilet seat, a nineties telephone (Figure 1). Some of the objects were whole, others were bisected. Some were encased in resin, others were stacked or extended beyond the wall, as though protruding like an open drawer. The scale of the towers was corporeal, the width and length of a pine box casket. But the feeling was not funereal. It was more like a record, a testament of someone very much alive and passing through. The towers and their sliced objects reminded me of the blank spaces on immigration forms; categorizing and containing, they are an imperfect fit for an actual life because they inevitably miss the whole picture. Seeing the cross section of a shoe felt as though a bit of it had been cut off or left behind in transit.

On the floor a 3 × 5 red grid was labeled 1–3 on the short side, and A–E on the long (Figure 2). Each tower was marked with a corresponding letter and number, but only C3 sat in its assigned square, implying both structure and failure to comport, a bit like our stuff (and us) when we are in transition. Playing on loop were three interviews with people who migrated to the Bay Area. (Wilson conducted these interviews in 2001, for an earlier installation of this piece at the now shuttered 3a gallery in San Francisco.) The interviewees, who were identified by name and the stops on their migratory path – for example, “Elsa Vivanco: Bogotá, Colombia; New Orleans; Lima, Peru; San Diego; San Francisco” – describe the unanticipated loss of community networks as well as the “cycles of generosity” that enable people to begin lives in new places. Together, the object towers and interviews offered a feeling of the fabric of migration.

Just outside the gallery, a small monitor played a video piece that unlocked one way to read the towers. The video begins with four rectangular room plan diagrams, equally sized and side-by-side. Symbols like tub, sink, and stove are marked with circles and rectangles. Text labels also overlay the shapes (sink, stove), with additional words standing in for personal effects (towels, tampons, photos, ashtray) and finishes (linoleum, carpet, rug). The rooms then merge into a single rectangle, and the shapes drop away leaving a chaotic map of object words – headboard, TV remote, trim, silk dress – oriented in different directions. The “n” of trashcan bumps against the “s” of plates since one orients left and the other right, a semiotic puzzle of large and small tangibles. Next, the rooms kaleidoscope up and words become dimensional, digitally rendered representations. The stack of rooms then collapses down again into a single cube. Ghostly images of objects intersect: the crib overlaps with the table, towels hang over the television in a dense layering of habitation symbols. The cube is then gridded, with letters along one side, numbers along the other, and the grid then slides apart until tall rectangular



Figure 1

Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson, (*ajway station* (installation view 1); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mabel O. Wilson and Paul Kariouk; © Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson; photo: Katherine Du Tiel.



Figure 2

Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson, (*ajway station* (installation view 2); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mabel O. Wilson and Paul Kariouk; © Paul Kariouk and Mabel O. Wilson; photo: Katherine Du Tiel.

prisms stand separately, filled with the sliced-up, mashed-together items, thus explaining the nature and makeup of the towers in the exhibit. The bisected ephemera and furniture resemble striated geological core samples, condensed evidence of human experience.

Exhibition curator Daryl McCurdy (Curatorial Associate of Architecture and Design at SFMoMA) explained in a conversation with me about the exhibit that, while some architecture collections focus on “canonical design histories, with a reliance on style and authorship, and the designers’ vision as the driving force of progress,” this piece appealed to the museum, in part, because it “flips

that, putting lived experience and social histories as the focus, recognizing that the work does not exist in a stylistic vacuum.” When Wilson and Kariouk made the work in 1999, Columbia University had just launched its paperless studio and parametricism; digital tools, and formal conversations about dematerialization dominated the architectural discourse. Their project challenges the discourse of that time by asking, what about the people? Disruption, adaptation, reliance on networks along the way: these are the stories they showcased in the installation. The personal belongings and fractured states force the focus to be on the lives inside a building, rather than the footprint of its walls.

Acquired by SFMoMA in 2004, this is the first time *(a)way station* has been exhibited at the museum. Like a life over time, the show has its own history. A QR code in the wall text led viewers to a full photo library with all of the towers (10 of the 15 were on display). Whereas most exhibits have rigid installation instructions and requirements, *(a)way station*, like a migratory person, shows up differently in each new space where it arrives. Debuting in 1999 at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York City, the towers were in a tight, roughly finished corridor, opening right onto the street. Photographed at night, it read as dark and hip. It had a hot tour, five shows in as many years. At Yale in 2000, the archive images show it at the edge of an atrium with natural light. 3a in San Francisco in 2001 photographs as a more traditional gallery, with concrete floors and high white ceilings. In LA at Zero Gallery in 2002, images show it next to tall bookshelves, a structural rhyme with the towers. At Cooper Hewitt in 2003, just before its acquisition by SFMoMA, it was included in the museum’s National Design Triennial. Like its human subjects, the piece packs up, moves, unpacks, and responds to a new environment. The only consistent rule is the red grid on the floor with a single tower taking its designated spot in the grid, referencing its packed and consolidated form.

Political conflicts, climate disasters, and other global crises have more than doubled the number of displaced people since *(a)way station* was made and, today, migration is centrally located in our discourse. But this exhibit was not about the larger geopolitical situation. Prioritizing human experience over style or vision, it did not have a didactic message beyond humanization. It was about the odyssey of individuals as witnessed through intimate, touched, known, needed, and discarded materials. By compressing, stacking, and cutting, the chopped-up nature of life on the move was made visceral. When someone is settled, it can feel natural to see displaced or transitory citizens as foreign. But *(a)way station* humanizes migration through the familiar things we all know, and the universal fact that we are all passing through.