

ANBER ONAR'S *IN CASE*

SHAJWAN N. FATAH

Charmo University
shajwan.nariman@chu.edu.iq
Orcid 0000-0001-7806-5216

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3553

Narratives are often left unspoken, yet through visual language—particularly in art and fashion—they can be powerfully articulated. Anber Onar narrates our silenced stories through her evocative use of fabric, as she explained in an interview with *Artistry of Good*: “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)

The Cypriot artist, Anber Onar, is recognized for her multidisciplinary practice across painting, photography, video, performance, and text. Her work explores themes of identity, gender, and cultural issues. She is the co-founder of the Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives in Cyprus (Artrooms at the House website). Onar’s recent exhibition, *In Case*, held from March 21 to June 13, 2025, at the Art Rooms Gallery in Cyprus, is poised to make a notable contribution to the contemporary art scene. The artist invites viewers on a metaphysical journey through a body of work spanning installation, photography, collage, video, sculpture, and painting—all fundamentally rooted in the motif of tied-folds. As viewers step into the gallery, they find themselves in another space—one where the carefully curated blend of earthy charcoal scent, the fresh, grounding aroma of petrichor, and enveloping sound effects extends their experience beyond the physical confines of the gallery. These sensory elements work together to evoke a deeper, transcendental response, inviting the audience to engage with the work not only in the immediate context of the exhibition but also within the broader scope of their personal histories and cultural backgrounds. The distinct aromas, resonant sounds, and the view of the layered tied-folds create an immersive environment where perception is heightened, prompting the viewers to reflect on their own relationship to the world. By invoking these universal sensory triggers, the installation transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, offering a shared mode of perception that resonates with human experience at its most fundamental level. This transcendent engagement with the work suggests that, regardless of where we come from, there are common sensory

experiences that connect us to the larger world and to each other. The exhibition engages with a wide range of themes, including land, war, migration, recognition, belonging, identity, freedom and restriction, memory and forgetting, and power dynamics (Fatah & Pasour, 2025). Central to Onar’s visual language is her use of fabric, particularly what she terms “tied-folds”. This concept, coined by the artist, refers to the folding of fabrics and other materials to create forms that act as metaphors for abstract concepts stripped of their original identity. She draws these materials from garments, cloth, and other sources, encompassing both personal and institutional textiles such as leather, bed sheets, and even straitjackets (Pillai, 2025). Here, I would like to draw attention to the inclusion of straitjackets, which, on the surface, evoke settings such as prisons and psychiatric institutions. However, beyond these literal associations, they symbolize a deeper sense of resistance—embodying suppressed voices and conveying the weight of unspoken or silenced narratives. In this context, the tied-folds act as metaphors for memory, trauma, and identity. Through this process of folding and binding, Onar creates works that are at once tactile and conceptual, inviting viewers to reflect on how histories and selves are shaped, constrained, or preserved across time and space. Her manipulation of fabric serves as a gesture of both remembrance and concealment, prompting a contemplation of what is held, hidden, or lost. The color choice, on the other hand, plays a crucial role; ranging from stark whites to vibrant multicolors, the palette seems to mirror the diverse identities of the viewers themselves. These chromatic variations suggest figures of different ages, genders, races, and ethnicities, allowing the audience to project their subjectivities onto the work. In doing so, Onar’s art transcends the exhibition walls, challenging traditional perspectives and oscillating between past and present, material and metaphysical, individual and collective. The exhibition title *In Case*, semiotically invites multiple layers of interpretation: it evokes the phrase “if we were...” (CED) and also suggests contingency, anticipation, or preparedness for an uncertain future. Simultaneously, it conjures the image of bags or suitcases—objects directly tied to the visual language of the exhibition. Within the context of genocide and political upheaval, these symbols resonate with the experiences of immigrants and displaced individuals. Onar’s choice of title



Fig. 01

thus becomes a conceptual entry point, guiding the audience through a reflective journey across fragmented spaces and temporalities. In other words, regardless of their origin or sense of belonging, viewers are encouraged to engage critically with each artwork, uncovering nuanced meanings embedded in the act of observation itself. Theoretically speaking, Onar's exhibition seems to investigate philosophical issues; for instance, it resonates with the principles of object-oriented ontology (Heft, 2017). That is to say, her visual language centers around silent, everyday objects that resist symbolic reduction, yet remain charged with affective and historical presence. These objects do not merely represent memory or identity; rather, they invite the viewer into a space where things themselves speak—bearing witness to the past while maintaining their own ontological autonomy. The artist also engages with the concept of space as a means to reveal the philosophical and unseen dimensions of these objects, treating them as signifiers that transform over time. To begin with, “Current” (Fig. 01) features 800 tied-folds carefully positioned on a slanted surface that spans 2.35 meters in width and 5 meters in length, descending from a height of 1.45 meters to the floor. What is striking about this installation is the abundance of tied-folds, featuring multiple colors, including dominant whites and a singular red spot, which evoke constructed ideologies

shaped by diverse cultural, political, and racial contexts. The title, “Current”, gestures not only toward the temporal present but also invites a moment of perception and reflection. Philosophically, the work appears to question how we attribute meaning to colors and to what extent these meanings are influenced by our subjective realities. From a temporal perspective, the linguistic choice of “current” suggests a dialogue with modernity and contemporaneity, encouraging both intellectuals and general viewers to engage with the artwork through the lens of their ideological frameworks, whether consciously held, lost, or newly discovered. An exceptionally stirring artwork, “Redoubt” (Fig. 02), the installation consists of nearly a thousand pale-hued, tied-folds, meticulously assembled into a three-dimensional configuration featuring wooden openings. While viewers are invited to peer through these openings, their vision is limited to whatever lies beyond the structure itself. As we examine this installation more closely, it begins to resemble a bunker, a prison, or a cluster of archival spaces that preserve fragments of the past. Onar connects the past to the moment of present observation through the sensory and symbolic presence of tied-folds, the earthy scent, and the wooden openings. These openings function as points of parapraxis — thresholds between what is hidden within the bunker and what lies outside. Yet, the past remains inaccessible. At this moment,



Fig. 02



Fig. 03

we, the viewers, are compelled to pause and confront the metaphysical dimension of the work: the unseen histories of war, genocide, and ideological resistance. The fabrics, in their folds, seem to enclose these lost narratives, reminding us that what we are witnessing is not the past itself, but a mediated surface — a barrier between us and what has been silenced.

Another evocative work from *In Case* is “Displacements No. 11” (Fig. 03), a digitally manipulated photo-collage. At the center of the composition is a mound of tied-folds rendered in grayscale, surrounded symmetrically by rows of individuals standing on either side. This visual arrangement invites multiple interpretations, particularly in relation to diaspora and genocide. The work resonates with the principles of object-oriented ontology, as the tied-folds assert their presence as more than symbolic objects — they possess an ontological weight that engages

the viewer directly. The archival color palette and composition evoke a sense of historical rupture, transforming the image into a frame that projects us into the past. We, as members of imagined communities and lands, are drawn into a temporal and spatial dislocation. Yet, in the very moment of observation, the tied-folds seem to articulate resistance — staging a dialectical encounter between thought and being, memory and materiality. What is particularly striking in this work is the positioning of the figures, their backs turned toward us. This gesture creates a subtle but powerful identification: they could just as easily be us. In facing the hazy, ghost-like image at the center, they embody our own act of looking — not only at the image, but through it, into a spectral space of memory, trauma, and displacement. “Displacements No. 16” (Fig. 04), which presents Onar’s suspended tied-folds resembling parachutes descending toward an indistinct land, invokes



Fig. 04

imagery of war, forced migration, and diaspora. The aerial perspective reinforces the detachment and disorientation experienced by those who are displaced, caught between land and sky, memory and movement. Semiotically, the artwork functions as a metaphor for identities that have been folded and scattered across space. These tied-folds have become signifiers—dense with meaning yet severed from clear referents—drifting in a void where the traces of origin are obscured or irretrievable. Onar’s work stages the theoretical dimension of diasporic narratives: stories that emerge not from fixed points of origin but from imagined communities, whose destinies may never circle back to a single homeland. Whether these identities eventually land upon familiar soil or foreign terrain remains unresolved, and perhaps irrelevant—the emphasis instead falls on the suspended condition of perpetual displacement. Through these selected pieces and others in the

exhibition, Onar’s tied-folds appear to recount narratives that span the past, present, and future. At the same time, she poses questions—or more precisely, invites viewers to question their sense of belonging. Her work prompts reflection on how political, cultural, and social ideologies construct and deconstruct our identities, and how resistance might be enacted through symbolic gestures. That is to say, by folding these ideologies, binding them, and leaving them suspended—anchored neither fully to land nor to space, but standing at the crossroads.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Anber Onar’s “Current”; installation, 145 x 235 x 500 cm (2025)

[Fig. 02] Anber Onar’s “Redoubt”; mixed media, 210 x 140 x 140 cm (2025)

[Fig. 03] Anber Onar’s “Displacements No.11”; digitally manipulated photo collage, 100 x 140 cm (2025)

[Fig. 04] Anber Onar’s “Displacements No. 16”; digitally

REFERENCES

- Artistry of Good. (2025). *On the “in case...” exhibition with Anber Onar: The artist’s creative process, thematic depth, and more*. Artistry of Good. <https://artistryofgood.com/anber-onar-ile-in-case-sergisi-uzerine-sanatcinin-yaratim-su-reci-tematik-derinlik-ve-daha-fazlasi/> Accessed [11-05-2025]
- Artrooms at the House. (n.d.). *Anber Onar*. Artrooms at the House. <https://www.artroomsatthehouse.com/anberonar> Accessed [10- 05- 2025]
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). *Referee*. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved September 23, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/referee?q=In+case> Accessed [10- 05-2025]
- Fatah, S. N., & Pasour, C. (2025). Folding Identity: A Foucauldian Reading of Time and Space in Anber Onar’s In Case. *Journal of Philology and Educational Sciences*, 4(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.53898/jpes2025411>
- Heft, P. (2017). *Taking things seriously again: An introduction to object-oriented ontology* [Conference presentation]. 21st Annual Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, Forest Grove, OR. https://www.academia.edu/32612377/Taking_Things_Seriously_Again_An_Introduction_to_Object_Oriented_Ontology
- Pillai, J. (2025). *Metafora dönüşen katlamalar* [Folds transforming into metaphor]. *Milliyet Sanat*, 52(791), 66–67.