

Research Article

Folding Identity: A Foucauldian Reading of Time and Space in Anber Onar's *In Case*

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	This paper offers a critical reading of four selected artworks: "Redoubt," "Displacements No. 11," "Current," and "Territories No. 15" from the recent exhibition <i>In Case</i> (2025) by the Cypriot artist Anber Onar. The study explores the philosophical implications of Onar's artistic choices in fabric, color, and medium through close visual and material analysis. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, this essay examines how the artworks engage with themes of time, space, memory, and the construction of identity. Ultimately, it argues that these artworks operate as layered spaces in which personal and collective histories converge—inviting viewers into a phenomenological encounter with "other" spatialities beyond linear or conventional frames.
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1. Introduction

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.

—Michel Foucault

The integration of temporality within heterotopias raises profound questions about identity. In other words, as historical narratives intersect with these marginals and often overlooked spaces,¹ the relationship

¹ The French Philosopher Henri Bergson, known for his exploration of time, offers insight into the interrelation between time and space. In his early work (1889), he proposes that time is essentially spatial in nature. To illustrate this, he describes how the motion of a clock's hand across space is used to represent the passage of time. While the past stretches infinitely behind us and the future lies ahead, the present moment vanishes almost as soon as it arrives. In our attempts to measure time precisely, we rely on spatial markers and expect events to occur according to these established rhythms (McConnell, 2019).

between abstraction and materiality becomes a crucial inquiry site. In this interplay, the notion of self is called into question, prompting a deeper reflection on how identity is shaped, fragmented, or redefined through spatial and historical frameworks. This essay focuses on selected artworks from *In Case* (2025), a recent exhibition by Anber Onar (Figure 1). Held at Art Rooms Gallery, one of Cyprus's leading venues for contemporary art, the exhibition features a diverse collection of newly produced works across various media, including installation, photography, collage, video, sculpture, and painting. Widely interpreted as a meditation on land, war, and migration, the exhibition also engages with deeper questions of recognition, belonging, identity, corporeality, and individuality. It also explores the dialectics of freedom and restriction, the politics of memory and forgetting, gaze, and shifting power dynamics. Through these explorations, Onar's work seems to unfold the metaphorical layers of identity that have been deconstructed and folded by the fusion of time and space (Artistry of Good, 2005).

Using a unique visual language, Onar's work presents a diverse range of artistic media, including immersive installations, intricate photographic sketches, layered photocollages, and multisensory sound, video, and scent experiences. This collection is not only visually striking but also intellectually engaging, encouraging viewers to reflect on deeper social and spatial issues. At the core of the work, there is an engagement with "heterotopias", or "other spaces"—real yet often marginalized locations that exist outside the realm of mainstream, socially recognized environments. These spaces, which are frequently excluded from dominant societal frameworks, exist at the fringes and intersections of lived experience. Onar's exhibition invites viewers' attention to such transitional locations, such as ruins, cemeteries, ongoing construction zones, refugee camps, psychiatric asylums, and spaces of refuge or sanctuary. Pillai (2025) focuses on the philosophical aspects of the artwork, showing how Onar challenges conventional perceptions of space, belonging, and memory, inviting the audience to reconsider the hidden narratives and histories embedded within these overlooked places. The foundation of Onar's exhibition lies in her development of a distinct visual language, which she constructs through what she refers to as *tied-folds*. These are meticulously folded and bound fabric objects—ranging from cloth and leather to canvas—that include personal and institutional textiles such as clothing, bed linens, and even straitjackets. Each tied-fold serves as a symbolic unit within her artistic vocabulary, carrying layers of meaning related to constraint, memory, and embodied experience. The artist strategically places these forms within various heterotopic spaces, either by physically integrating them into these marginal environments or by recontextualizing them through photographic

compositions and multimedia installations. By embedding these folded and bound fabrics into sites of exclusion—such as cemeteries, asylums, refugee camps, and archaeological ruins—she creates a dialogue between materiality and space, evoking themes of displacement, absence, and the fragility of human existence. Through this method, her work not only transforms physical objects into carriers of meaning but also challenges the viewer to decipher the layered histories and emotions embedded within these carefully manipulated materials. Unlike the logic of immediacy, which tries to hide the medium so the viewer focuses only on the image or content, the logic of hypermediacy draws attention to the medium itself and its role in shaping the artwork. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) explain, these are two different ways that media can “remediate” older forms: either by concealing or by emphasizing the tools and processes involved. This idea is particularly relevant to contemporary artworks that involve mapping, layering, or transforming data and memory through various media. Such works exemplify hypermediacy because they expose the mechanisms of mediation and change. When interpreted through Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, these works become layered spaces where memory, media, and meaning intersect, challenging conventional ideas of time, space, and representation (Tomašovičová, 2017, p. 8). Onar’s tied-folds exemplify hypermediacy by encouraging viewers not only to engage with the artwork visually but also to reflect on the materiality of the fabric and the layered, often concealed, meanings embedded within its folds.



Figure 1. Anber Onar

2. The Foucauldian Motion of Heterotopia

Foucault suggests that the creation of a site takes place within a virtually infinite range of possible

choices.² Foucault emphasizes that emplacement is not something imposed by an external force; rather, it is a deliberate choice—like all rhetorical acts—to organize the world and its human technologies in a way that makes this organization seem both logical and necessary. He goes on to note that our decisions about how to arrange spaces present various technical challenges. The creation of space (for example, a "classroom" among an endless expanse of roads and buildings) is "haunted by fantasy" (p. 16); it is shaped by the collective decision of its inhabitants to adapt to and accept a shared meaning. In other words, our actions in occupying and performing a space are just as crucial as the plans and designs of the architects who create it (pp. 22- 24). Foucault presents two broad examples to illustrate his concept of space. First, he discusses "utopias," defining them as imagined or unreal spaces, such as Plato's *Republic* or Thomas More's "island," that expose the limitations of human relationships we consider real. A utopia reflects not the way the world is, but rather how it should be. Foucault then shifts his focus to the central topic of the essay— "heterotopias".³ These are real, existing spaces—not just products of the imagination—that, while part of the physical world, reveal possibilities or conditions not typically encountered in everyday life. Foucault elaborates on heterotopias by outlining a set of principles that govern their placement and function (Foucault, 1967). He argues that heterotopias exist in all cultures, though they take different forms depending on the time and place. A heterotopia can serve various functions in different contexts, such as a cemetery, which in the past was situated in the center of town but has since been moved to the outskirts, marking the separation of the living from the dead. This raises a question: if a cemetery is eventually covered by new developments, as has happened throughout history, does it cease to be a heterotopia, or does it remain one, merely needing

² According to Foucault, our conception of space, particularly in how it relates to environments, people, and objects, has undergone a historical transformation. He notes that in the medieval period, space was understood hierarchically, with certain places regarded as more important or sacred than others. This spatial order was disrupted by Galileo's heliocentric theory, which challenged the geocentric model and, by extension, the idea that specific locations (like Earth) held inherent cosmic significance. In this shift, Foucault sees the emergence of a modern spatial paradigm, which he calls "emplacement." While his translators offer various reasons for using this term, it can be provisionally understood as a "site" shaped by human interpretation and context (Jadhav, 2022).

³ The term *heterotopia* is formed in a similar way to *utopia* and *dystopia*. It combines the Greek prefix *hetero*—meaning "other" or "different"—with *topos*, meaning "place," to signify "a different place" or a space associated with otherness. Unlike *utopia*, which refers to an imagined ideal society (as seen in Thomas More's writing or Le Corbusier's designs), *heterotopia* does not suggest perfection or its opposite. As Russell Mead puts it, while utopias represent idealized worlds and dystopias depict deeply flawed ones, heterotopias are simply spaces of difference—places whose elements may lack clear or logical connections with one another (Loreto, 2022).

to be uncovered? One defining feature of a heterotopia is its ability to contrast with and create an alternative to its surroundings, such as the relationship between a zoo and a public garden. Another is that a heterotopia can disrupt our usual sense of time, as seen in places like an old library filled with ancient books or a festival that transports us away from the routine of everyday life. Heterotopias operate through a system of opening and closing, creating moments of isolation as well as connection to their environment. A heterotopia also functions in relation to other spaces, since it establishes its own rules and order, highlighting its distinctiveness and existence in contrast to its surroundings.

3. Space and Perception in Merleau-Ponty's Thought

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty characterizes phenomenology as the study of essences, particularly the essences of perception and consciousness. At the same time, he presents phenomenology as a method for exploring how we perceive and engage with the world. This approach emphasizes a direct description of human experience as it is lived. That is to say, perception forms the foundation of all experience, guiding every act of consciousness. The world appears to us as a field of perception, within which human consciousness plays an active role in assigning meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). In this sense, we are inseparable from our perceptions of the world. Merleau-Ponty critiques both traditional empiricism and rationalism for their failure to fully capture the phenomenology of perception. Empiricism claims that sensory experience is the root of all knowledge, while rationalism asserts that reason alone, independent of the senses, is the true source of knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricism overlooks the role of consciousness in shaping perception, whereas rationalism neglects how perception informs and structures consciousness itself. He further notes that perception can be organized through associative forces and can be selectively focused through attention. However, attention does not create perceptions; rather, it highlights specific elements within the perceptual field, allowing conscious reflection to structure those perceptions more clearly. In addition, judgment arises from perceiving relationships between perceived objects. Judgment may involve interpreting sensory signs through logical frameworks, yet it is neither exclusively a logical operation nor purely a sensory one. Instead, judgments have the capacity to transcend the domains of both reason and experience (Scott, 2002). Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes embodied experience as central to perception and identity. For him, identity is not a fixed essence but emerges through how we live in space and time—how the body situates itself within the world, and how we remember, anticipate, and move. He blurs the line between subjective and objective time/space, showing how

lived experience integrates them in constructing selfhood. Regarding the subjective experience of time, Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of time as a series of disconnected instants. He posits that time is an interconnected whole, where the past flows into the present, and the present opens up possibilities for the future. Rather than moving through time as if it were a container, we inhabit time with our very being (Borislow, 2023). From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, installation art engages perception at its most fundamental level. Instead of depending on empiricism or intellectual abstraction, his philosophy offers artists a primal mode of seeing that precedes individual subjectivity. It suggests a kind of perceptual "ground zero," where experience is rooted in the body itself, which not only receives sensory input but also actively interprets spatial relationships (Hobbs, 2001). Merleau-Ponty also differentiates between two dimensions of subjectivity: the "speaking" subject, who responds to the world through embodied, lived experience, and the "thinking" subject, who relates to it through abstract reasoning (Gill, 2013).

4. Reading *In Case*

At its core, the title of Onar's exhibition— *In Case* — invites multiple interpretations, allowing the audience to engage with its layered meanings. On the one hand, it evokes the phrase "what if," a conditional expression that opens possibilities, invites speculation, and challenges dominant narratives. In this context, the title seems to suggest a continuous shift between the moment of observation and the memory it evokes, in Merleau-Ponty's (2012) terms, as well as the potential futures embedded within spatial functions. On the other hand, the phrase 'in case' also indicates a physical containment, such as bags, containers, or protective coverings. At a deeper level, the meaning of the title conjures images of immigrants, museums, prisons, and refugee camps—spaces where displacement, preservation, and restriction intersect. These sites operate under distinct norms and rules; these are Foucauldian heterotopias, where space is both real and symbolic, structured yet fluid. Ultimately, the title reveals itself as a metaphor for both space and time: it signifies not only the physical act of encasing but also the ways in which memory, history, and trauma are preserved, transported, and experienced across different temporal and spatial dimensions. And it leads one to investigate the integration of time and space through its material – the fabric – which seems to be a deliberate artistic choice. From a philosophical standpoint, the selection of fabric within the exhibition appears to resonate with deeper theoretical implications that surpass conventional or merely decorative interpretations of textiles. Critics such as Ezadpanah et al. (2024) emphasize the conceptual importance of temporality in artworks, noting that Ancient Greek philosophers—renowned for their foundational contributions across

disciplines—held a profound belief in its role in both the creation and experience of art. For them, temporality was not merely a measure of existence but a dynamic force shaping artistic expression. The passage of time was intimately connected to the evolution of artistic techniques and ideas, influencing not only how art was produced but also how it was perceived by audiences. This view highlights the deep interconnection between temporal experience and artistic practice in ancient Greek culture (p. 151). Ezadpanah et al. (2024) focus on the representation of the concept of time through the use of fabrics; they suggest that textiles inhabit a layered space, where each thread interlaces with temporal dimensions like a woven narrative. Rooted in ancestral traditions and evolving through contemporary innovation, each textile embodies both historical narratives and future potential. In this context, time transcends chronological measurement—it becomes a testament to the patience, craftsmanship, and devotion inherent in the act of making (p. 161).

In contemporary thought, the philosophy of fabric has emerged as a rich field for exploring materiality, embodiment, and spatiality. This is especially evident when considered through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) influential concepts—particularly the *rhizome*,⁴ *haecceity*,⁵ *lines of flight*,⁶ and *becoming*—which have provided a framework for thinking about movement, multiplicity, and non-hierarchical forms of organization. Within this framework, textiles such as felt and other fabrics can be understood as more than just physical substances; they become conceptual tools that help visualize and materialize the distinction between “smooth” and “striated” space. This distinction manifests vividly in practices like crochet, knitting, patchwork, and embroidery, where the act of making reveals tensions between order and

⁴ The idea of the rhizome was initially introduced in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, which was originally published in French in 1975 and translated into English in 1986. In this work, the concept is drawn from Kafka's portrayal of movements in his novels and short stories, but it also relates to a particular approach to reading and writing. Later, in *Mille Plateaux* (1980), known in English as *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), the term is expanded to encompass a broader framework for thinking and analyzing in ways that are non-hierarchical and decentered, as well as a more specific literary sense concerning styles of writing. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome is presented to describe a mode of composition that contrasts with the traditional book form and offers a theory of language that rejects a rigid structure, logic, or grammar from which variations evolve (Colebrook, 2021).

⁵ A haecceity has no clear start or finish, no origin or end point; it exists perpetually in a state of "in-betweenness." It isn't composed of discrete points, but rather of continuous lines. It resembles a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Perfectoid spaces are ideal for depicting this concept of a radical beginning that is simultaneously already in the middle, without a distinct beginning.

⁶ Lines of flight is a key concept from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, especially in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and it doesn't mean "escape" in a simplistic sense—it refers to pathways of transformation, creativity, or resistance that break away from dominant structures or systems.

spontaneity, structure and flow. Thus, the use of fabric in the exhibition is not merely aesthetic but operates on a theoretical level, inviting the viewer to consider how textile practices embody complex ideas about space, temporality, and becoming. In recent years, textile scholarship has gained renewed attention, partly due to its historical relegation to the realm of tactile femininity rather than the traditionally privileged masculine vision (Paavolainen, 2017, p. 173). However, Onar's choice of the tied-folds seems to present deeper issues:

When I started this project, I actually started with my most worthless, old, out-of-fashion clothes and I was trying to transform each of them into an abstract object. I started to wrap each piece of clothing in the shape of rectangles that I liked, in a way that did not give much clue about what it was before, as an element that was no longer used for its intended purpose, and then tied them so that they would not fall apart. (Artistry of Good, 2025)

Onar's statement demonstrates a conscious separation from the materials' original purpose, which resonates with Ferrier's (2007) notion of detachment, where the fabric patch, no longer serving its initial function, takes on a new symbolic role—it transforms into a synecdoche, standing in for the larger whole from which it was separated. This shift not only compresses the narrative but imbues the fabric with a symbolic density, allowing it to explore the larger history it carries in a compact—an abstract form. Like Onar's transformed garments, the fabric patch becomes both an aesthetic vessel and a conduit for untold, everyday stories — stories that transcend their immediate materiality. This notion of symbolic detachment seems to align with the way identity itself is formed and reconstructed in the context of time and space. Once folded into these broader, historical contexts, identity becomes fragmented, and its essence and origin are no longer easily traceable. Instead of a stable or fixed selfhood, what emerges is merely a bunch of signifiers — scattered, shifting elements that move through history, forming and re-forming meanings. In the same way, Onar's fabric pieces are transformed into something new, similarly, identity, when shaped by historical forces, becomes a constantly evolving signifier, a fluid trace of its former self.⁷

The thread of our analysis also leads us to investigate the use of color; both its diversity and the

⁷ This idea draws on Roland Barthes's concept that the signifier constantly shifts in meaning and is never fully anchored in a stable referent (Barthes, 1977). It also aligns with Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*, which suggests that meaning is always deferred and identity is constituted through absence and relational traces (Derrida, 1978).

recurring presence of white invite multiple layers of interpretation. The varied hues can be read semiotically as representations of different ages, genders, races, and national identities, each embedded with distinct ideological constructions. Within the tied-folds of Onar's artwork, these colors symbolize the coexistence of multiple histories and perspectives, reflecting the complexity of collective memory. At the same time, the dominance of white introduces a contrasting yet equally significant dimension. White, often associated with purity, mourning, erasure, or neutrality, can be interpreted as a metaphor for both the homogenization of identity and the blank slate on which histories are inscribed—or erased. In the context of genocide studies, it may evoke themes of forced assimilation, absence, or the fragility of memory. By juxtaposing vibrant diversity with the unifying yet ambiguous presence of white, Onar's work navigates the tensions between individuality and collective history, visibility and erasure. The color choices not only enhance the visual impact of her pieces but also intensify their engagement with themes of displacement, memory, and identity. If anything that directly shapes the quality of a texture is considered a “strand,” while anything that influences it indirectly is seen as “context,” then the distinction between the two is ultimately a matter of perspective. When viewed closely, every strand reveals its texture, whereas from a distance, entire textures may blend and appear as individual strands within a larger composition (Paavolainen, 2017, p. 175). In connection with Onar's work, the choice of fabric initially directs the viewer's gaze to the superficial meanings of everyday objects—clothes, suitcases, or remnants of a genocide. However, her work also elevates this perception, inviting us to confront more complex issues related to identity and the metaphysical relationship between time and space.

This is clear in Onar's “Redoubt” (Figure 2), an installation composed of approximately 1000 tied-folds of lighter shades, arranged in the form of a three-dimensional structure with wooden openings. The observer may look through the openings, but can only see what is on the other side of the structure. Remarkably, this artwork presents itself as a structure that evokes a bunker or shelter. The careful arrangement and the neutral color scheme create a sense of sterility, fragility, and order, all of which contribute to the work's layered meanings. The installation, by virtue of its form and materiality, operates as a heterotopic space—a site that embodies the tension between preservation and erasure, stability and impermanence, belonging and displacement. The use of stacked textiles, typically associated with domesticity, contrasts with the rigid structure of the installation, suggesting a paradoxical relationship between comfort and coercion.



Figure 2. “Redoubt” 210 x140 x140 cm, mixed media (2025)

A striking feature of the work is the opening from each facade (Figure 3), a visual and conceptual element that introduces multiple layers of interpretation: on one level, this opening functions as a metaphor for detention and confinement, evoking the restrictive conditions imposed upon displaced individuals.



Figure 3. A tunnel-like wooden opening in “Redoubt” (2025)

It suggests imprisonment within constructed identities, where individuals are defined and controlled by the political, social, and cultural structures that displace them. At the same time, the tunnel-like opening can also be understood as a liminal threshold, symbolizing the abstract boundary between inclusion and exclusion, between the inside and the outside—a visual representation of the blurred line that separates those who belong from those who are forcibly removed from their place of origin – a metaphor. In this sense, the opening does not merely signify surveillance or entrapment but also introduces the possibility of escape, remembrance, or alternative perspectives, much like how Foucault's heterotopias function as spaces that disrupt conventional social orders. More broadly, Onar's work appears to construct an archival bunker, a physical space that preserves and recounts the fragmented histories of those who have experienced displacement. The neatly folded sheets and other items resemble stored documents, maps, or records—silent witnesses to past violence and forced migration. This visual language aligns with Foucault's concept of heterotopias of time, where certain spaces accumulate and preserve history while simultaneously distorting or reshaping it. In this case, the "Redoubt" functions as an archive of absence, where the traces of lost identities and disrupted lives are both remembered and abstracted, present yet invisible. Onar's work also evokes Walter Benjamin's concept of ruins, as the installation—much like a ruin—is carefully arranged yet inherently fragile, always on the verge of collapse.⁸ This structural precarity functions as a metaphor for identity, which, like history itself, is never fixed but rather continuously recounted and reshaped over time. The installation operates as a shelter that appears to preserve memory and identity, yet it also enacts a paradox: in its effort to protect these traces, it simultaneously distances them from their original context, transforming them into remnants rather than intact narratives. In this way, the installation functions as a contemporary ruin—an artistic space where presence and absence, memory and loss, protection and erasure exist in perpetual tension.

Another work, "Displacements No. 11" (Figure 4), suggests multiple layers of meaning—removal, shift, expulsion, or relocation. The title alone gestures toward the condition of dislocation, both physical and existential. At first glance, the image presents a central mound of tied-folds, rendered in grayscale,

⁸ Benjamin's concept of the ruin, particularly as developed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, is significant because it moves beyond viewing the ruin merely as an aesthetic object. Instead, he interprets it as a process—a method of demythologizing and peeling away layers of symbolism, allowing one to approach historical truth through a kind of reduction or unraveling (Stead, 2003).

evoking the colors of memory— of the past. These tied-folds appear as though one is “packing a life,” condensed and contained.



Figure 4. “Displacements No.11” 100×140 cm, digitally manipulated photo collage (2025)

Figuratively, they invite viewers to project meaning onto them: remnants of identity, silent archives of what has been carried, lost, or left behind. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, this image communicates not through symbols alone, but through texture and gesture. The folds, knots, and their weight suggest the lived experience of those who packed them. The viewer’s perception is not passive; it is embodied, as their own memories and physical empathy are activated by the visual encounter. The tied-folds function as extensions of bodily movement—traces of hands that folded, shoulders that carried, and lives that were displaced. Simultaneously, the composition recalls Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. That is to say, these folded fabrics are no longer mere objects—they have become dislocated signifiers, suspended in a curated space that collapses temporal and spatial boundaries. They echo the shadows of identities and memories, estranged from their origins, held within a space that is both real and unreal. The figures standing to either side of the composition, partially obscured, frame the scene like sentinels. Their vague presence contributes to the image’s temporospatial ambiguity, suggesting both a theatrical staging and a commemorative ritual. These figures may represent refugees, immigrants, or survivors of conflict, yet their ambiguity opens further philosophical inquiry. Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, they may also signify surveillance or institutional presence—embodying the mechanisms of power that both define and delimit identity. Their stillness and obscurity evoke a deeper question: are they witnesses, bystanders, or participants in the construction of

memory? Or do they reflect the viewer themselves, caught in a loop of watching and being watched, positioned within the visual politics of trauma? Onar's artistic work opens up a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, inviting viewers to peel away layers of meaning and deconstruct central themes. Paradoxically, each tied-fold appears to be untied through the sign system that emerges from the audience's own engagement.

"Current" (Figure 5) is another featured piece from *In Case*, the installation features a composition of 800 tied-folds, arranged on an inclined surface 2.35 meters wide and 5 meters long, sloping down to the ground from a height of 1.45 meters.



Figure 5. "Current" 145 x 235 x 500 cm, installation (2025)

The title of the artwork offers multiple interpretations; metaphysically, it appears to signify the ongoing flow of time, but also the state of being present, of existing. This multiplicity is mirrored in the tied-folds, where the varied colors and textures—white, pale, gray, and multi-colored evoke an integration of diverse cultural identities, layered histories, and displaced lives. On the surface, the tied-folds appear as relics of migration and displacement, but when viewed through the lens of Foucault's heterotopia, the installation becomes a space charged with deeper philosophical meaning. It seems like a site where time and space fold into each other—where the "current" moment is haunted by the past. The floor of the installation evokes multiple spatial identities: it is at once a home, a prison, a refugee camp, and even a monument or

a grave. These shifting meanings make the space metaphysical, revealing how identity is not fixed, but continually shaped through spatial and temporal dislocation. In this sense, “Current” becomes not just an artwork but a cartography of memory and belonging. It materializes the fragile boundary between presence and absence, between individual memory and collective identity. The work resonates with Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities,⁹ where nations are formed not through direct relations but through shared myths, traumas, and symbolic spaces. Onar’s piece stages such a space; one that wonders not only who we are, but also where we are, and when.

The concept of cartography within “Current” leads us to investigate Onar’s “Territories No.15” (Figure 6). The term ‘territory,’ etymologically, emerged in the late 14th century, originally referring to land governed by a town, ruler, or state—a region connected to a kingdom or specific group of people. It likely stems from the Latin *territorium*, meaning “the land surrounding a town or a district, which itself comes from *terra*, meaning ‘earth’ or ‘land’”¹⁰. On metaphorical levels, the title invites viewers to situate themselves within specific spaces—territories that are not merely geographic, but symbolic. It evokes the concept of “imagined communities,” prompting a figurative reading that underscores the presence and significance of borders, not only between lands but between certain ideologies.

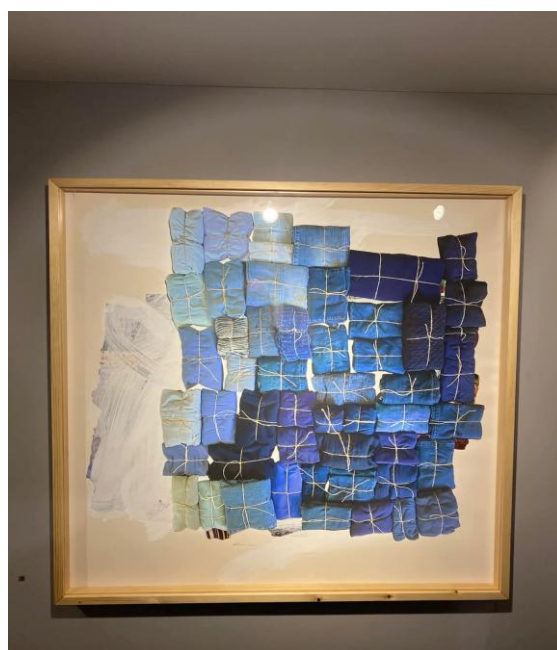


Figure 6. “Territories No.15” 100×100 cm, mixed media collage (2025)

⁹ In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “imagined communities”—social constructs in which people, despite never meeting, perceive themselves as part of a unified group with shared history and values.

¹⁰ Etymologyonline.com <https://www.etymonline.com/word/territory>

These borders are political, cultural, religious, and social in nature. Onar's work challenges the viewers to confront these divisions, elevating our awareness to the ways we perceive ourselves: as *antevasins*—those who are both caught and released between diverse constructed doctrines, between materialistic and transcendental. The choice of blue fabric, along with the careful folding and rectangular arrangement, appears deeply embedded in the meaning of the title "Territories". These elements visually map out fragmented yet interconnected spaces, resonating with Foucault's concept of heterotopia—real places that are simultaneously physical and symbolic, layered with multiple meanings. The work seems to transport the *antevasin*, or border dweller, across shifting locations, reflecting a state of constant movement and displacement. Through this visual and conceptual interplay, Onar invites us to consider how territories are not fixed or homogeneous but are instead heterogeneous spaces where identities and histories intersect and overlap. They are merely collections of signifiers that can no longer trace back their origins: the concept of identity appears to be folded within the blue fabrics, representing *antevasins* whose identities are simultaneously lost and reconstructed. The integration of time and space within the work creates an illusion in which identities become fluid and layered, resisting fixed or singular definitions. Through this process, Onar explores how identity is continuously negotiated across boundaries—both geographical and existential.

In addition, the artwork immediately captures the viewer's attention through the use of blues—in hues that carry layered symbolic significance and invite multiple interpretations. According to the theory of color primitivism, chromatic qualities are considered fundamental and irreducible, not derivable from other aspects of an object. The blues in Onar's work are not simply an aesthetic feature but a vital, expressive force.¹¹ Throughout history, the color blue has held rich and evolving significance in art and culture. Rare and expensive in the ancient world due to the limited availability of pigments, it symbolized power and prestige when used. By the Romantic and Impressionist periods, blue became a means of expressing emotional depth and was often associated with freedom, serenity, and spiritual longing. In the 20th century, artists across various movements, such as Rothko, Picasso, Klein, and Kusama—embraced blue as a versatile

¹¹ The Egyptians were the first society known to have a word for the color blue, and notably, they were also the only culture at the time capable of producing blue dyes. Historically, the color blue holds particular significance. In ancient Egyptian culture, blue symbolized the sky and the Nile, and by extension, became associated with the universe, creation, and fertility. Despite its cultural importance, blue was a rare and difficult pigment to obtain, as early artists primarily relied on earth-based materials (Brack, 2015).

color capable of conveying a wide range of emotions, from sorrow and nostalgia to joy and optimism (Arts Artists Artwork, 2022). Thus, when “Territories No.15” is seen through the lenses of Foucauldian heterotopias and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, the use of color in it— particularly the interplay between shades of light and dark blue—becomes especially significant. The light blue tones suggest intersections of memory, power, joy, and freedom, while the varied shades of blue evoke both historical depth and emotional resonance. These chromatic choices not only color the imagined “territories” but also invite the viewer to reflect on their symbolic function and their relationship to the work’s title. The heterotopic nature of the work here displaces the viewer into a liminal space—between realities, histories, and meanings. Viewers become antepasins—those who exist at the threshold—caught between borders, uncertain of which territory each shade represents. This ambiguity becomes a philosophical invitation to question how color can both mark and blur the boundaries of lived experience, memory, and political space.

5. Conclusion

These four works from Anber Onar’s 2025 exhibition, *In Case*—“Redoubt,” “Displacements No. 11,” “Current,” and “Territories No. 15”—confront and engage with themes of displacement, immigration, and genocide, while also pointing toward more complex conceptual territories through the symbolic use of tied-folds, color choices, and other material elements within the installations. Understanding Foucault’s concept of heterotopias and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception enables viewers of these particular works and the exhibition as a whole to engage with each piece as it articulates a dynamic interplay between time and space, ultimately reflecting processes of identity construction and deconstruction embedded within the folds themselves.

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