

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

AMAN MOJADIDI

August 08, 2017 • Aman Mojadidi discusses *Once Upon a Place*



Aman Mojadidi, *Once Upon a Place*, 2017, Times Square, New York. Photo: Brian William Waddell / FT SET for Times Square Arts.

Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi works largely on site-specific projects that combine

qualitative research, traditional storytelling, postmodern narrative strategies, and mixed-media installations to approach themes such as belonging, identity politics, conflict, and migration. His latest installation, Once Upon a Place, 2017, comprises three phone booths that are wired to relay dozens of oral histories told by immigrants living throughout New York City. Mojadidi recorded the stories during his residency with Times Square Arts. The work will be on view in the heart of Times Square (Forty-Sixth Street and Seventh Avenue) until September 5, 2017.

I DON'T KNOW if I identify as an ethnographer or as an artist, to be honest. I feel like I straddle this position between the two. My process is ethnographic, but the product that I create is much more artistic.

My family comes from Afghanistan. They came to the US in the late 1960s. I was born in the US, so issues of migration, immigration, biculturalism, and identity play a role in the work that I've done from the beginning. For the past five or six years, my background in cultural anthropology has driven me to create site-specific projects that in some way involve communities and address particular environments.

In Cuba, I've done work that looks at Guantánamo Bay prisoners and detainees who are being released, and I've done projects on my own upbringing within two cultures. I currently live in France, where immigration is a huge issue, and I lived in Afghanistan for about twelve years, where I know a lot of people who are trying to leave. These artist friends of mine, and others who are looking for legal and illegal ways to get themselves to Europe or farther, made me want to look at the anti-immigrant hysteria that has been brewing in the US, Europe, and other places over the past couple of years. I wanted to make a work that dealt with the humanity of people leaving their homes, and I wanted to do it within an urban environment that is a flagship of immigration. I mean, New York, even globally, is seen as a model of how immigration builds a city.

As I was thinking about doing this project in 2014, I learned that phone booths were being removed from the streets of New York, and then the idea immediately hit me. The fact that so many people have used these booths in the past, and that so many stories have been told through these phones, made them a natural way to present new stories.

In terms of identifying communities, there was a lot of desk review. I reviewed reports through the census bureau, as well as through articles and reports on immigration in all the boroughs. I tried to reach people through community organizations and centers, I approached mosques and temples, and I spent a lot of time in neighborhoods. I met with people during the run-up to the election last year, so there was a lot of suspicion from them, which added an extra barrier to reaching people. They wanted to know why I was collecting information on immigrants. Many people who spoke with me were illegal and stayed anonymous. In the end, we were still able to get about seventy stories from immigrants from twenty-six countries.

There's a young man who was carried over the Mexican border by his mom when he was three years old—she carried him on her back—and now he is an activist for immigrant rights and lobbies in Washington, DC. There's a gentleman from Yemen, who worked as a cook in Windows on the World before the attack on the Twin Towers; he talks about how the politics around his identity as a Yemeni changed after the towers fell. There's a woman from Puerto Rico who had been a drug addict and needed to make a change.

I'm hoping that other immigrants will listen and feel a connection with these people, and that within this climate of heightened xenophobia the project can help people see beyond all of the anti-immigration rhetoric being spouted by the Trump administration, as well as in other places in the world. Picking up that phone and listening to someone's voice is an intimate experience; it's different from hearing someone's story on the news or through some other medium. In a way, the project just cuts out the politics; the person just tells their story.

— *As told to Lauren Cavalli*

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