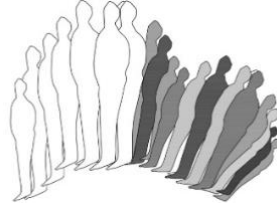


Un Regard Oblique – A Distorted Gaze – نَظْرَةٌ مُحَرِّفَةٌ

Designing Confinement



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Abstract

My thesis project is a tribute to generations of people, like myself, who grew up without a voice, crushed by psychological confinement, without the feeblest option of an unconventional identity. My intention is to explore and to tell a raw, uninhibited narrative, and to explain the traumatic anguish that is still extremely prominent in many underprivileged societies today. It's a paraphrase of human suffering and oppressive conditions.

Using my solitary artistic explorations during the Covid-19 pandemic, I will create an installation that best translates these emotions, using multimedia projections, tactile installations, and sound experimentations.

The pivoting element of this installation will be the relationship between the visitors and the spectacle of emotions. It will create an opportunity for the people to draw triggers, to interact with the physical dramatic spaces, to reflect on communal beliefs and to incite a feeling of social awareness.

Dedication

I dedicate this project to the memory of all the lives that were lost in the 4th of August 2020 blast, that rocked Beirut city and swept with it the land of my memories.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to my advisor Prof. Teresa Przybylski. Her complete support and unreserved trust in my work were fundamental in the journey that I embarked on.

None of this could have been possible without the unconditional support of my husband, Rodrigue Hammal, whose faith and encouragement gave me the strength to seek out new academic ventures.

All my work is forever rooted in the city of Beirut, the city where I grew up, discovered myself and became who I am today. My absolute love to what this city represents in its unconventional, complicated, chaotic, violent beauty.

To all the strong warrior women in my life, I stand in homage to your infinite wisdom and all the strength that you gave me. Mother, grandmother, sister, friend... I am deeply grateful to you!

Preface

“I know it is not realistic to expect all our contemporaries to change overnight the way they express themselves. But I think it is important for each of us to become aware that our words are not innocent and without consequence: they may help to perpetuate prejudices which history has shown to be perverse and deadly. For it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free.”

Amine Maalouf, *In the name of identity (Identités Meurtrières)*

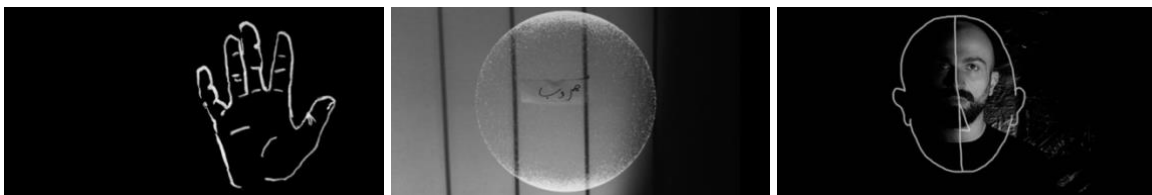


Figure 1: Exploration Video Vignette

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Introduction: Emotional Nudity

This project utilizes personal artistic expressions, in a socially conscious and progressive context. My life experiences and traumas perceived as a creative source, have been the driving force of my process. After much reflection and discussions, I decided to look inward and contemplate myself as a subject of research and examination. This work is the unrestrained expression of my artistic inclinations, guided by creative instinct. This endeavour represents the culmination of a healing journey through practice and research.

Growing up in a country that is in constant turmoil, my existence has been shaped by a sense of insecurity and a constant projection of an alternative reality. Thriving through my survival instinct, I created a set of psychological patterns that helped me navigate the oppressive nature of a society, rooted in discrimination and homophobia, especially since my sexual orientation was and still is, criminalized by law. Although this may sound bleak and devastating, I was fortunate enough to foster strength and resilience. It forged somewhat a sense of duty and obligation towards the people, that didn't have the strength to fight on their own.

Eventually, I moved to Toronto and began my academic journey at York University. The liberating environment of the school offered me the setting and mind space to reflect on what I wanted to express through my thesis project. I was ready to bare my experiences and share them through my art, with the hope of reaching a wide demographic, and to demonstrate the urgency of this social discussion.

Moving from a country where I was psychologically confined to a country where I found myself physically confined, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, I made a pivotal breakthrough. How do we translate physical and psychological confinement through design? I drew parallelisms between my past and current experiences and how they seem to blend and dissociate from my reflection. The opportunity was right to take this subject further and explore what it means to live this duality of confinement, the separation, the interaction between negative and positive, the realization of demarcation lines and barriers and the duality of perception and conflict. I attempted to free my traumas, to bear witness to their existence, to understand them and most importantly, to let them go.

After much research, exploration video creation and performance trials, the decision to take all these elements and consolidate them in an immersive installation was clear. I wanted the participants who will visit the installation, to experience an emotional transition, that tackles the many layers of confinement, through physical and psychological nuances. It's a

journey of senses and awareness. As the document unfolds, I will take you through my creative process, the methodology I implemented in my research and the different discoveries that shaped the project. Consider this as a documented process of discovery, healing and artistic creation.



Figure 2: Exploration Video Vignette

Chapter One: Methods of Creation

Coming into this project with the intention of self-discovery and personal healing, I employed an uncensored and uninhibited approach, that has been the defining guideline of my methodology. Introspecting, asking questions, creating in my studio, analyzing the work, writing, designing the installation; these were the most significant stages of my work. My explorations in the studio and the analysis of my topics were conducted simultaneously.

A multitude of questioning and interrogations, carried from defining experiences and past traumas, surfaced. After much thought and trials, I organized them in conceptual themes.

- Language

How does our language define us? How do we exist in different languages? Do we have a different personality when speaking each language? Do we have an adopted identity with a set of heritage and culture, every time we use a language? Do we use language as a mean to fit in? to blend in? How does language affect the creation of one's identity? How can multiple languages co-exist? Do they perform a power dance over the psyche of their speaker? Can speaking one language isolate and oppress its speaker? What does it symbolize? How does colonisation affect the use of different language? Is there an inherent hierarchy?

- Shadow

What is the dialogue that exists between our movement and the shadows that it creates? Can we escape our shadow? How does our body and shadow coexist so instinctively, yet always kept at bay, forgotten, unaware? How often do we look at our shadow? What happens if it's taken away? Would we feel incomplete? Broken? Or is it just a mere reflection of light? The absence of the presence? How can we create a dialogue between ourselves and our shadow? What remains when we leave?

- Perception

We are often so bombarded with an incredible amount of information, that our mind is not able to process it all. Are we processing memories or selecting them? How can we create new mechanisms that opens up our perception to new explorations? How can two conflicting feelings coexist within the same moment? How can they exist within the same human body? How much control do we have over our perception? Is it the culmination of a predesigned societal identity? How can we open our minds to new connections? How can we challenge the notion of an absolute truth or the binary construct of right and wrong?

- Society/Oppression

What happens when we challenge the standards of society? Why do we feel the need and obligation to fit a pre-designed mold? What happens when we break away from the cage of the repetitive mold? Do we still belong? How can we challenge the norm and advance progress and tolerance? What are the emotions expressed, while being confined to an assigned body and role? How do we perform and communicate our sexual identity? How can we challenge body ownership and expectations?

- Fear

What happens when we realize that safety is an illusion? Why do we fear change? Are we so comfortable in our cocoon that we forget what it means to be free? How do we express who we are? Are we afraid of being different? Why does our mind default to fear as a first response to distress? Why is there a preconceived stigma around fear? What can we learn from this human emotion? And how can we embrace it, understand it and grow through it?

- Movement

Why do we replicate the same movement of our environment? Are we constantly mirroring the dynamic of the society we live in? Is it repetition? Is it brainwash? Does it echo a sense of belonging? How can the body express continuous and/or changing emotions? How do we react to psychological barricades in our movement? Are we aware of the origin of our daily movements?

To better understand how to answer these questions and to move forward with my creative process, I needed to start experimenting with different multimedia components, while simultaneously, continuing my intellectual investigations.

Artistic Process

After much thought and reflection, I made the conscious decision to transform all my emotions and traumas into a layered artistic investigation, and to conclude my work with an installation. With Covid-19 restrictions and the ongoing confinement, I found myself alone, in my house, without any physical or social interaction, for an extended period of time. It seemed as if the whole planet stood still, and its incessant movement came to a halt. This forced physical isolation offered me the space and time to dive into the multiple layers of my project. I converted my basement studio into a multimedia workshop space, where my creative energy was free to be guided by my instinct and interests. I treated the space around me as a blank canvas, where time seemed to stretch differently. Some moments were linear and continuous,

while others became fluctuant and spontaneous. I decided to film everything that I created in the studio, from thoughts being mapped out onto walls, to the gushing emotions captured through a series of exploration videos. I made a mindful decision to use what was available to me, and I applied these self-imposed restrictions as a powerful force in my creative journey.

This process helped me to better understand my thesis' main topics. The act of observing what I created, how I portrayed the emotions, how I manipulated the progress, was both therapeutic and revelatory. Due to the ongoing pandemic, I decided that the possibility of creating the installation in a physical space will not be possible. I turned once more to my basement, and worked on creating, within the confinement of its walls, a digital representation of an installation that best encapsulates the spirit of the piece.



Figure 3: Brainstorming Wall

Multimedia Explorations

Working visually and manually (*en parallèle*) has been the primary approach to my creative process. The launching trigger was a brainstorming collage, where I mapped out thoughts and visuals on the blank canvas of a white wall. This hands-on activity came to be the founding grounds of my research. From the resulting artwork, I was able to draw phraseology and numerous emotional queues, that best represented my objectives. The recurrent words were grouped in topics and allowed me to hone my discourse. The emotions emanating from the main topics were translated into interpretational videos and then, transformed into drawings, storyboards and notes. The result would launch further investigations. Another key element in the creative process has been the use of sound, both in videos and recordings. I edited and overlaid different sound queues to enhance the emotional and physical situation. In addition, I decided to record my thoughts as they flowed, without following a guideline or a scripted topic. After taking some distance, I would listen to them again and transcribe what came out of these sessions. I chose to mix auditive and visual elements into one medium. This new creation offered an external point of reference, and allowed me to introduce an imagined audience to the performances. The camera served in its essence, as a voyeur character. It was an element of insertion that constantly monitored the subject. It often zoomed in and out into

the subconscious, offering a new point of view, a different perspective. This heightened the sense of presence and awareness in the work, and provided it with an extra boundary to push through, a boundary that is self-imposed, and self-imagined. I used a monochromatic render for most of the videos, in black and white, as a tool to highlight the imposed duality of existence and the feelings engendered from this perception. This choice offered a harsh and contrasted visual aesthetic, stripping it down to a minimal chromatic image. As a performer, I played with multiple physical and psychological elements to create a feeling of obstruction, of oppression, and to highlight a self-imposed limitation. I let the medium in hand guide and direct me. There were moments where I was scared, excited, where I felt naked, where I cried and where I ran away. The intellectual and emotional investigation was imbedded in the design, through the exploration of different visual effects. This balanced approach moved ideas forward with all the new components that were added simultaneously to the design. All the dualities below represent the core essence of this part of the project.

- Tension vs Release
- Voice vs Silence
- Confinement vs Freedom
- Oppression vs Tolerance
- Constant vs Sudden
- Distortion vs Reality
- Subservient vs Dominant
- Control vs Letting go
- Negative vs Positive
- Rigidness vs Fluidity
- Light vs Darkness
- Filtered vs Flow
- Duality vs Singularity



Figure 4: Video Collage Vignette

Materials and Consequences

After exploring different mediums during my research, I decided to investigate the potent possibilities of various materials and visual effects. In an attempt to best represent the emotions portrayed, I listed the elements that form the skeleton of the exploration.

- Light and Shadow

The conversation between shadow and light was a prominent component of my experiments. Using one or several sources of light, I discovered a dialogue between the shadow casted by the body, distorted by architectural elements and the physical self within the frame. A natural visual storytelling/choreography was initiated, breaking down the barrier between reality and fiction. It introduced an intense level of contrast in the image. Using my face and body as a field of experimentation, the demarcation lines that were drawn by the blacked-out sides vs the illuminated sides created an analogised dichotomy. The notion of perception was continuously challenged, breaking down the norm and the primitive understanding of what we are seeing and observing. It was about positioning and creating a dialogue between the constant and the fluid, the tension and the deformation. The deformed shadows created a contorted and contrived figure that is constantly with us. We might not be able to see it but it's emanating from our own physicality. The use of shadow in a deformed esthetic helped emphasize, the idea of a foreign matter that is annexed and juxtaposed onto a human matter.



Figure 5: Exploration Video Vignette – Shadow Manipulation

- Fabric

Experimenting with a piece of fabric, sown in a circle, a double-sided scarf, black on one side and grey on the other, offered the opportunity for an obstructed exploration of my body movement. I used this element to physically block senses, such as sight and mobility. I observed the emotions that surfaced and what triggers were ignited. A lot of fear and suffocation played through my body, while memories of past traumas gushed to the surface. I felt weak, overcome while the self-inflicted pain ignited memories of hopelessness and apprehension.

- Plastic

Using a dry-cleaning plastic wrap created a dialogue between transparency and reflection. Exploiting all the possibilities that a tubular sheet of plastic has to offer, I engaged with it as a representation of a self-imposed prison cell. This alluded to the many self-inflicted boxes and shackles we trap ourselves in, overwhelmed by the power of words and situations, especially, when we feel powerless. The magnitude of these situations is defined by our perception of reality and distorted by fear and instinctive defense mechanisms. What made this material highly interesting is its permeability to light, how it distorted everything that was wrapped in it and transformed what was behind it. It created new visual dialogues and suggestions between past ephemeral conditions of trauma and their current significance.

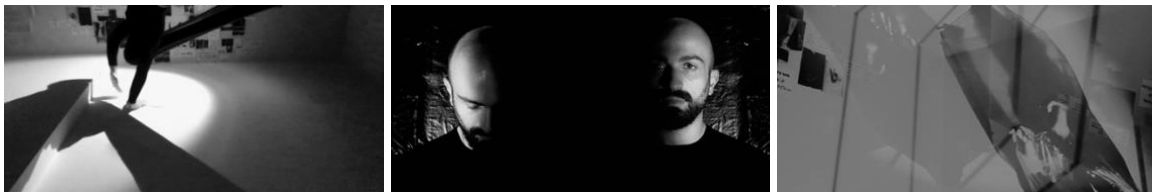


Figure 6: Exploration Video Vignette – Duality

- Words and Recitation

Coming from a trilingual heritage and using three languages on a daily basis is an intrinsic part of my identity. I am most comfortable expressing myself when I am mixing the three. I tackle the construct of language as a vocal expression of one's identity. I decided to investigate the relation between the written word, the recitation and the emotional expression of these different languages. The performance of a written word immortalizes the intellectual intention and gives it a stamp of existence. This was a very important tool that offered a transversal line of storytelling, a very prominent factor in my project. It was an affirmation of a lost voice seeking strength in its presence. Having been deprived of a voice for so long, turns one's simple act of speaking into an act of revolution and rebellion. I attempted to explore what this fusion of dialectic identities performs on the psyche. The overwhelming feeling of not belonging to either one is constant and present. A hybrid is created, floating between the three and choosing traits and attributes that best resonate with our inclinations. This implicit language confinement, performs an oppressive mind control over the speaker.

- Graphics and Visuals

Mixing juxtaposed visual elements offered a multi-layered image. Whether it was a manually-drawn visual, actual footage or the combination of the two, the editing session provided a necessary moment of reflection. The interaction between the different mediums portrayed a calibrated dosage of the intention. Sketches and primitive animations helped to achieve the objective for each video.

- Sound

Sound and its absence define our experiences. We are almost always surrounded by sound. I drew attention to silence and how we inhabit moments of prolonged stillness. This was an opportunity to create a language between the inner self and the outer extension. It offered a moment to look inward, and to examine the impenetrable boxes that we create for ourselves, that confined us, when we are looking for comfort and security. The duality of sound is a foundational antonym whether it is a monotone robotic sound, or the weight of a silent room, it always adds pressure and tension to the moment.



Figure 7: Exploration Video Vignette – Caged Speech

Links to Exploration Videos

The links below take you to a compilation of exploration videos that I conducted, in my basement/atelier, during the first lockdown due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Link to Video: [Brainstorming Wall Timelapse](#)

Link to Video One: [Confinement Video Edit One](#)

Link to Video Two: [Confinement Video Edit Two](#)

Link to Video Three: [Confinement Video Edit Three](#)

Link to Video Four: [Confinement Video Edit Four](#)

Link to Video Five: [Confinement Video Edit Five](#)

Link to Video Six: [Confinement Video Edit Six](#)

Link to Video Seven: [Confinement Video Edit Seven](#)

Link to Video Eight: [Confinement Video Edit Eight](#)

Chapter Two: The Origin

Absent-Present: The Narrative of an Antonym

In the summer of 2019, my partner and I newly settled in Toronto. Even though it was the necessary choice to make, a constant subdued longing accompanied my every movement. One can blame it on nostalgia, or on a romanticized version of a home that doesn't exist anymore. I was navigating new and uncharted territories in my psyche, trying to understand how it is possible to be present in two places at the same. Some part of me was struggling with the notion of letting go, and more importantly, with the concept of disappearing.

While working on the first design studio project, I chose two words to translate into a costume exercise: Presence-Absence. The choice of words and my ultimate design for that piece, became an important steppingstone in my current project. Not knowing that these words would later define my thesis project, I found myself instinctively playing with hollowed paper, removed from their inhabitant silhouettes. And thus, the concept and tangibility of the antonym came to be. I started questioning the fundamental aspects of our existence, and the undeniable relationship to the physical space that we occupy. What is left from our existence once we leave? Once the material world that we had built around us disappears? What happens to the web of relationships and connections that shaped our reality? What's the magnitude of our presence? What is the connection between these two words, where one cannot exist without the other, and one cannot be felt until the other has been erased?

In this first attempt, I tried to translate the idea of duality of presence and absence through pictures that showcase the antonyms together, yet separated by light, emptiness, darkness and shadows. Using large bands of paper cut-outs, made almost identical in size and length, I wrapped the silhouette with an array of beige strips, and let my instinct guide the flow of the composition. Presence was embodied through a stylized representation of an expanded aura, reaching out to embrace everyone around it.

The colour of the paper provided an opportunity for a nuanced treatment of the photographs. I used a contrasted dual light projection while enhancing the dark sections. It was a very important factor in setting the scene, for a particular feeling and emotion. Contrasting the relationship between the space and the costume in the two series of pictures fortified the allegory of the antonyms.



Figure 8: Design Project Antonym - Present

In the three photographs above, we can see the other side of the silhouette, empty, colorless in the dark. It reflects absence in that same exact moment. It's the dark side of the moon. It exists, quietly, yet nobody really sees it, which renders the concept of absence and presence related directly to one's perception. Seeing and looking are two very different things.

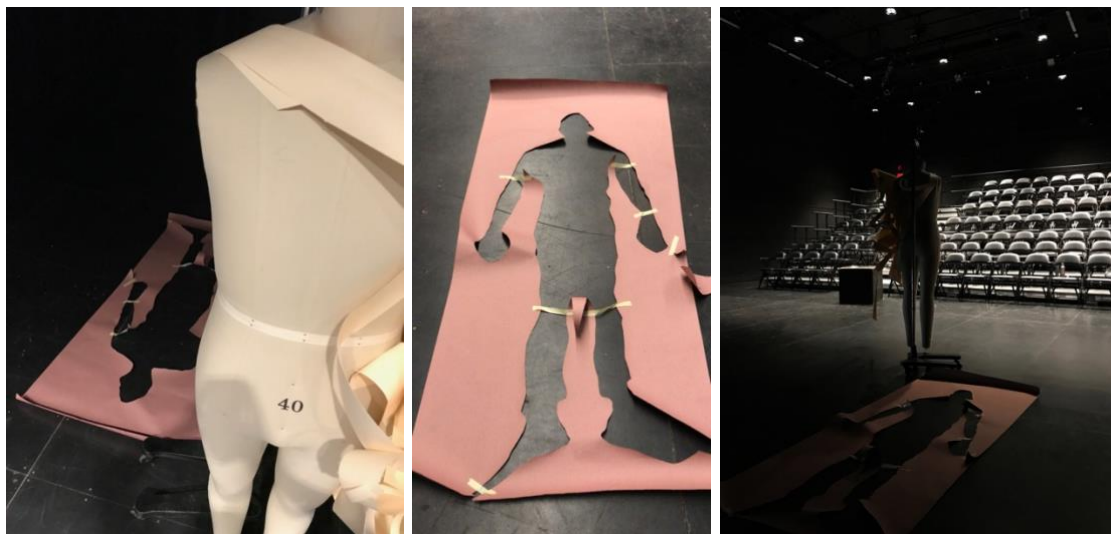


Figure 9: Design Project Antonym - Absent

The second iteration is created through the contrast of a silhouette, drawn as a shadow (my own body outline) taped to the floor, with the mannequin is in the dark, facing an empty stage. The mannequin is darkly lit, while the empty audience seats are overexposed. This is a representation of absence and raises the question of what's left from our being when we leave a space, once there is nobody left to see us, or to acknowledge our presence.

A Story of Shadows

The Costume project generated further investigation in my studio. Emerging from the previous idea of silhouette and cut-outs, came this singular shape, that has no gender, orientation nor a clear racial identity. This is «*Personnage Figuratif*». The movement of the silhouette is very refrained and obstructed, somewhat mechanical. It follows you, yet it is static. It exists in contrast and flat outlines.

Questioning and interrogations:

What is the relation between our traced silhouette and the hollow shape it leaves when removed from its paper box? Is it a manifestation of the relentless duality that exists within us? Is it a questioning of the binary concept of male and female? Are we strictly either or? Is it more fluid, more circular and less *cartésien*? Why do we have to choose? Is our gender identity born as a result of social pressure or nature's expected course? Can't we be one and the other? Does the concept of duality become more potent with the manipulation of the cut-outs? What is this schism that we live on a daily basis, between right and wrong? Yes and no? Should and shouldn't? Where is the spectrum of colours and feelings that fills the chromatic circle of life? Does it make it easier for others to relate to us? To fit us in a box? To identify us? To feel a resemblance? To feel safe? Is standing out a narcissistic cry for attention or is it an act of rebellion against the social conformative box? Are we ever free from confinements even if we transcend them? Is there mysticism in replicated synchronised movement? Does repetition equal brainwash?

After doing many replications and cutting out identical silhouettes, I started creating various compositions on my wall. Using different paper materials that were within my reach, I examined the repetition of the silhouettes taped to a harshly contrasted background. I explored the hollowness of the paper, when the silhouette was removed. The gap in the remaining map of its existence, allowed an opportunity to insert linear shapes and forms and to create an individual aesthetic.



Figure 10: Silhouette Composition Trials

Chapter Three: The Allegory of Two Cities

In Between Places-Spaces

Two years elapsed since we moved to Toronto. A perceptive understanding of our parallel conditioning in both Beirut and Toronto was formed and manifested itself in our lives. As an immigrant, you instinctively bring with you a pre-set of mechanisms and impulses that have unconsciously been built and used over the years, to guarantee your safety and sanity. These defense mechanisms placed in a different environment do not necessarily work anymore, nor do they serve their original purpose. Looking at Toronto from an emotional stand point, I found the city to be soft, quiet and peaceful. It has an embracing spirit, and I instantly felt at home. This privileged environment shelters you. Numerous patterns that were needed to survive, seemed to fade in the background. They receded simply because they were not needed anymore. There was no longer a question of life and survival. My experience from Beirut stands on the opposite end of the spectrum. The core of the city is prejudiced, passionate and contradictory, fast and unforgiving, violent, beautifully ugly, exhilarating and imprisoning at the same time. It's a constant juxtaposition of opposites, and yet Beirut has offered me the chance to be where I am today, with all the learnings and the traumas that bewildered my psyche. It is an integral part of who I am. Toronto on the other hand, is a new part of my construct that offers safety, sanity and the promise of an inclusive future. In the merging of the divergent existence, I am finding my lost voice.

The Apocalypse of Memories

On the 4th of August 2020, a cataclysmic explosion blasted the heart of Beirut. Experiencing such a traumatic event abroad left me feeling helpless and completely removed from the land, that has been a home for three decades. It shattered the permanence of the present and the past and with it, the city where I first fell in love, had my heart broken, where I first challenged the norm, decided to brave the oppression of society and to carve my own path. Months elapsed before I finally made the decision to visit Beirut. This choice was a defining turn in my work on my thesis. Having based all my previous research around my past experiences, this adventure was the obvious missing link.

Nothing prepared me for what I experienced. The first thing I did after I arrived, when it was safe to do so, was to go to my atelier. It is located in the heart of Beirut, facing the port, which saw the most impact from the explosion. It was completely destroyed. Rubble

everywhere on the street, shards of glass, stillness. My biggest fear was not to recognizing the place, to feel that it's not mine anymore, that it was taken away. When you create distance between the trauma of destruction and yourself, an opportunity to create a new narrative emerges. You have the choice to take control and make it your own, while halting the victimized scenario running through your head. Suddenly all the mechanisms and shields that became obsolete in Toronto came rushing back, and aggressively present.

I took one step closer.

Observing and mapping out a parallel reality between what was destroyed and what remained, I found myself taking longer and deeper breaths. There was no more glass, no more doors. The fallen rollup shutter that used to keep the place safe was a testimony in irony. It was a warm night, and the voice of a good friend trying to shield me from what lays ahead was distressfully outraging. I simply had to go inside. Moving the deformed rollup shutters and contorting my body, in order to fit between the broken glass and metal created a new ritual of performance.

Standing there, immersed by this familiar wrecked skeleton, a rush of memories flooded my mind; all the lunches and mundane discussions, creative meetings and family moments, the community we surrounded ourselves with. They were all still there. The broken mugs that I endlessly used had taken a different shape and form. It's the physicality of the container that changed, not its essence. Examining the walls and surfaces, a few fragments of glass remain on an oversized mirror separation we had designed for the space. The brutal projection of red, coming from the parking lights of a car, splashing over the gigantic carcass, created a certain beauty to the space. Some of the plummeted walls have been mended and sanded. The organic and accidental nature of the composition left an anatomical imprint on the surfaces. What once was a blank white surface, became ornate with scars and bruises as the drama/trauma left marks and pigments on the walls.

Coming out of this experience, I realized how much importance we give to the physical side of the memory in order to keep it alive. But at the same time, we realize how we are always traveling with those moments, with these people. We are always accompanied. I absorbed the violent architecture that emerged from the explosion, how in order to survive, matter morphs and distorts its physicality and embraces new forms. The silence in the midst of this experience was a pivotal factor. The space liberated from sounds and distractions created an opportunity to observe the surrounding environment and reflect on the emotions that were surfacing.

In a romanticised approach, a different treatment of what is perceived as a healthy environment emerged and challenged the notion of a welcoming milieu. Sometimes, it is necessary to go through a transition, albeit forced. Sometimes, we need an explosive shift to

take us from a place of comfort that we built, to a place where we need to be, in order to grow and to create another empowering narrative. Facing this fear is crucial, even though our instinct is telling us to run or to manifest anything that could shield us. It is an opportunity to feel the hurt, to feel the pain, to feel the struggle, and to stop masking it, to stay with it, in its discomfort and simply grow.

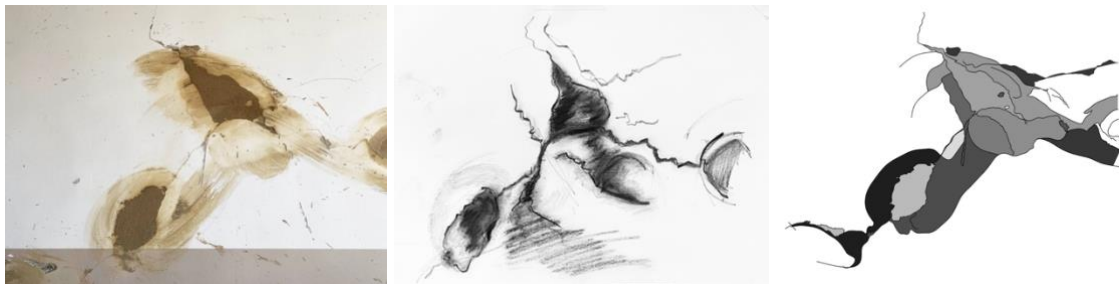


Figure 11: Compositional Scars, Wall Fragments From My Atelier in Beirut Post Explosion.

The Discovery of Tension

During the month I spent in Beirut, I walked through all the devastated streets. I witnessed the city rejuvenating its facades. I perceived the contrasted juxtaposition that is weaved in the construct of the city.

The psychological distance that I gained in Toronto, provided me with a new pair of eyes, that allowed me to observe the mechanisms of the city, from a dissociated objective. On one occasion in Beirut, I was walking in our neighborhood with a good friend; an entrepreneur that embodies the strength and resilience of Lebanese women. We were together, but we were seeing our surroundings very differently. I was shocked by the destruction that I was witnessing, trying to cope, while on the other hand, she was observing the leaps that the city made, to rise again since the explosion. She said something that stayed with me, “we have the chance to live in a city that serves life on a daily basis. You don’t have the opportunity to escape seeing this life, it is just there, in a very quick time-lapse of beautiful-ugly-life-death-construction-destruction-joy-sadness-wealth-poverty- and they are all in a two-second span.” When you live there, your mind tunes to the frequency of the city. It is not foreign. You weave yourself again into that reality. However, when you separate yourself and create both physical and psychological distance, and you go back, nothing feels quite the same anymore. All the filters and layers you’ve created to protect yourself from this vortex that is constantly engulfing you, comes rushing back. Your brain doesn’t process how quick it is. This is the moment where you redefine your concept of survival, and delineate your capability of being emotionally agile

and flexible again. The relationship between oneself and all the different annexations that superimpose on our psyche in order to fit in with society's pressure, is another manifestation of the city. I use the word "annexations" because we are constantly annexed to different personalities, some completely voluntary and some completely forced in order to blend in, disappear. For a brief moment, you tend to let it engulf you again, to become silent and voiceless. This is a pivotal moment of reflection. It stops being about escaping it, denying it or running away. It becomes an invitation to sit with it, to observe it and let the learnings sweep in. This is where the idea of tension emerged, and how we are constantly trying to escape tension. It is in the end, how we decide to coexist with it, how we create the best contortion, both physically and mentally, that lets us exist and survive. It is the different contradicting emotions that eventually help us move forward.

The Sidewalk Metaphor

Another discovery made during my trip was the rapport between perception and our readiness to perceive it. I made this simple discovery while walking through a passage/sidewalk that I had never seen before. While gazing from a new vantage point, its existence suddenly came to be. It was the change of physical positioning that allowed me to have a different perspective. This accidental incident started my reflection around perception and the concept of communal perception. Our focus is very often pulled towards what we are used to see, to what is familiar. We rarely take the risk of looking at the same situation through different lenses. The multitude of concepts/ideas/pathways are always there to investigate, but it takes a certain change of perspective to do so, in a new approach. It entails readiness to be able to welcome a different angle.

This applies to the individual as much as it does to the community as a whole. It takes a new pair of eyes to see something that was there, but we weren't ready to deal with or simply acknowledge. We were not in a capacity to see it. However, offering a new perspective, a different perception of the same space transmutes the single sided lens that we see the world through. This incident raised many questionings: How can we be more perceptive of our surrounding environment? How can we see others without the communal filters that we have in regards to strangers? How can we bridge between people, rather than feed on preconceived prejudices? How can we create a healthier community, where everyone is seen and accepted for who they are?



Figure 12: Compositional Scars, My Atelier in Beirut Post Explosion

Chapter Four: The Installation – Un Regard Oblique

Installation Dialogue

The intricate relation between a space and its occupants has always been an integral component of my reflection. The stories held by the walls are passed on through generations. They are a witness to times of past and holders of future promises. Choosing an installation format for the project was an inevitable decision. What kind of environments can I create through the designed spaces, that allows the people experiencing this journey to stop, to reflect and to think? What are they feeling? How do they relate to time? How can I create a physical journey that is completely immersive and curated around triggering the senses? The answers to the questions raised during my research process, became the main objectives for the installation.

The installation will be a voyage through moments in time, telling the story of human conditioning and resilience. Tracing the emotional chapters of a story and giving them physicality in a space, is the conduit of the installation. The different sections of the journey are designed to suggest reaction and reflection, where emotions and sensations are prompted. The fluid and interactive properties of the design allow a user–space-emotion connection. Using all the findings and key emotions that were discovered in the research process, I designed a structure that carries a reflection of their impact. Punctual audio moments, storytelling through animation and the segmented architecture of the space, accentuates the intrinsic plot of the installation. It is built to trigger the emotions of the audience, be it fear, claustrophobia, discomfort, or relief. It creates the necessary space for the participants, between reality and a distortion of this reality, to reflect on their choices, beliefs, and social responsibility. The participants have the choice of being fully immersed in the experience, going through the stages and the emotions, or taking a step back and observe others going through the chambers. It is a choice that people make in everyday life, and this is a re-iteration of that choice. You can either participate fully or go through the experience as an outside observer. No judgement is placed on either choice. They both offer very different points of view, which serves the general outlook of the project. This piece is a call for action and reaction. It is an invitation to consciously take a moment and to reflect on how the existing social structures, have been affecting our communal behavior. It offers the space where we can ask questions, examine how we are contributing to a structure, that is completely and solely based on a contorted notion of social tension.

Universal Patterns

The installation carries, at its forefront, the human experience. The dialogue between the space and its occupant is not about the quest for harmony. It is how the architecture of the space carries the complex emotions of the story. The design is not a focal point, it is merely a tool that ignites a stream of emotions. The conceptual design of the piece is to recreate a story, a journey. It allows the audience, for a moment, to experience notions that might seem foreign to their reality. The grueling veracity of being trapped, physically and psychologically, of being without a voice, of being constantly oppressed, forced to fit a mold is being imposed on the partakers. These emotional suggestions accompany them from one fragment to another, and allows them the time to reflect on their own self and beliefs. Another component in the aesthetic of the piece is the concept of contrast; highly exaggerated, sharp contrast. Throughout the installation, a constant duality of entities is present, segmenting the notions of fluidity into a harsh binary environment. It interrogates our freedom of choice. The overall space is stripped of its pantone hues and evolves in a declination of gradient greys.

Movement in Time and Sound

The sound composition will be an essential element in the cognitive journey. It will be punctuated by moments of reflection and observation, through a succession of unravelling stages in space and sound. Different sounds are curated for each of the seven chambers to support particular senses and emotions.

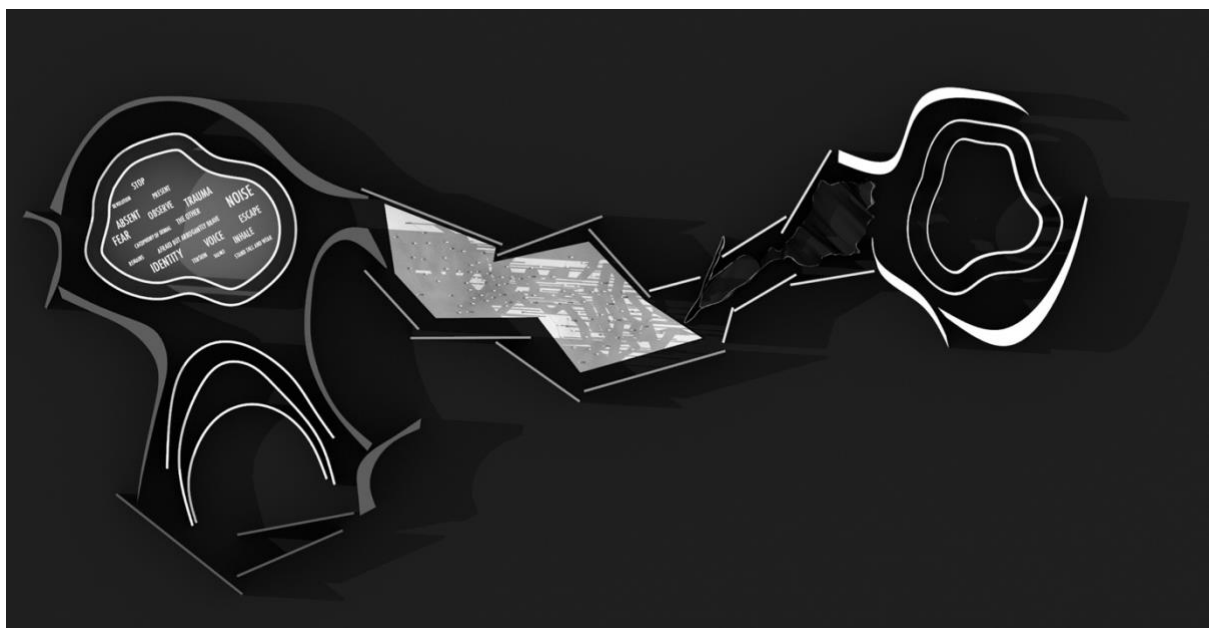


Figure 13: Installation Floor Plan



Figure 14: Color Grading Section

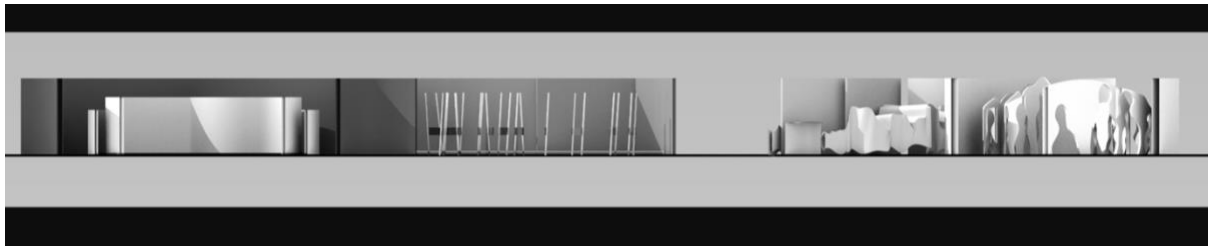


Figure 15: Rendered Section

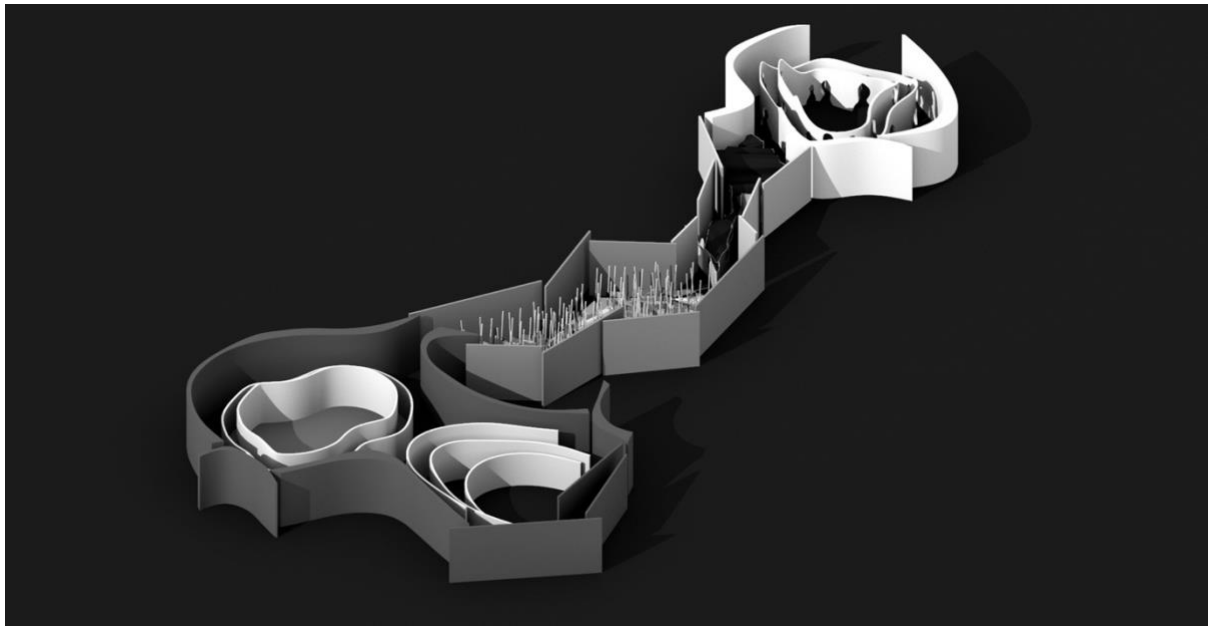


Figure 16: Axonometry

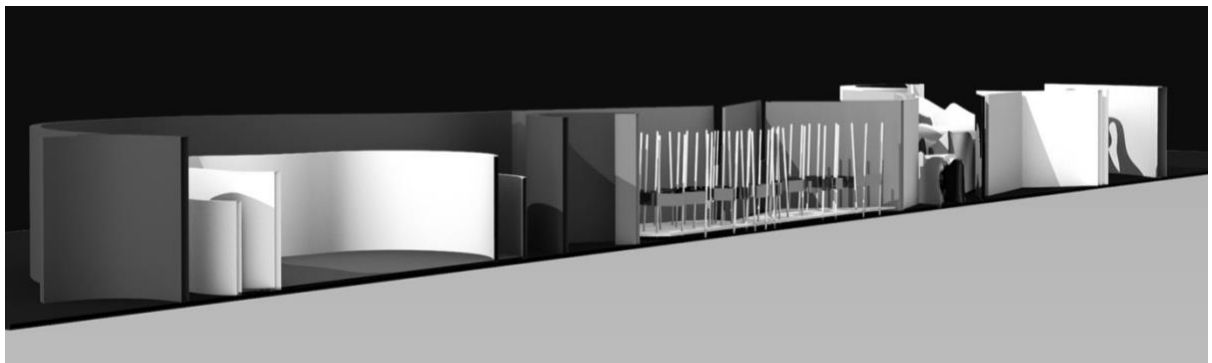


Figure 17: Axonometry Section

Chapter Five: The Chambers

Chamber One

Initiation: Awakening the Melody of Alienation

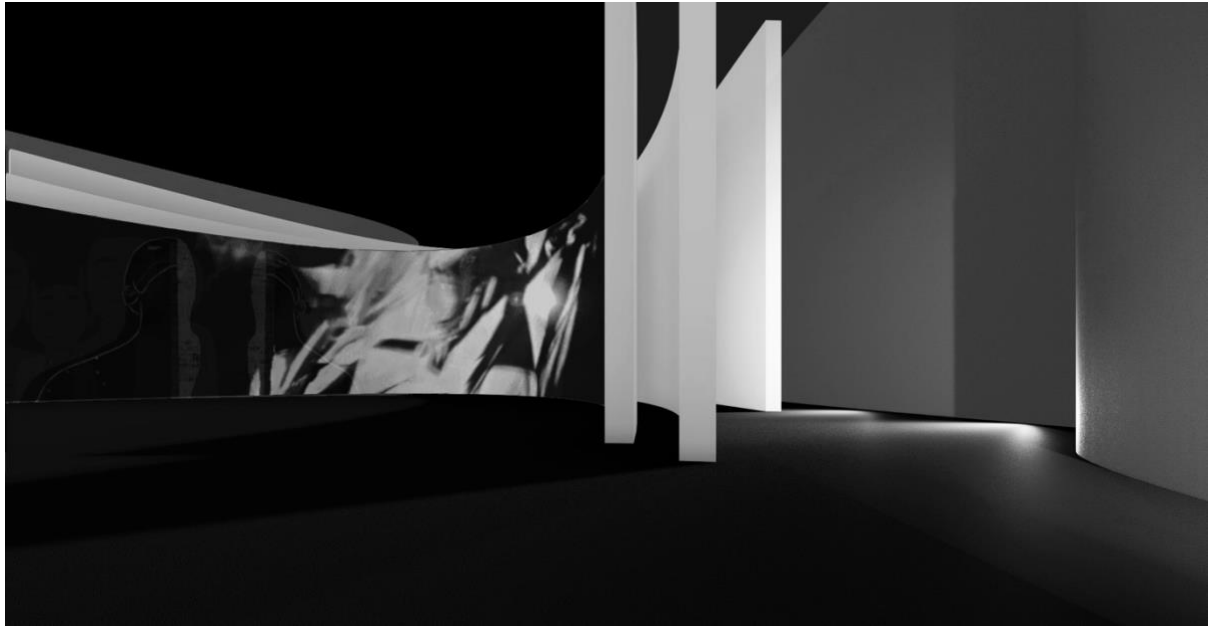


Figure 18: 3D Modelling View – Chamber One

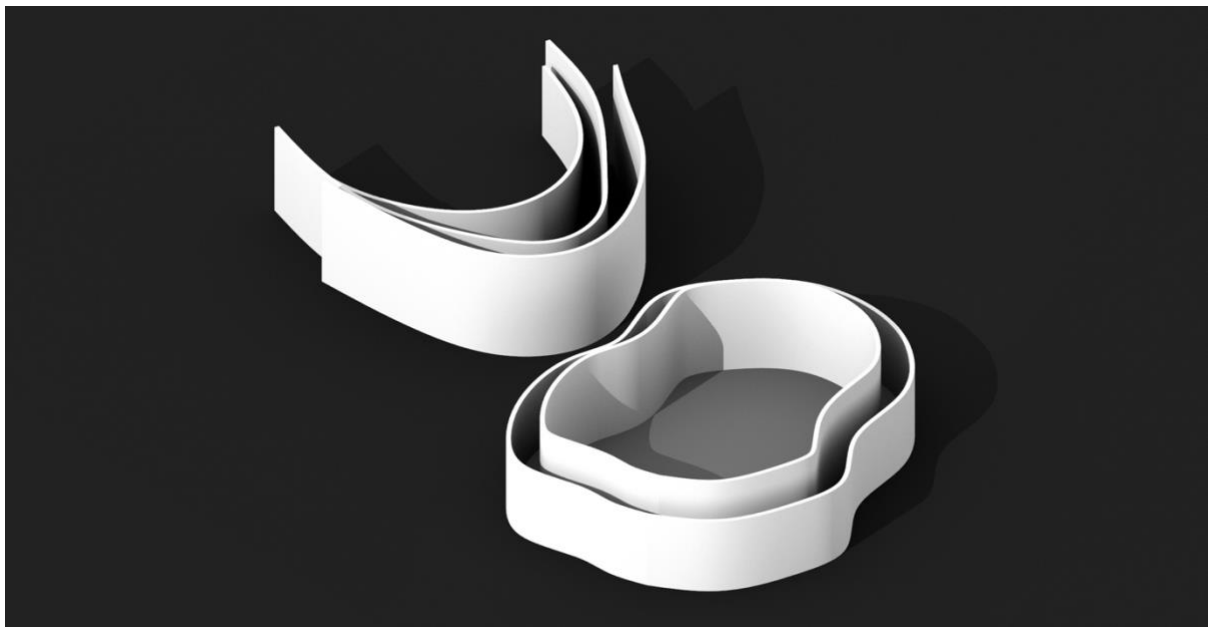


Figure 19: 3D Modelling View – Chamber One

Entering through an intimidating contrasted dark panel, trimmed by a narrow shaft in the wall, we come upon a three-layered concave screen of different heights. The first two are white and the third screen is black. Projected on the first two screens is a fragmented video

featuring a silhouette reciting a distorted, trilingual poem, mixed with abstract visuals and graphics. It gives way to a multi-lingual discourse, that is warped and fragmented. It is an incoherent recitation of a deconstructed story, magnified with sound bends. An unrecognisable sound is heightening at punctuated moments, by a somewhat mechanical echo. The scene is very still and contemplative. It is quiet. The feeling of loneliness is exaggerated through long moments of silence. There is a certain resonance in the atmosphere. A sense of estrangement is felt throughout the entrance. The dramatized scale of the hall insinuates a sense of alienation and separation.

This is an invitation for the spectators to embark on the journey of the unknown. Hugging the sides of the screens are elongated organic membranes, offering both an opening and a barricade. The audience has the choice to go on either sides of the screens and proceed to the following chamber.

Chamber Two

Transition Paths: The Illusion of Choice

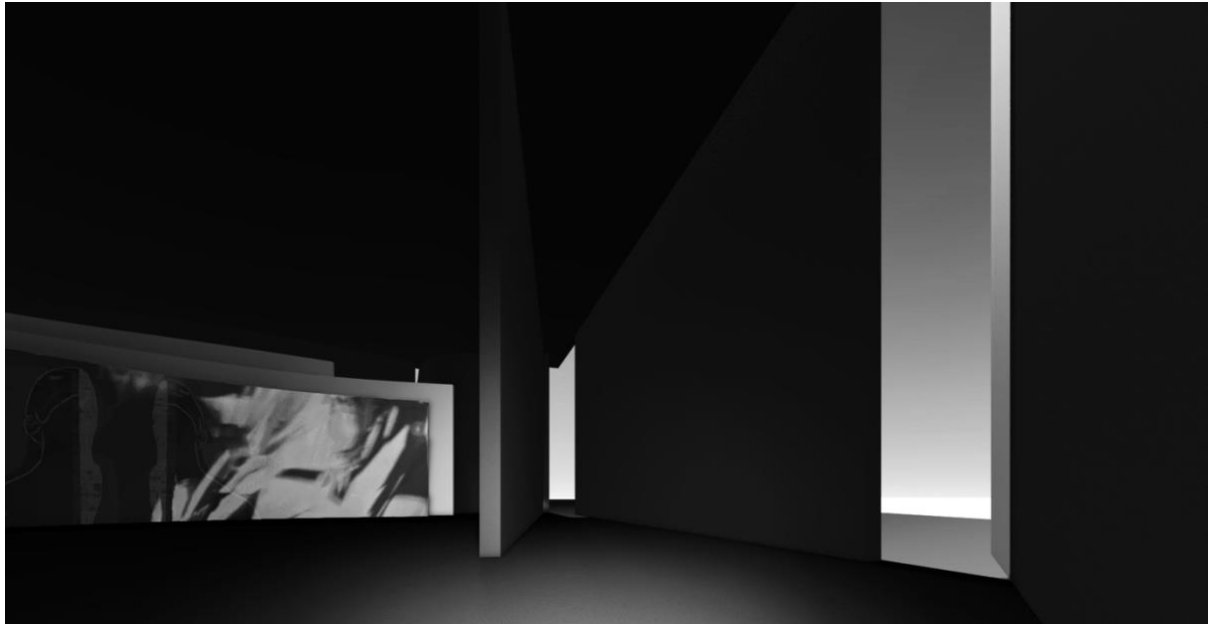


Figure 20: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Two

Throughout the layout of the installation, we discover a mix of intertwined pathways that accompany the people from one experience to the next. A graduated grey colour paints the walls. The corridors are narrow and emotionally high. It amplifies the tension of the space, and raises the sense of apprehension and expectation. They offer moments of silence, reflection and allow the necessary space for recollection. They are an invitation for the people experiencing this installation, to reflect on what they witnessed.

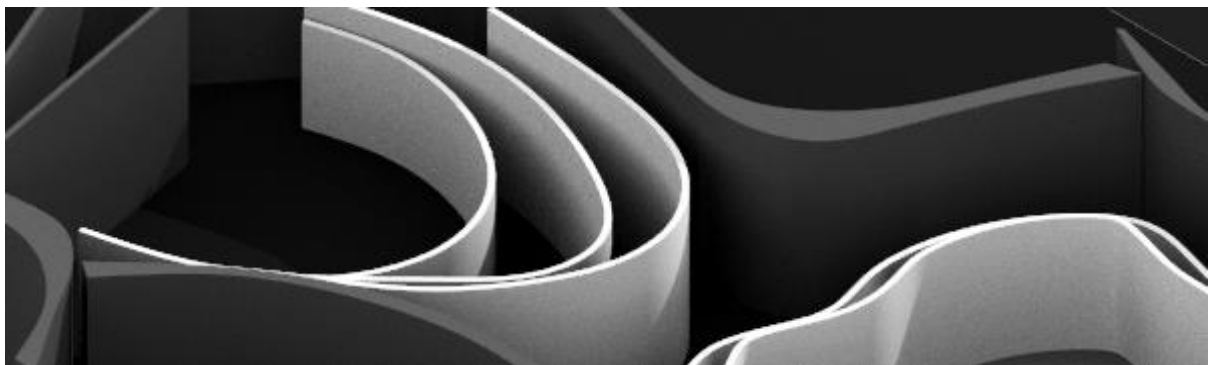


Figure 21: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Two

Chamber Three

Distortion: The Hall of Shapes



Figure 22: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Three

A series of projectors placed on the ground, intercepts the circulation trajectory. It is a moment to readjust the point of interest. People discover on the concave wall a distorted version of their own cast shadow, blended with pre-designed and manipulated silhouettes. The physical act of turning and discovering a part of us that is often forgotten (our shadow) ignites this physical discovery. Our shadow is always there, and yet we barely see it or observe it. This is a moment of reconnection with a vital part of our physicality, that is in constant dialogue with light and its momentary absence. It is a metaphor that represents all our past traumas, that are still with us, enlarged, distorted, and yet never really perceived. A growing humming alternates with the silences and is intercepted with the resonance of a magnified single decibel, bell ring.



Figure 23: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Three

Chamber Four

Perception: The Circle of Life

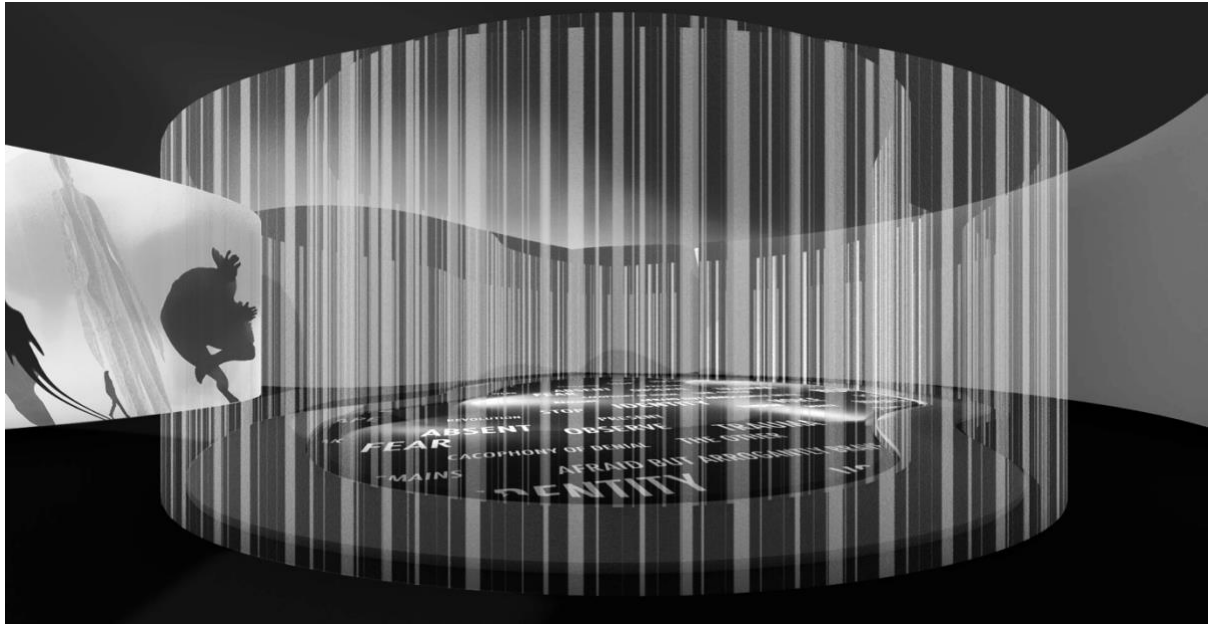


Figure 24: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Four

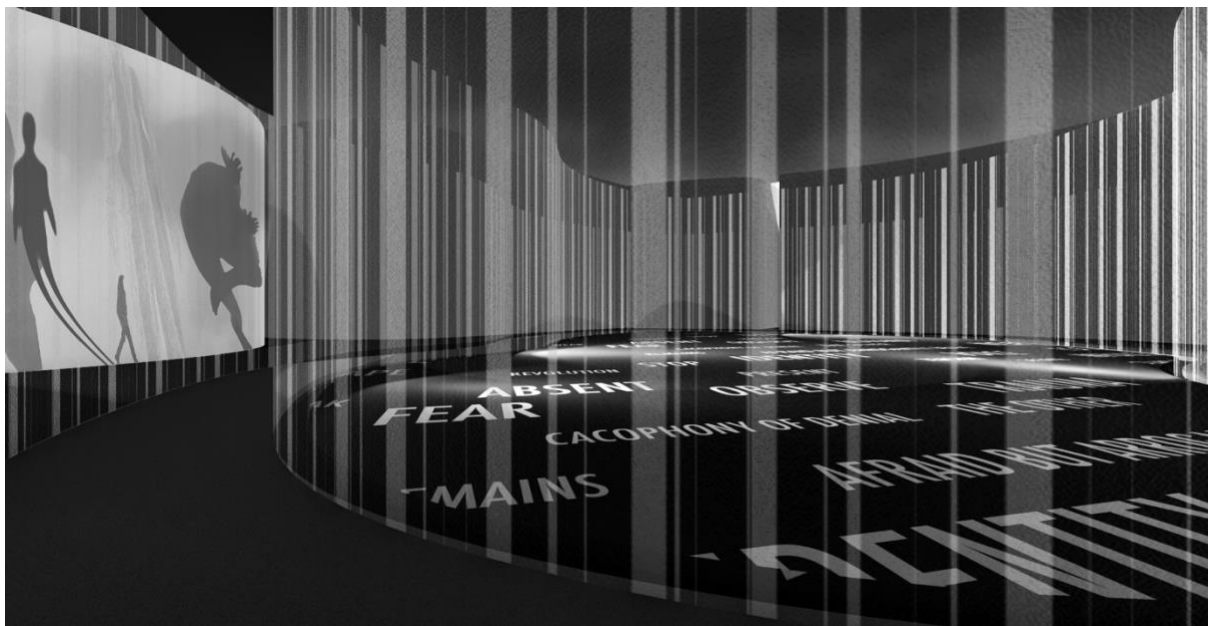


Figure 25: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Four

As people move forward in their walk, they come upon a rhythmic blur of silhouettes navigating inside an organic structure. Layers of thick translucent plastic sheets, come together to form this cellular symbiosis. This is a moment to witness the sequence of undetermined movement. People seem to be stripped from their uniqueness and merge together, in a sea of nameless existence. Light stripes that elevate this cocoon from the surrounding environment, are superimposed between the layered sheets. It almost looks ephemeral, caught in an

impromptu flight. Once inside the plastic sphere, we discover big bold words, disintegrated on the floor. It is a visual continuation of the recitation we heard at the beginning of the piece. Some words are bigger, some are highlighted, while others fade and disappear. This is a moment to change our point of view and observe an alternative reality. Some participants might lie down, some might sit, or simply pass through it. It is up to the audience to choose how to interact with the space and the words on the ground. Sharp shushing sounds in different pitches, blending female and male voices in a robotic manner, echo inside the sphere. It is an amalgamation of vocal oppression that is hostile and threatening.

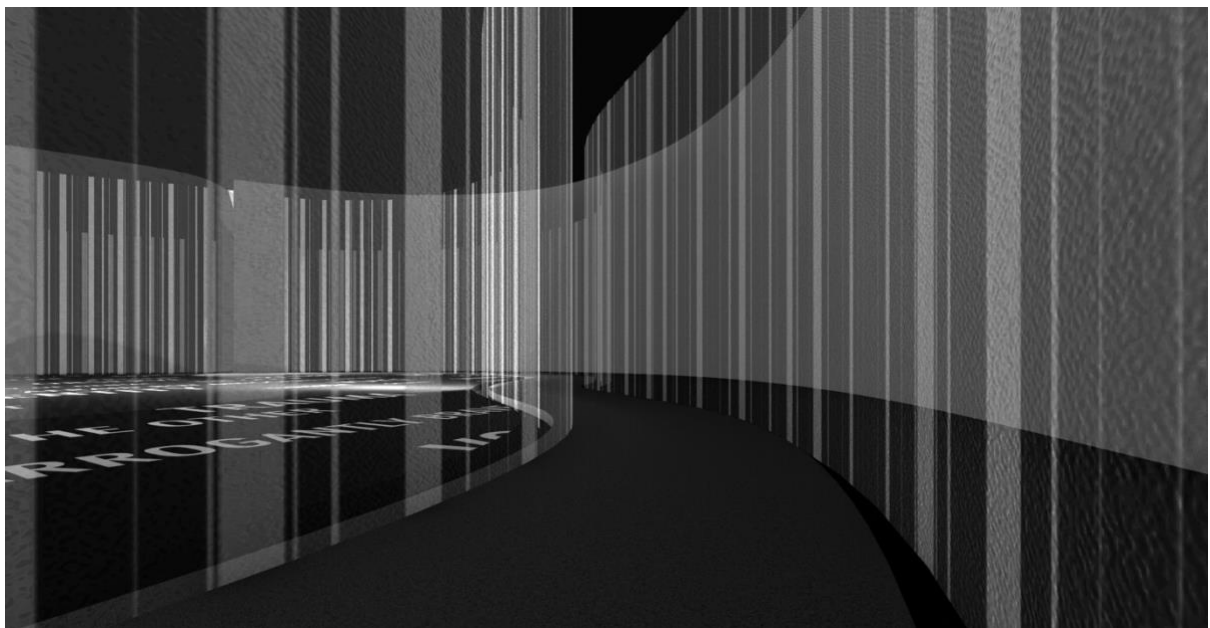


Figure 26: Un Regard Oblique, 3D Modelling View

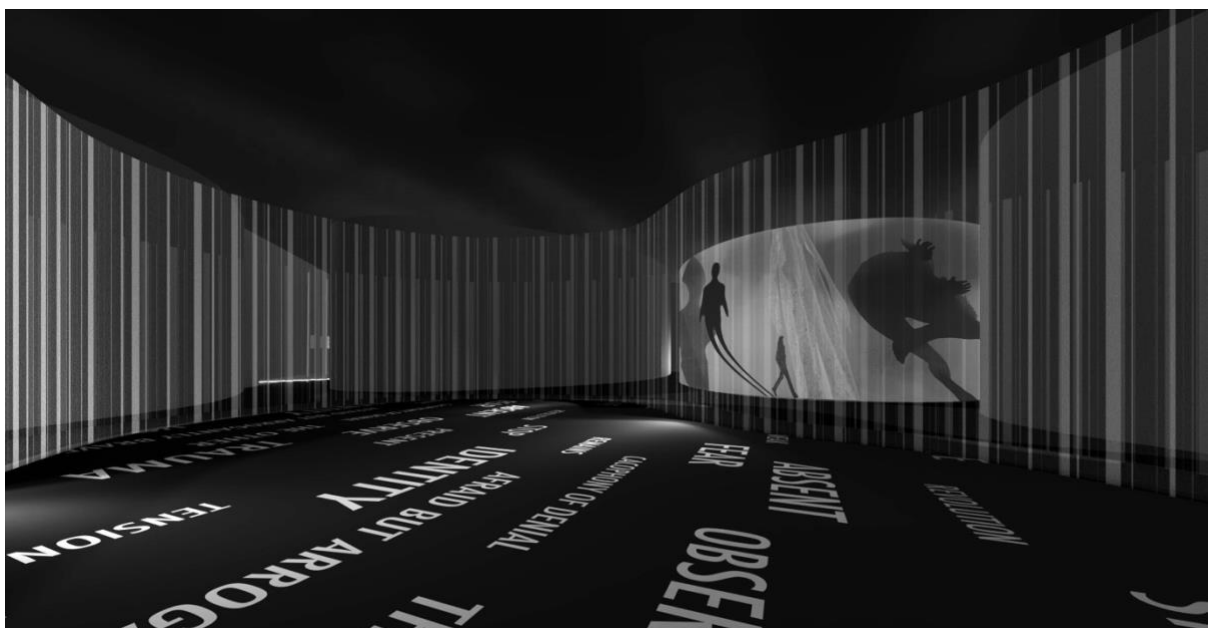


Figure 27: Un Regard Oblique, 3D Modelling View

Chamber Five

Compass: Identity Maze

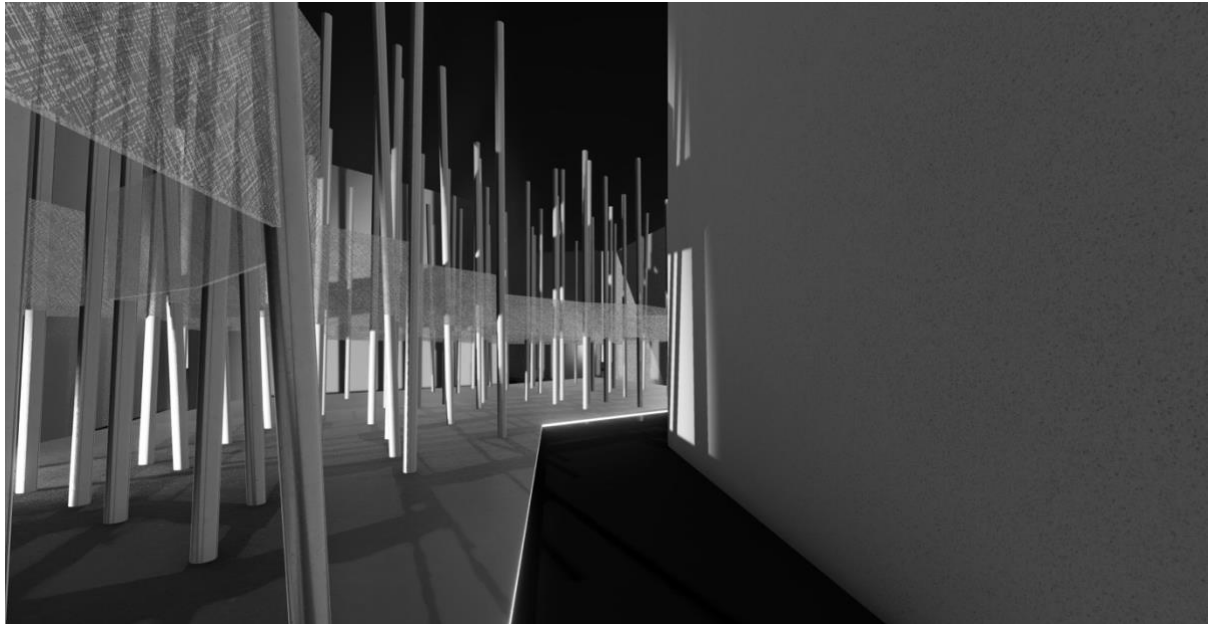


Figure 28: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Five

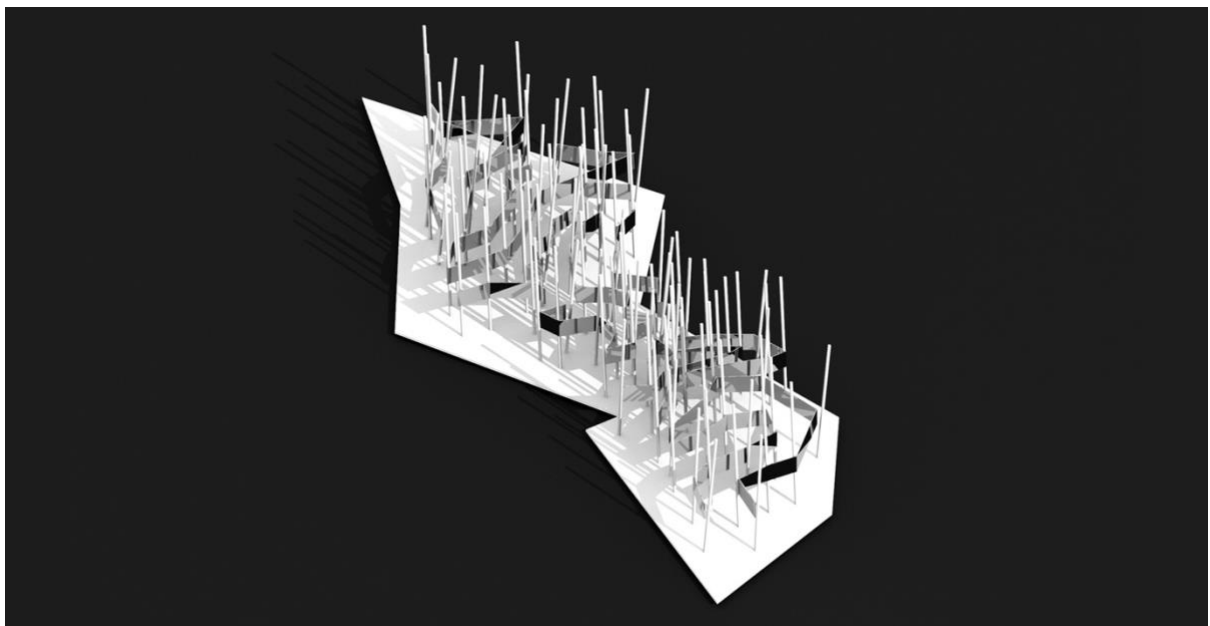


Figure 29: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Five

A metallic layer floats in the space, supported by oscillating metallic springs. The surface is in constant movement. It is subtle yet very unsettling. The motion of the platform is accentuated by the high-pitched sound, generated by the footsteps. It creates a unique melody, that is different for each participant. It offers rhythmic company, on this solitary journey. The metallic island is pierced with steel rods, in fluctuating inclinations and positions. A metallic mesh comes and hugs the rods around the eye level of the audience. The space becomes an array of cut-outs, walking, finding their way, in the midst of high-pitched footsteps. You cannot

get lost in the labyrinth, that is not the point. It insinuates the removal of one's freedom to make their own choices and decisions, and groups the participants together in the solitary illusion of finding their way. The metal treatment is somewhat reflective, and gives the people walking through the maze, a distorted glimpse of themselves, through the successive and repetitive forms. We find alongside the island a narrow passage, a window of opportunity. It is the participants choice to either go through the maze or walk next to it. This choice gives the audience the necessary space, to create distance between the experience and their awareness.

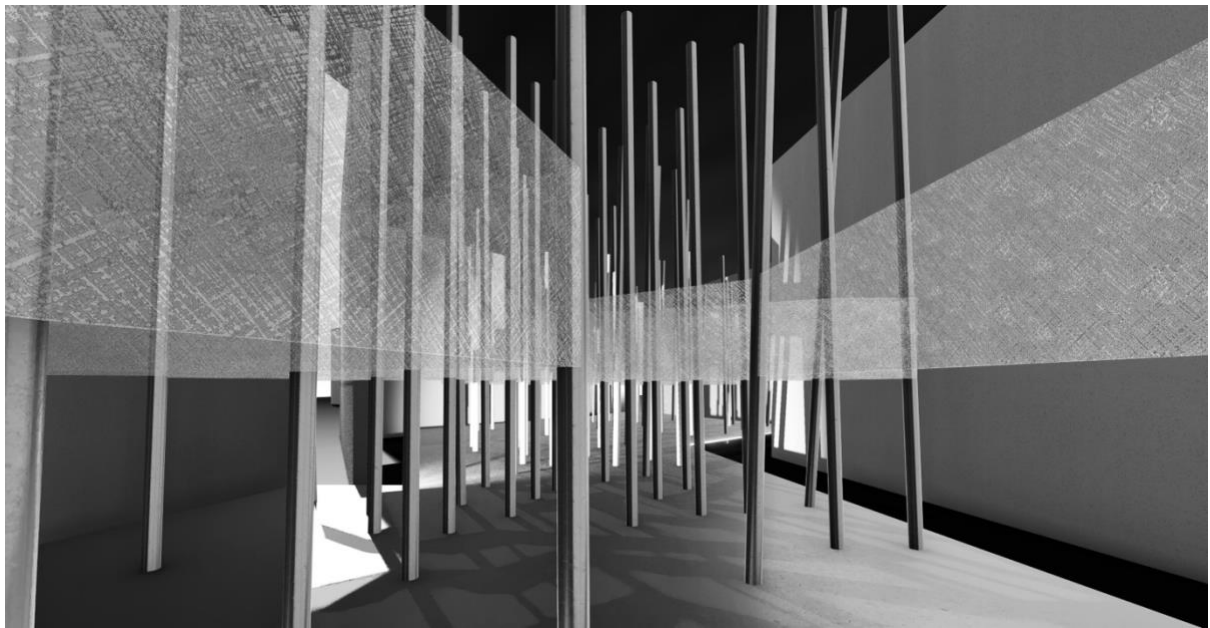


Figure 30: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Five

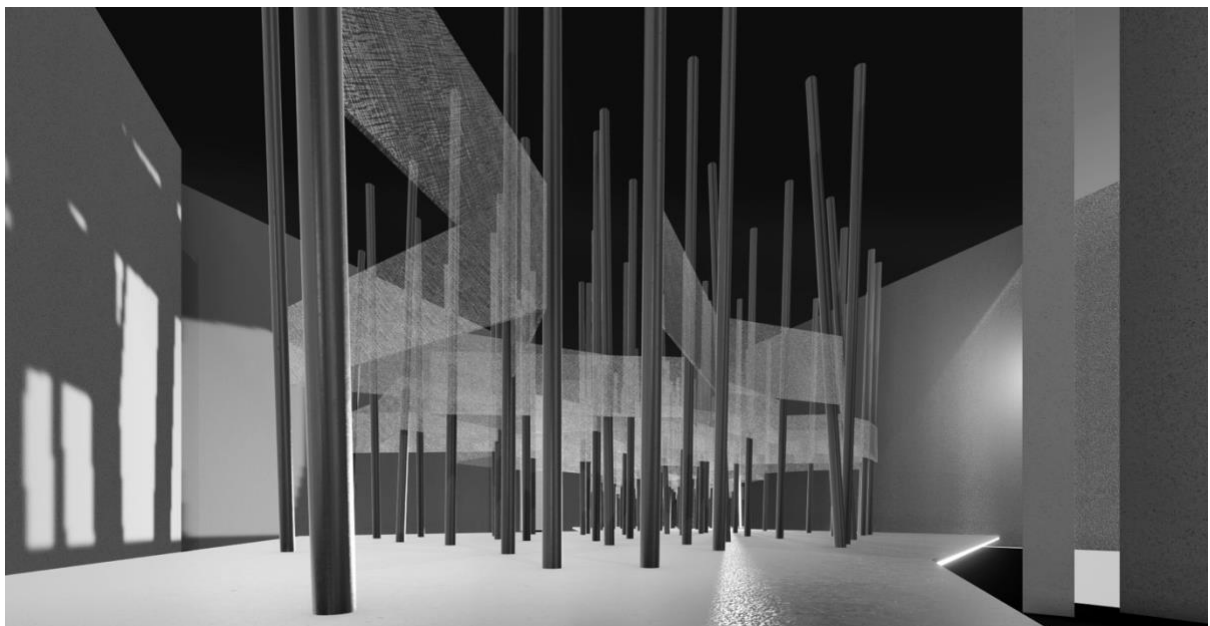


Figure 31: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Five

Chamber Six

Expression: Physical Contortion

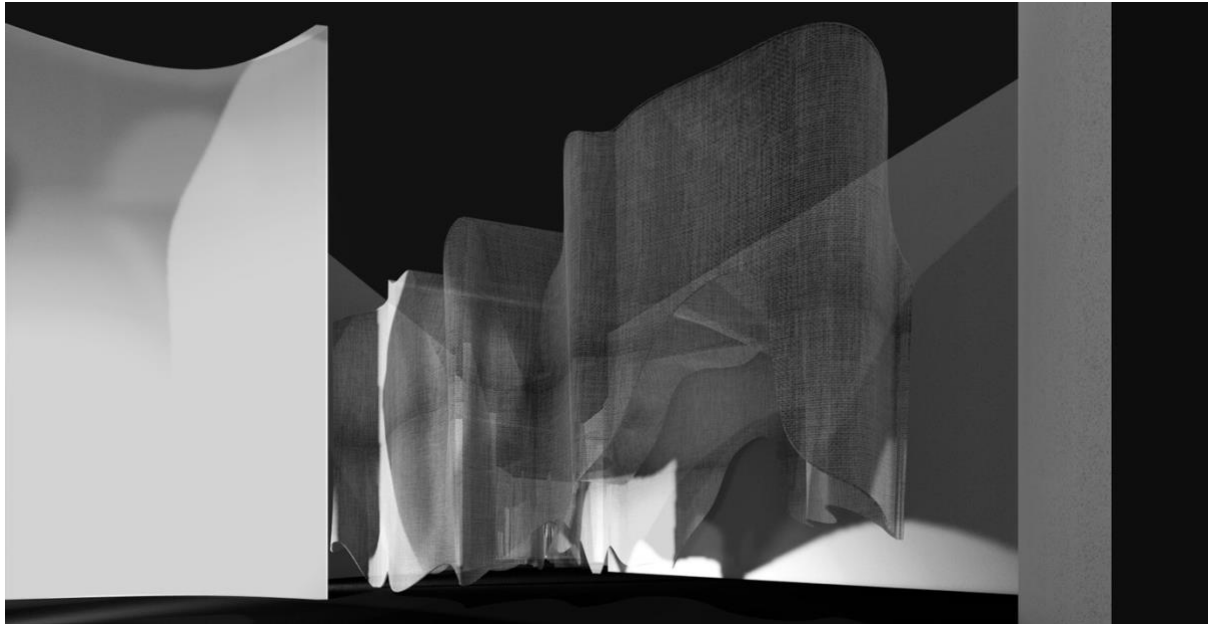


Figure 32: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Six

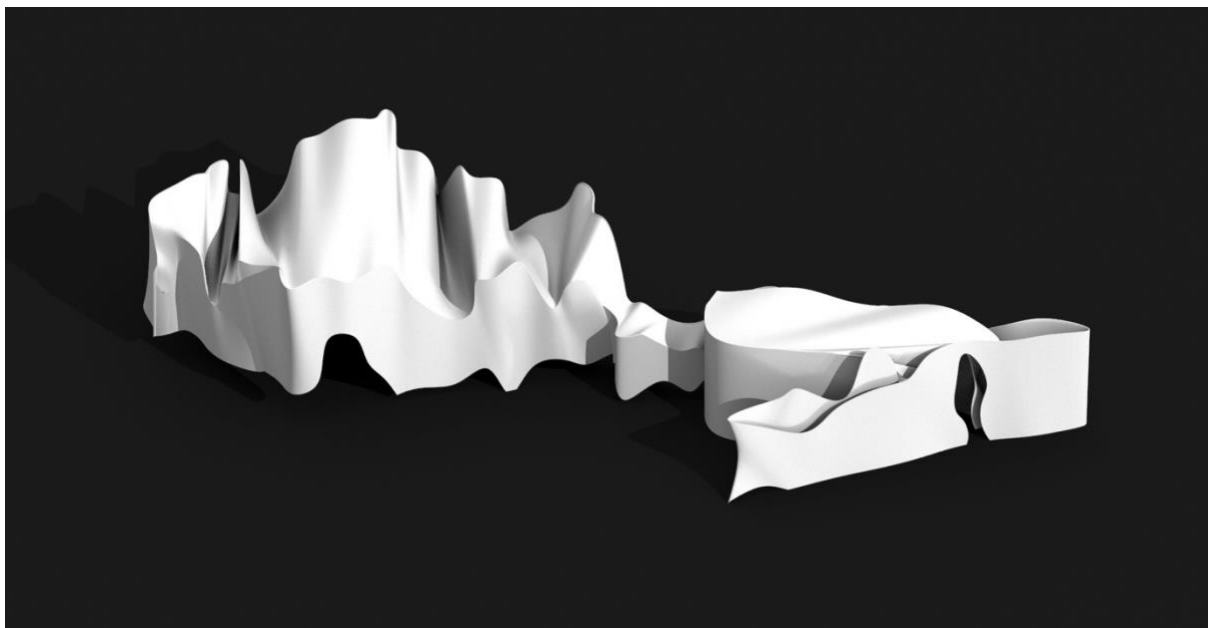


Figure 33: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Six

After leaving the labyrinth, we come upon an organically shaped tunnel, made from fabric. This material creates a somewhat opaque physical barrier, that is mouldable and structural at the same time. The tunnel is narrow yet light in color. You can see the trajectory; however, the scale of the tunnel is constantly changing and morphing. It goes through stages of different sizes. Along the way, the height and width are constantly decreasing and forcing the body to contort itself, to be able to exit. Accompanying this journey is the constant sound

of rubble and glass being shoveled and discarded. The sharp sound of glass breaking is violent, but it is necessary to heighten the sensory experience in this section. We are all forced to contort our bodies daily, to contort our minds, to be able to navigate the complexities of our modern life. What is left behind? What do we sacrifice along the way?

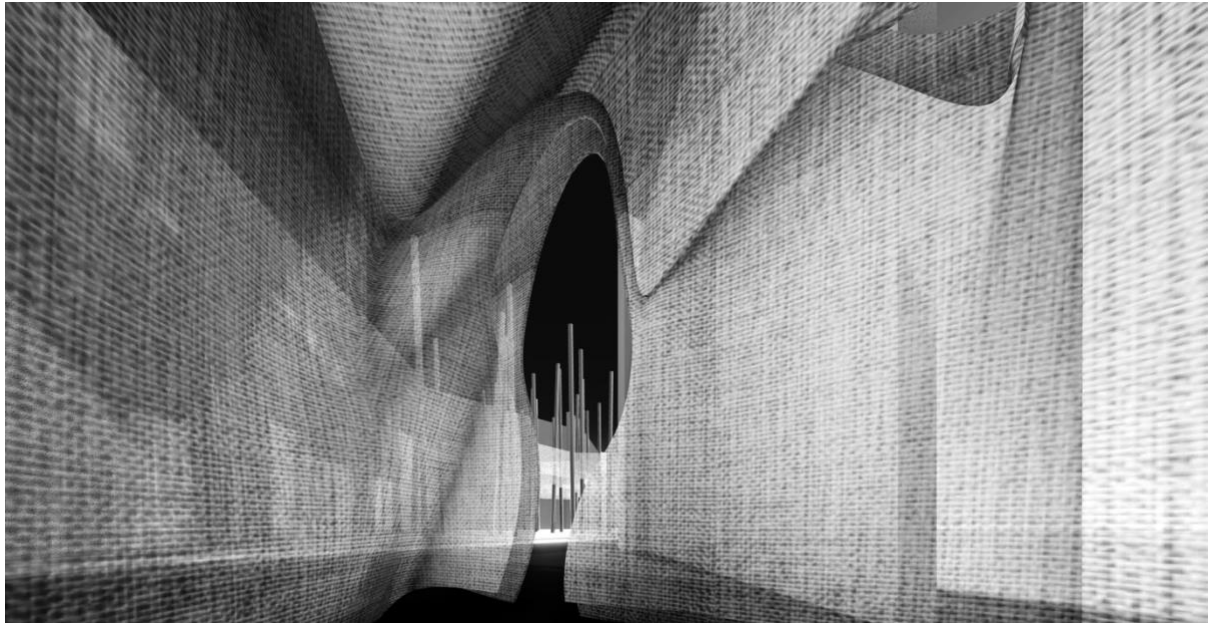


Figure 34: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Six

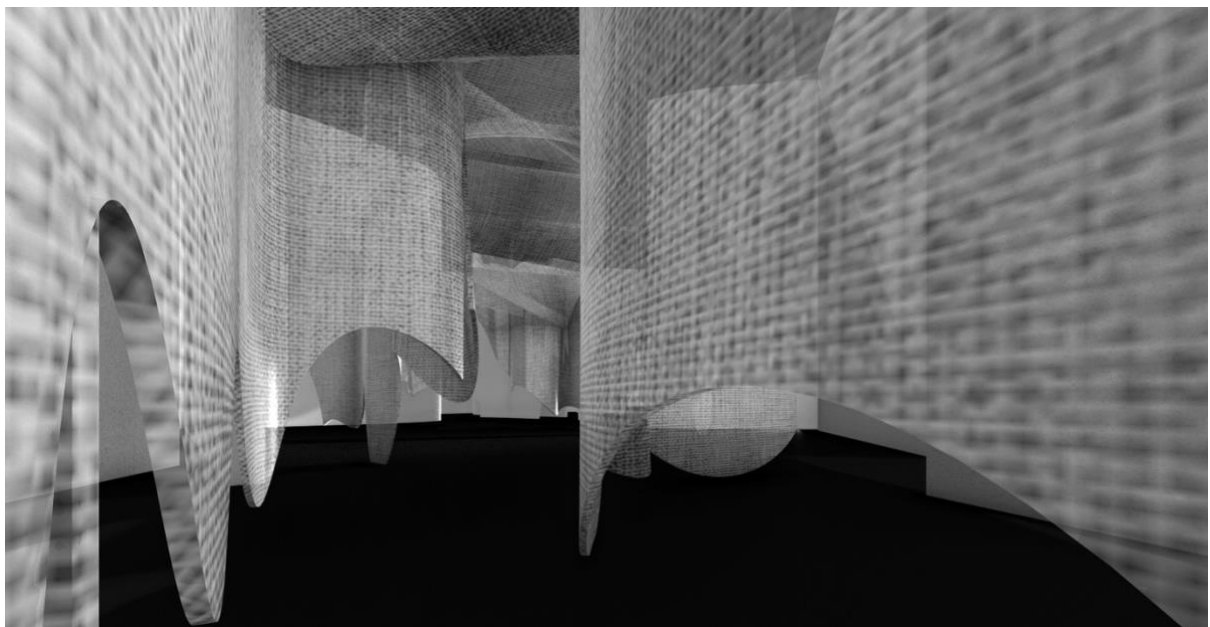


Figure 35: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Six

Chamber Seven

Recollection, Reconciliation and Community

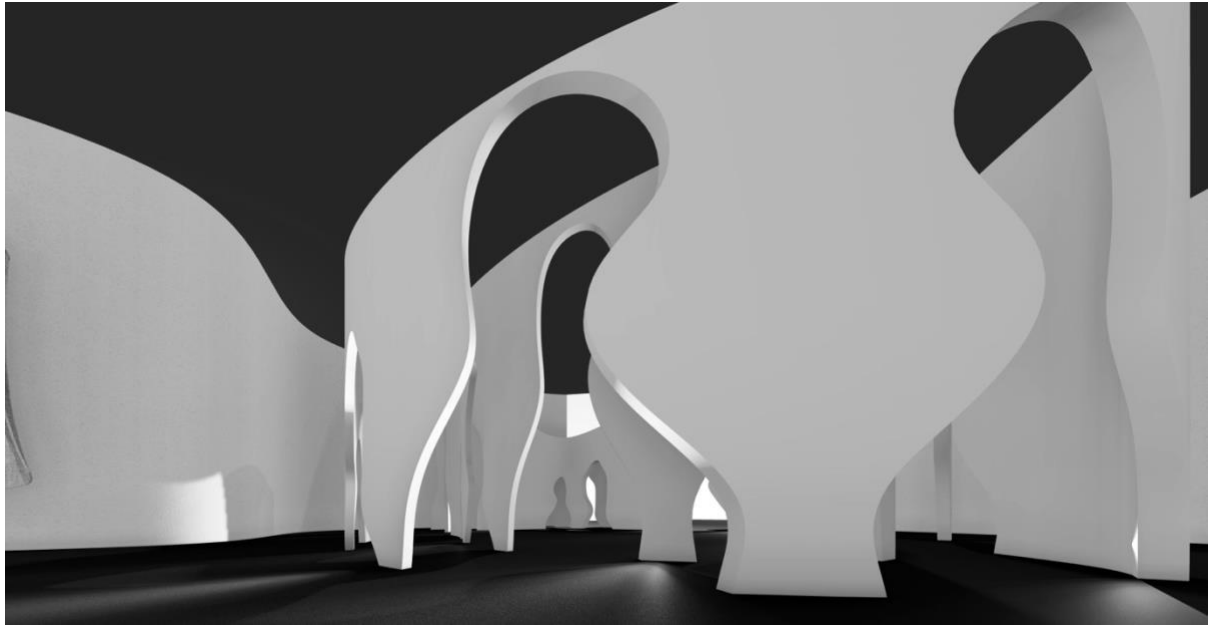


Figure 36: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Seven



Figure 37: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Seven

Leaving behind the tunnel, we emerge into an organic shaped white hall, with projections on the walls of figurative mixed-media art. Layered with the duplicated organic shapes, is a succession of hollowed absent silhouettes. This sequence creates a sea of different bodies and a multitude of shapes. It brings the mind back to a holistic approach of seeing the other, the stranger, where all our differences seem to merge through this circular movement. It's an invitation to discover our humanity and similarities again. All the repetitive circular

movement is exercised in silence. It is a moment of recollection and reflection, of discovery and surprise.

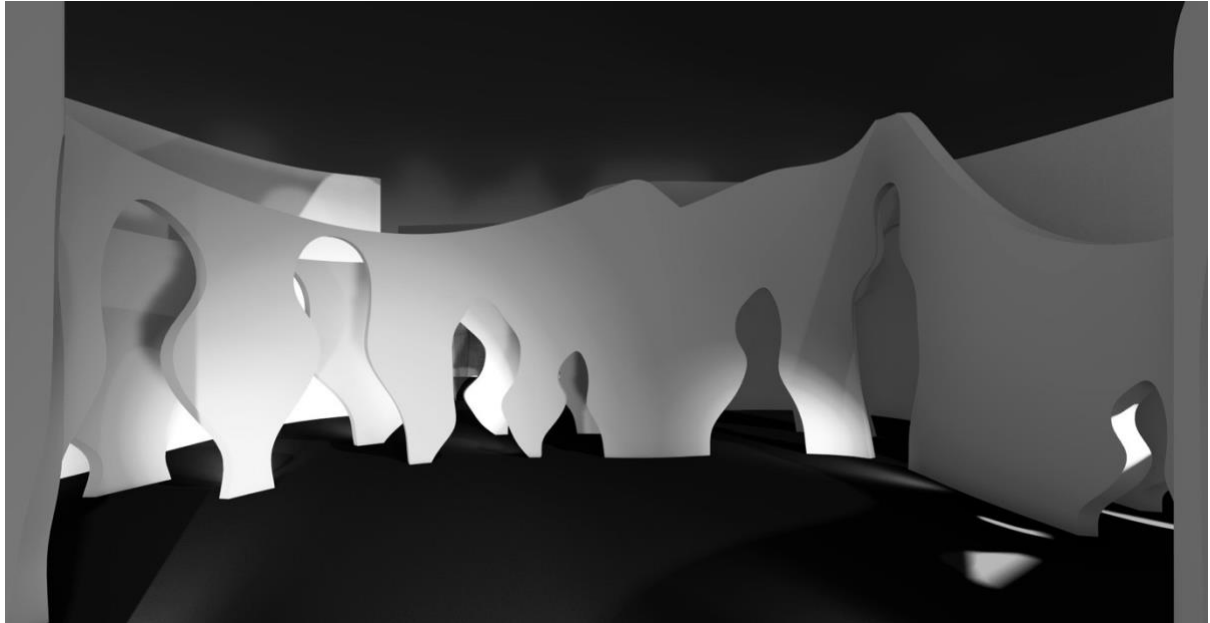


Figure 38: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Seven

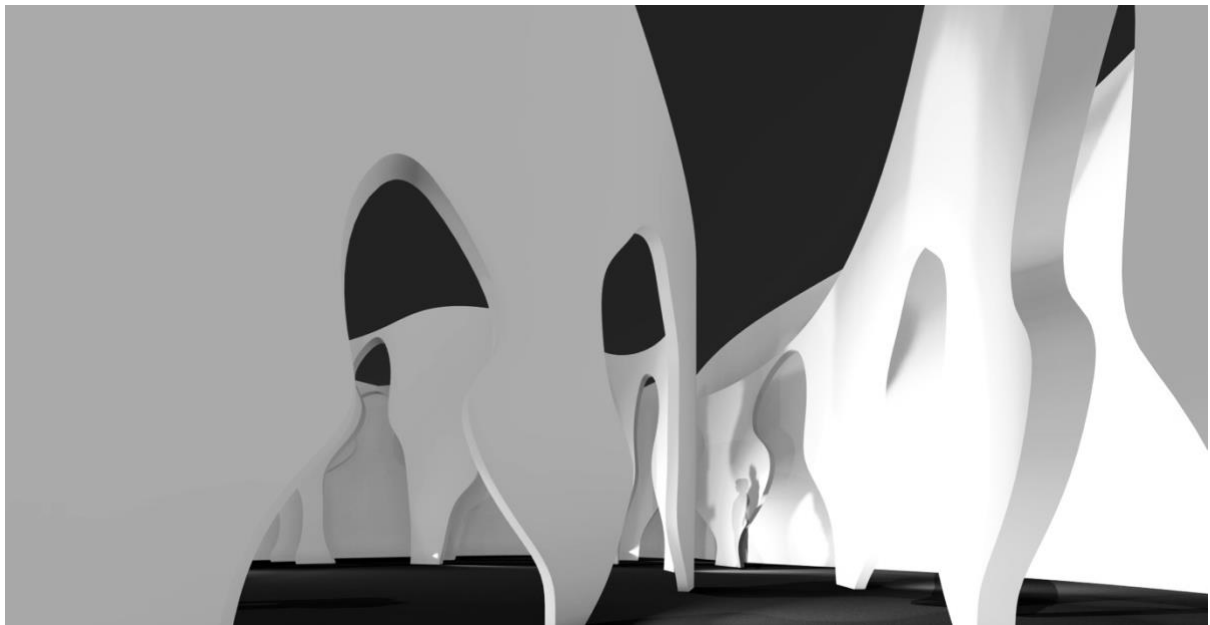


Figure 39: 3D Modelling View – Chamber Seven

Link to Animation Video

[Un Regard Oblique - Animation Walkthrough](#)

Epilogue: Moving Forward

Observation and Reflection

As I was able to look back at this project, I was struck by the amount of stillness and sobriety that emerged as my main reflection/conclusion. What felt like a twirling tornado was contrasted by the stillness of the image and the sensibility of the expression. I realized that the direction that I embarked on in my design process, had shifted drastically with time. I found myself looking into simpler and more sincere ways of expressions, that best encapsulate the emotions, rather than resorting to exaggerations and embellishments. There was a very humble and dignified rapport between the performance and the spectator, where all the layers seem to be stripped back, peeled off, until nothing remained but the truthful raw sentiment.

What started as an ambitious endeavor to create and share this experimental installation with people, has grown beyond my expectations. My initial objective to bring all the learnings and experiences, that I came across, and manifest them into a practice remained constant. The design in its new form resonates both nationally and internationally, translating the human experience, that is rooted in differences and similarities.

After the restrictions are lifted and the sanitary situation permits it, I am hoping to present this installation in a museum, a gallery or any other space that can accommodate this performance/installation.

Queer Voices: *Pirouette Exilée* (exiled)

Identifying as queer in a heteronormative and an extremely homophobic society, creates a multitude of ripples in the development of one's identity. It segments it, and builds many different personas, hidden within the same mould. In the course of my work on the thesis, I extrapolated myself from the physical context and looked at the self-made, metaphorical prison. I attempted to look at it from afar, to be objective, and deconstruct the multiple facets of its existence. When your identity is caged, it is a constant quest to value your self-worth, and to find recognition, first and foremost, in your own self. In the final part of my thesis, the installation, I invite you to stare at this confinement, to breathe it in, and let it envelop you. It is poetic, absurdist, even brutalist. This project is dedicated to people who grew up without a voice, without the choice of being who they are. It pays tribute to their stories and struggles. It stands in homage. It offered me the space to come to terms with my own preconceptions of my country, my identity, and how I position myself in my practice as an artist.

Creative Process - *Feuille de Route*

The creative process of this project has been a unique path of self-discovery. It liberated my creative impulses and gave me immense confidence in my process as an artist. I learned how to have faith in my method and give it the proper time and space it needs to grow. Looking back, the progression of my methods seems so simple and straightforward. It wasn't. All these tools were discovered by sheer instinct, accidental findings and the indomitable need to experiment. I learned how to appreciate my process and respect it. I embraced my failures and mistakes and transformed them into a motivation to keep going, and build further investigations. I consider this to be the most important learning I made throughout this project.

“Creativity is not about making something out of nothing. Instead it's about refashioning what already exists. It is about us fighting our brain's urge to veer toward familiarity by digging deeper, pushing boundaries, and staring failure in the face. In this way, we can take advantage of what it is to be human, to drink in the world and produce something, anything, that has never existed before.” David Eagleman, *The Creative Brain*.

I would like to open this project to further discussion and reflection.



Figure 40 : Exploration Video Vignette – Silhouette

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Annex

Many books, poets, performance artists, dancers and installation designers were a constant guide and inspiration in my body of work. I tapped into their strength and resilience as a guide in my creative process. I stand in homage to their work.

The artists cited in this bibliography are pioneers in their respective milieu. Some I had the honor to meet and others I got to know through their repertoire. They are connected through their fight for equality in their creations, their constant challenging of society's norms and the potent absurdist nature of their work.

Alexandre Paulikevitch's work has been a constant inspiration for my work and a pillar of strength and resilience. Coming from the same background, I have identified with the causes he portrays through his performance pieces. I revere his strength and determination to challenge the norms of society and push forward more equal and inclusive ideals.

Caroline Denervaud is a performer and a plastic artist renowned for her mix of video art and physical art creation. Her approach to conceptualizing and the freedom of the medium at hand, gave me the confidence and courage to explore non-traditional methods of creation.

David Eaglemen's documentary is a cornerstone for the creative process. It liberates the mind from the preconceived notion around the validity of creation while asserting the fluid and cyclical nature of the creative mind.

Prima Ballerina Diana Vishneva's performance in *Flow* brings XIXth century dance theatre into modern times. Her physical dialogue with a structure that molds and folds itself around her choreography treads the lines of a self-imposed cage while alluding to a Dervish Tourneur made into a ballerina. The duality of her performance ignited many visual and intellectual questionings and explorations.

Fadia Tomb El Hage's collaboration with Joelle Khoury, both native Lebanese artists, accompanied my brainstorming and creative sessions. Their work together embodies a juxtaposed reality, layered with robotic sonic resonance and punctuated rhythmic recitations.

Anne-Marie Garat and Gilbert Garcin's potent work has been a true inspiration. Their take on absurdist reality and graphic gestures has brought a lot of minimalism and restraint to my thinking and aesthetic.

Gebran Khalil Gebran's Madman poems reflect the constant nuances that I am endlessly looking to understand. Coming from a country built on absurdity and contradiction, his representation of characters and ideas bring life to visuals and conveys wisdom and irony.

Jun Igarashi's Playhouse created for the Osaka Contemporary Theatre Festival in Japan is a testimony for minimal architecture and design, built to engage human emotions. Drawing inspiration from the treatment of material and form, this installation created ripples in my creative process and directed me towards a minimal approach to design.

Amine Maalouf's In the Name of Identity carries in its fold the story of many of the Lebanese diaspora. It's an unconventional support and companion in a life unfolding in a new land.

William Kentridge's method of working has been a major inspiration in my work. Mixing graphics with painting and animation in video edits and montages gave me the tools and courage to explore my work in an unrestricted approach.

Ryo Yamada's work Vertical Landscapes in Sapporo Japan, creates an architectural installation that is in constant motion in response to the elements. The ephemeral act of existence and the minimal use of materials drew me even further towards a minimalistic aesthetic.

Zia Azazi's Neo Dervish performance is a blatant challenge to society's norms. It takes a traditional dance performance, restricted to male dancers and transforms it into a liberation act. The strength to challenge the norms of society has been a constant drive in my process, and one of the many layers that define my work.

Appendices

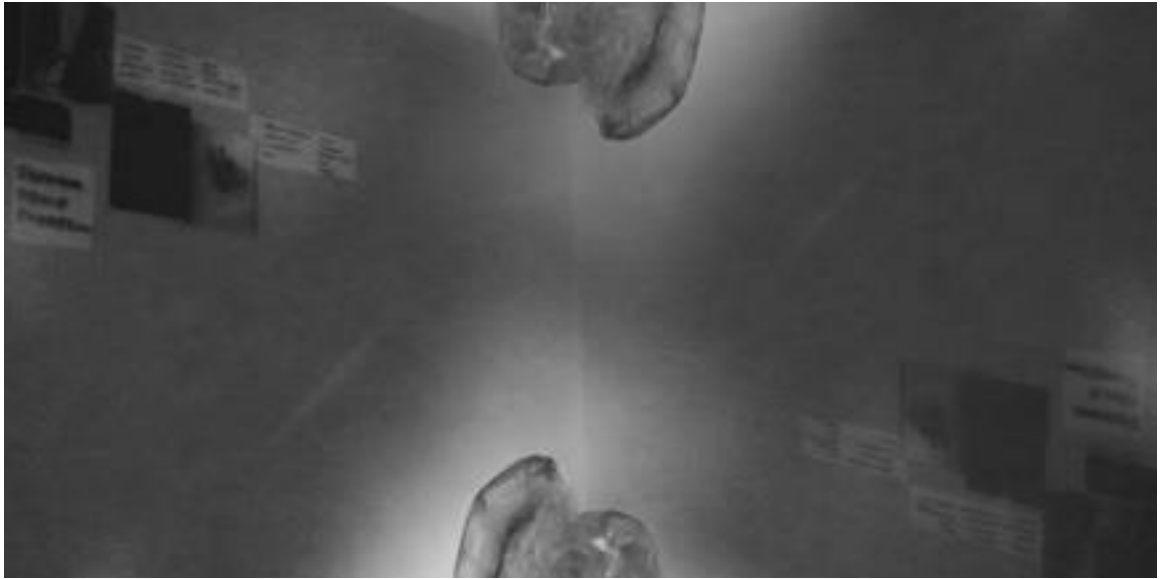
Appendix 1: Brainstorming Wall – April 2020



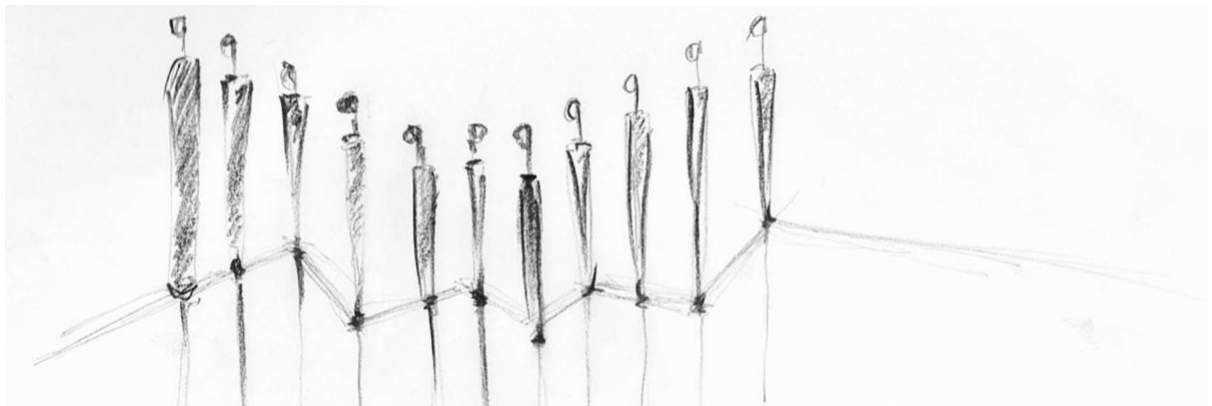
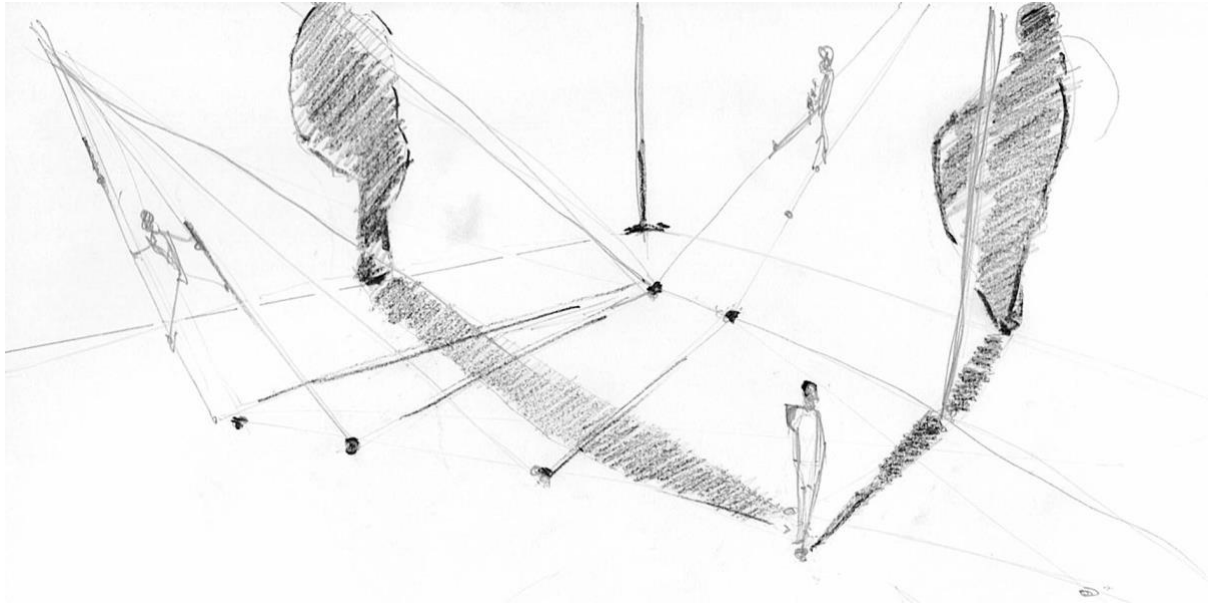
Appendix 2: Exploration Video Storyboard – May/July 2020

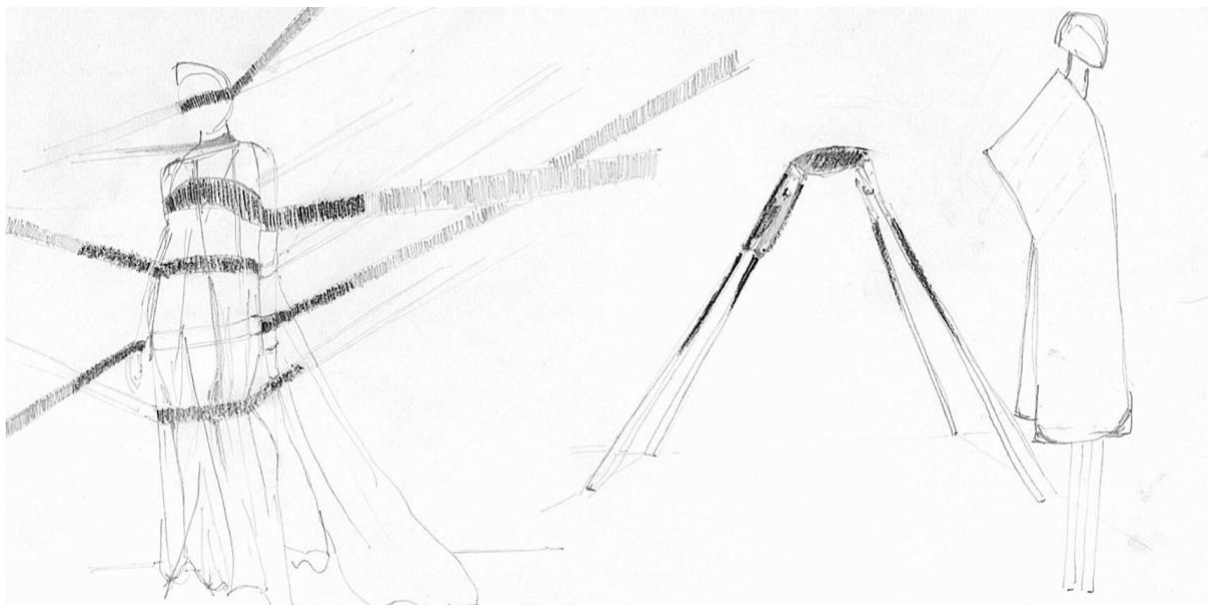
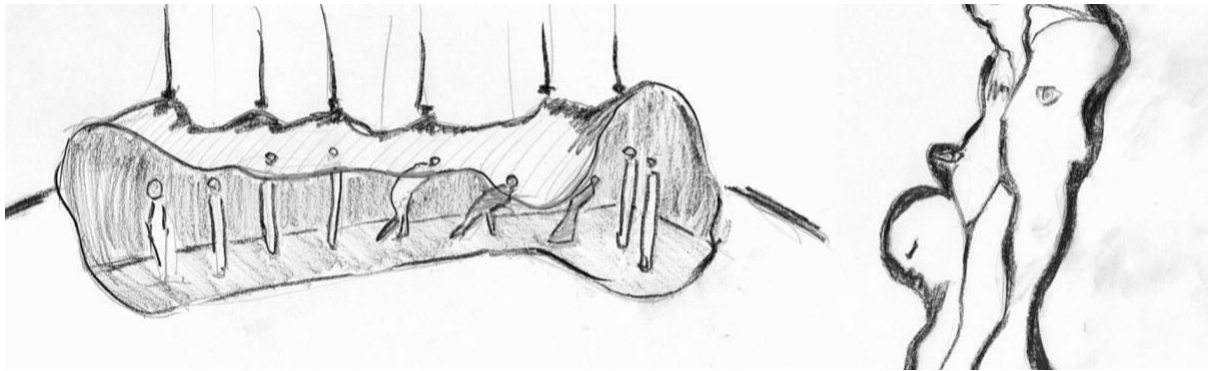




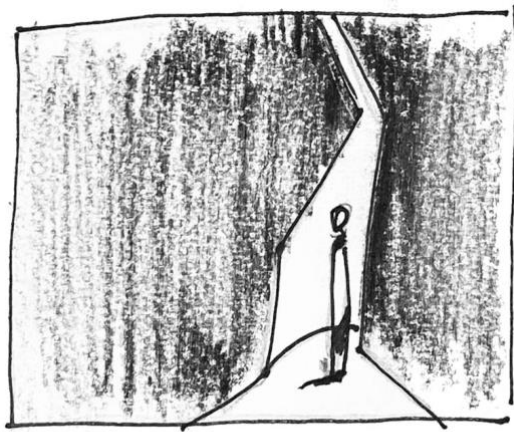
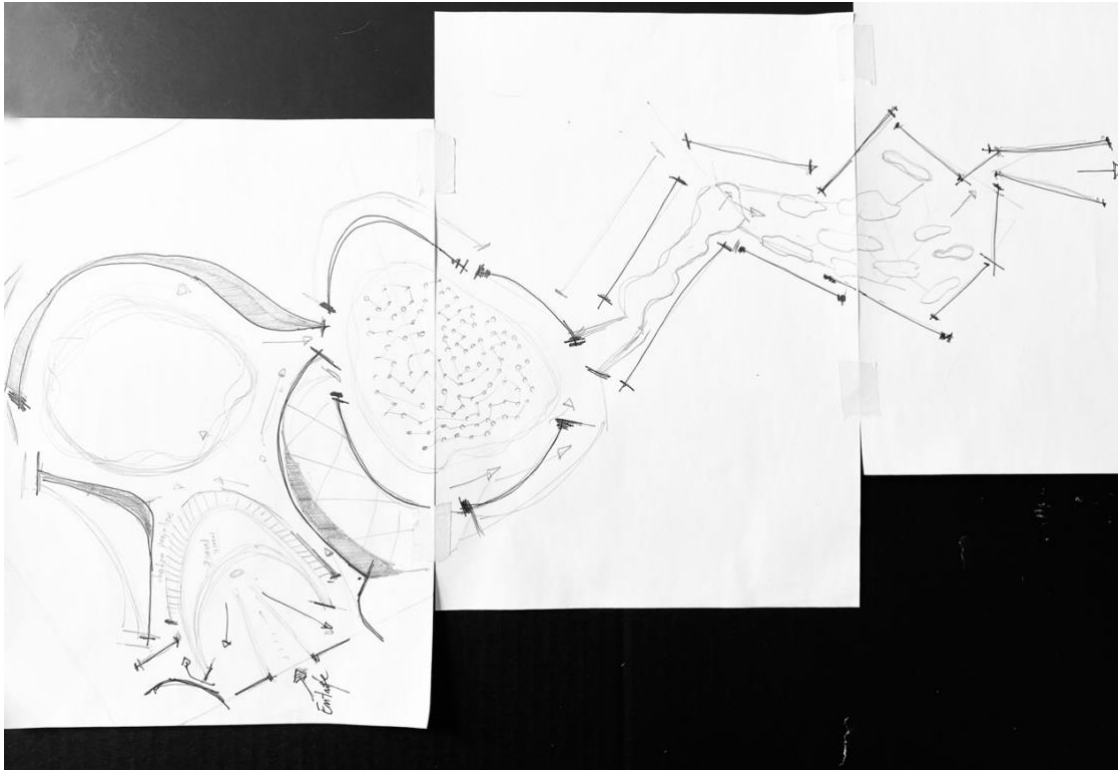


Appendix 3: Brainstorming Sketches – October/December 2020

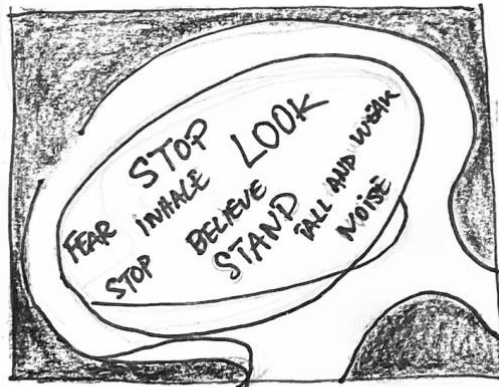




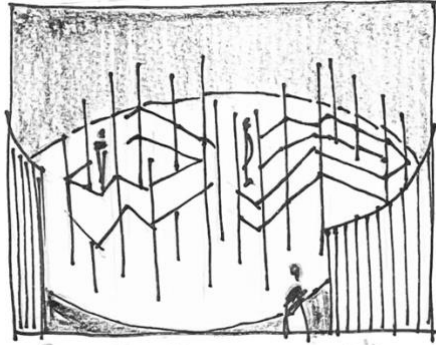
Appendix 4: Brainstorming Floor Plan and Moments from the Installation – February 2021



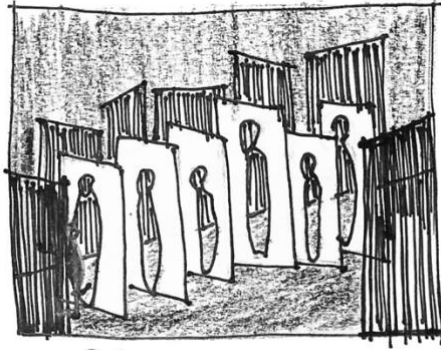
Sophie. Exit



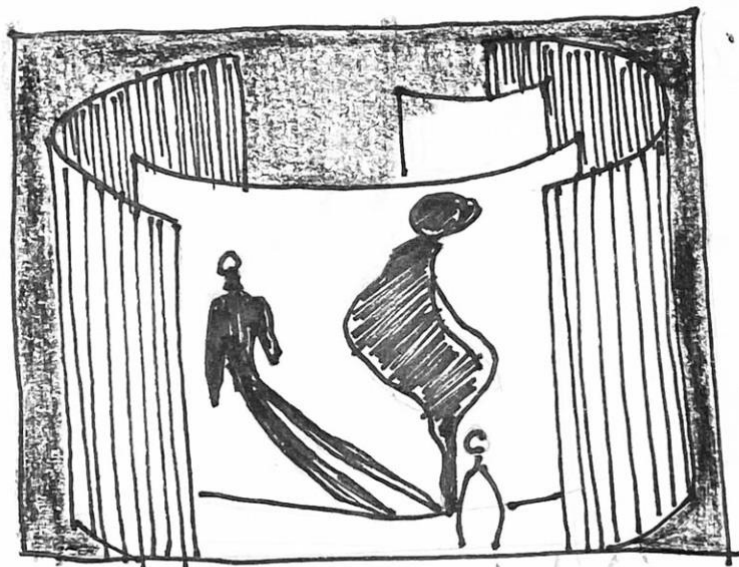
SS. Top shot
uniting on the floor



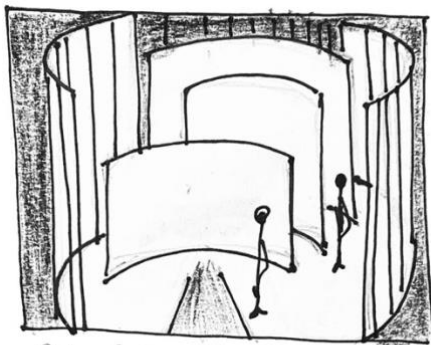
S.4. Finding your path.



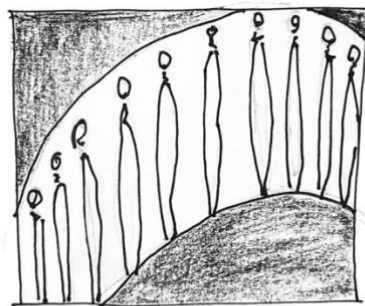
S.6



S.2. Shadows distortion

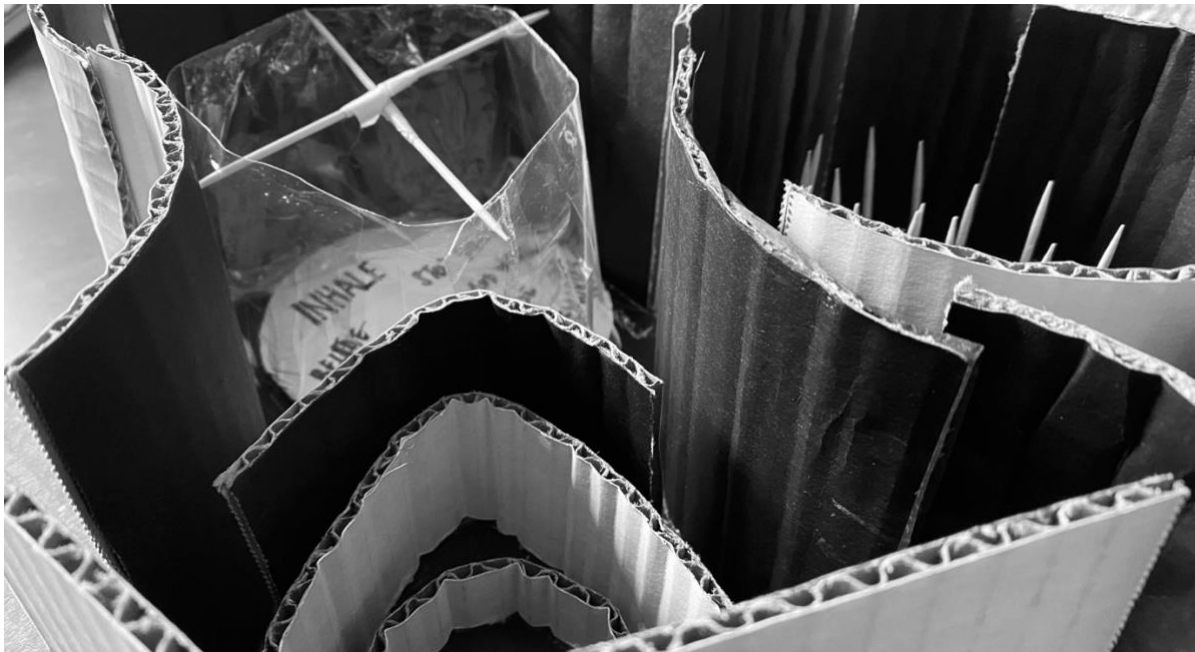
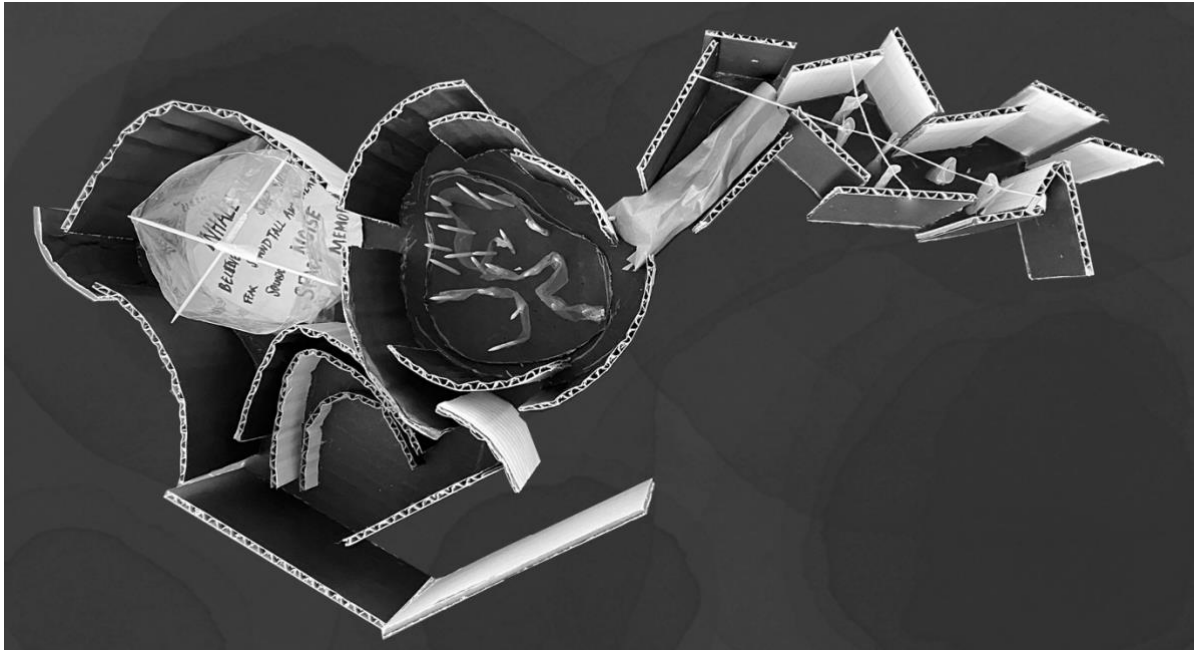


S.1. 3 curved screens with fragmented projections

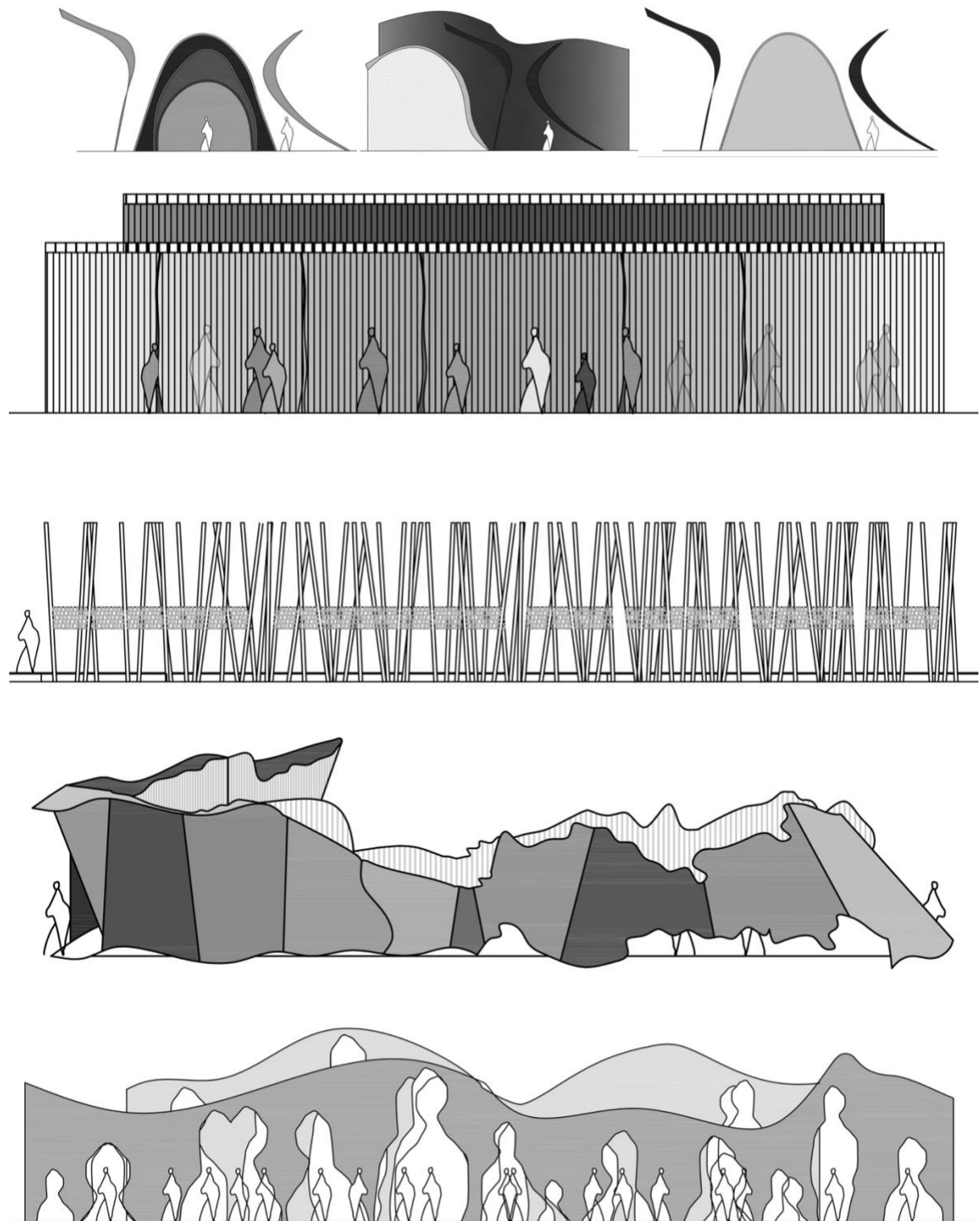


Is there silhouette given a panorama while walking the path?

Appendix 5: Brainstorming Model – February 2021



Appendix 6: Auto-cad Drafting Sections – March 2021



Appendix 7: Storyboard for the Installation – March 2021

