

Journal of
**MATERIAL
CULTURE**

Volume 20
Number 4
DECEMBER 2015

ISSN 1359-1835



Commemorating home: Art as place making, an artist's narration

Journal of Material Culture

2015, Vol. 20(4) 415–428

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1359183515605858

mcu.sagepub.com



Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan

University of Jaffna, Thirunelveli, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The damage caused by 26 years of armed conflict in its various forms on the social fabric of the Sri Lankan Tamil community has led to the loss of place, as well as displacement for many, compelling individuals to live with traumatic and fragile memories of home. This visual essay foregrounds the changing role of the author's own artistic practice conceived both as eye witness and facilitator in this context. The essay also explores how anthropological tools and museum techniques are employed to draw audiences into the aesthetics of individual pain connected to experiences of loss and displacement in conflict situations.

Keywords

aesthetics, art, home, place, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's civil war was brought to an end in 2009 by a brutal government military initiative. In the north, however, ripped up roofs and walls, destroyed buildings, dwellings completely taken over by the growth of vegetation, bulldozed villages, fields riddled with landmines and devastated streets and junctions without human trace all still remain, reflecting the realities of war (Figure 1). Images like this bring to mind the fate of civilians forced to move out of their homes, just as it brings to mind those who chose to stay and were subsequently injured, deformed or even killed. Bullet marks on the buildings imply the wounds and scars of the people who carry the burden of the war. These destructions index the social system that has been slowly eradicated in different phases of aggravation during Sri Lanka's 26-year armed conflict. On the other hand, the incommensurable realities of displacement become the subtext of these kinds of images.

Corresponding author:

Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, University of Jaffna, ????, Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Email: tshanaathanan@yahoo.co.in



Figure 1. War-damaged property in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. © Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan.

Cycles of displacement over the last 30 years of civil war have drastically altered demographic patterns in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, irrevocably damaging its social fabric.¹ A vast majority of the population in Sri Lanka's Northern Province experienced displacement within and across the island as well as beyond its borders. Although terms such as 'diaspora' and 'internally displaced' are variously used to describe these communities, the experiences of expatriate and internally displaced Tamil-speaking communities are inter-related and inter-laced with each other through the experience of 'home' and loss. Hence, in the wake of displacement, social and geographical rootedness and/or the realities of 'home' were either completely erased or drastically altered. Even those who escaped displacement or managed to return home have experienced becoming strangers in their former homes given the utter disintegration of previous social bonds and relationships (see Appadurai, 1997).

As a person whose entire life has been encompassed by the realities of civil war, critical interrogations of home as a feeling of stability, intimacy, belonging and permanence became the major thematic preoccupation of my art practice. When the struggle for a separate Tamil homeland imploded and ruined the actually existing realities of home, the question of identity in the context of the loss of home became the driving force behind my art practice. My art, whilst becoming autobiographical, attempted to materialize the feelings of mutuality, loss and shared dispossession in relation to home. In the early phase of my artistic practice, through the representation of personal myths and symbols, painting became a portrayal of victimhood.

On the left side of the painting below, entitled 'Home' (Figure 2), a green human figure tightly holds a burning tree, and on the right, two more carry houses as they move



Figure 2. 'Home' (1997) / oil on canvas. © Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan.

towards the fire. In the middle of the composition, a house is falling, either caught in a whirlpool or sinking into marshland, emerging or vanishing. The painting clearly foregrounds the irony for many caught in the midst of the conflict in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, where home has become self-destructive and uncertain, hence painful; it expresses the feeling of melancholia attached to home.

Similarly, in the case of a mixed media work called 'Musical Home' (Figure 3), a two-faced man is trying to balance an upside-down house covered in thorns. He holds a stack of houses in his other hand, balancing them as if he were a circus player. The agony of balancing the image of home with the realities of defiled houses, of negotiating happy memories with the fragile realities of home, is accentuated by creatures crawling over the protagonist's body. In 2002, when the war came to a temporary halt, the hidden realities of displacement were exposed. We became more aware that ancient villages were erased from the surface of the earth, making way for high security military zones. And in the process, I realized that these villages now only exist in memory or on maps. Even if people were allowed to resettle they would not be the same old villages. This realization drew me to engage with maps and memory in my artistic intervention.

The painting 'My Grandma's Courtyard' (Figure 4) was based purely on the mental map of my grandmother's house and its surroundings, which were demolished by cycles of air raids from the Sri Lankan Government air force. By introducing myself in the top right corner of the painting as a lonely figure in a swing under the mango tree in my grandmother's courtyard, I refer to how I became a stranger in my own place, to the entrapment between memory and the present, in the absence of my relatives and neighbours. In this work, a map is excavated from memory and becomes an index for a non-existent home or a community completely scattered and dispersed due to displacement.



Figure 3. 'Musical Home' (2000) / mixed media on paper. © Thamothersampillai Shanaathanan.

During this phase I began to understand myself as a character living with mismatching bits and pieces of dissimilar realities, which I attempt to express in the painting 'Dislocation I' (Figure 5). Here, a multi-armed human-like creature holds together jigsaw puzzle pieces that cannot be put together. These mixed media works are further complicated by juxtaposing and superimposing mental maps over cartographic maps of different locations and periods depicting current Tamil homes, which on the one hand articulate mismatches of citizenships, nationalities, territories, histories and identities.



Figure 4. 'My Grandma's Courtyard' (2006) / mixed media on paper. © Thamoathampillai Shanaathanan.

On the other hand, these works portray the acceptance of place as collaged and mismatched, they identify something that is emplaced in the present. Pieces of bandage incorporated in the work express pain attached to the act of both connection and disconnection.

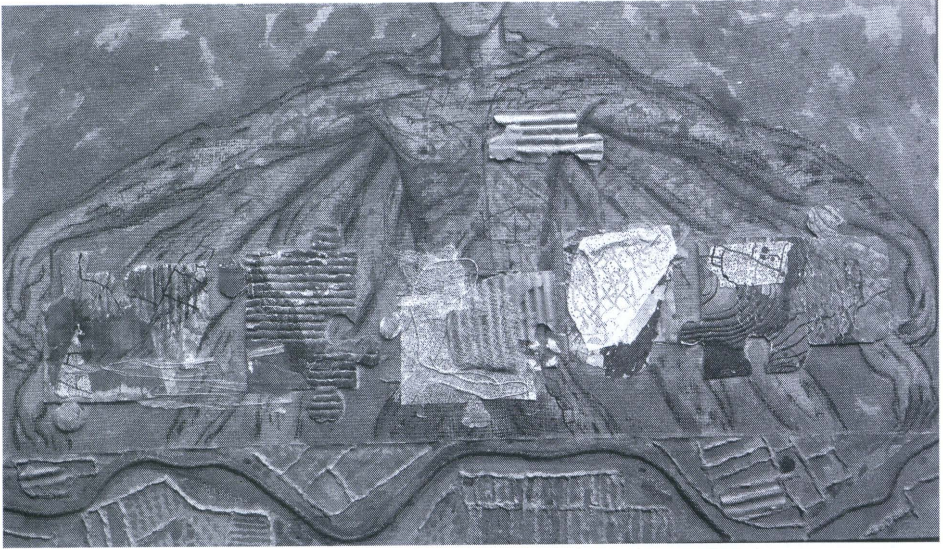


Figure 5. 'Dislocation I' (2006) / mixed media on paper. © Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan.

In 2004, I visited a Jaffna Tamil couple in a London suburb.² They were married in Colombo in the late 1990s, when Jaffna was not easily accessible due to travel restrictions imposed by the Sri Lankan Government and the closure of the land. Having moved to London soon after their marriage, the husband did not have an opportunity to visit his wife's dowry house in Jaffna.³ To compensate, he built a model of this house in plywood, based entirely on his wife's descriptions (Figure 6). It now has pride of place in the living room of their London apartment. This replica of home was not only a product of memory but had become an integral part of the couple's attempt to 'home making' in London. This many-bedroomed, sprawling replica was a tangible symbol of the dignity and status this family would have enjoyed in Jaffna. The couple's narration of their family history in relation to this replica had them moving through a variety of emotions: joy, anxiety, pain and nostalgia.

I have encountered a few other occasions where people attempt to represent their image of home, all of which highlight how displacement gives extraordinary emotional resonance to domestic architecture and material culture. Like Yaso's replica of his dowry house in Jaffna (Figure 6), these representational practices have been extremely influential in my artistic practice. As Hans Belting (2011: 19) notes, in cult usage, the dead exchange their bodies for an image that remains present. In order to give that image a presence, to make possible the re-presentation of the body, a medium becomes essential. The object becomes the point of empathy, a present absence. In this context, I have worked with the ways that verbal and visual representations give new agency to the displaced to negotiate the realities of homelessness. The act of memorizing and narrating is not only nostalgic and painful, but also a cathartic attempt to cope in the present. Hence, place making is crucially connected to the act of remembering as well as to forgetting. Aesthetics as a feeling-in-common emerges as a mode of mediation offering agency.

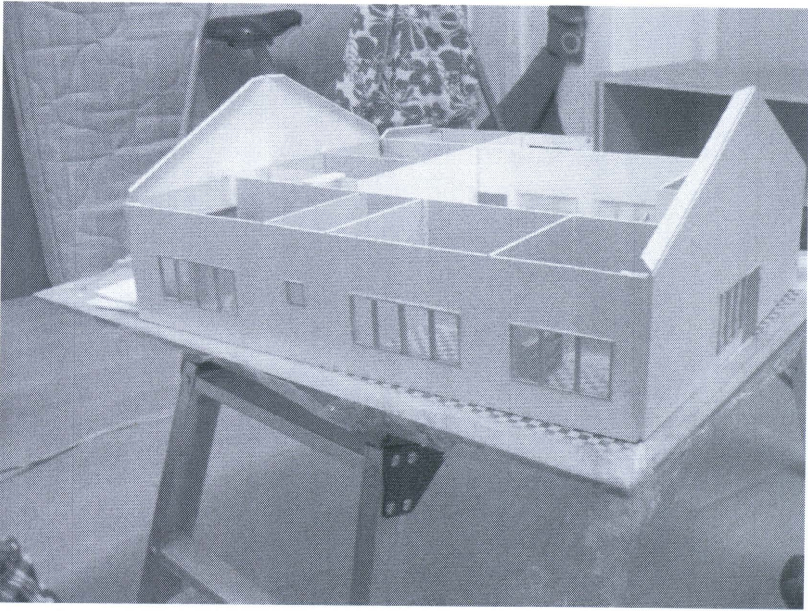


Figure 6. Replica of Yaso's Jaffna house / plywood / in London. © Thamocharampillai Shanaathanan.

In September 2010, Raking Leaves, a London based, non-profit curatorial publisher, invited me to undertake an art-book project based on two earlier collective projects. These earlier art projects revolved around the notion of home experienced by the internally displaced Tamil community in Jaffna, Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Vancouver, Canada.

The first work entitled 'History of Histories' (Figure 7) included 500 everyday objects with indexical or symbolic connections to the experiences of those living in a war zone; they were randomly collected from home owners all over the Jaffna peninsula.⁴ The collection was mounted in 2004 in the iconic Jaffna Public Library, a public building and institution reduced to ashes by the Sri Lankan Government in 1981 and subsequently rebuilt in 2003. Each object in this collection was placed on a red velvet pedestal, enclosed within identical containers and displayed as it might have been in a conventional museum or laboratory. The collection included a wide range of ordinary, everyday objects, such as a dead child's shoe, the broken head of a temple icon, various identity cards, passports, death certificates, residential permits, reports of disappearances and letters from missing relatives, keys of houses that had been demolished for the expansion of High Security Zones, photographs of loved ones lost in the war, the ashes of a burnt house, bits and pieces of plaster, shell-fragments, bullets, broken dolls, pieces of dance costume jewellery, barbed-wire and sand. This exhibit was part of a larger visual art initiative that brought to Jaffna several major works produced by Sinhalese artists in Colombo, reflecting on civil conflict and militarization in Sri Lanka.⁵



Figure 7. 'History of Histories' (2004) / installation. © Thamothersampillai Shanaathanan.

I compiled a similar exhibition, also in 2009, focusing on objects belonging to the Sri Lankan Tamil community living in Vancouver. Entitled 'Imag(in)ing Home' (Figure 8), this installation was mounted at Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology as part of its international exhibition titled 'Border Zones: New Art Across Cultures', showcasing artists who were using anthropological tools to produce art.⁶ Interweaving 300 individual stories of home, this installation tried to unpack the complexity and liminality of Tamil homes in Vancouver by probing the emotional and material boundaries of diasporic homes and how they interact and transform each other. Many of these Tamil migrants – both legal and illegal – crossed various borders, entry points, transit and checkpoints of different countries to reach their final destination. These unpredictable and dangerous journeys determined the size and nature of the objects they could carry. Thus, the passage of travel became a subtext of these objects. Like the migrants, these objects too underwent the surveillance of state and non-state actors through their journeys. Hence, travel handled, translated and altered the memory and meaning of objects, determining their transparency or opacity.

In these laboratory/museum-like displays, individual stories were allowed to collude with each other and to transform the personal into public narratives. They also invited viewers to imagine their own home. Each everyday object in this collection not only represented a personal history or memory of home, but now became a part of the collective architecture of home in the context of displacement. The personal memories thus intertwined with larger social/political histories. Though the installations were a collage



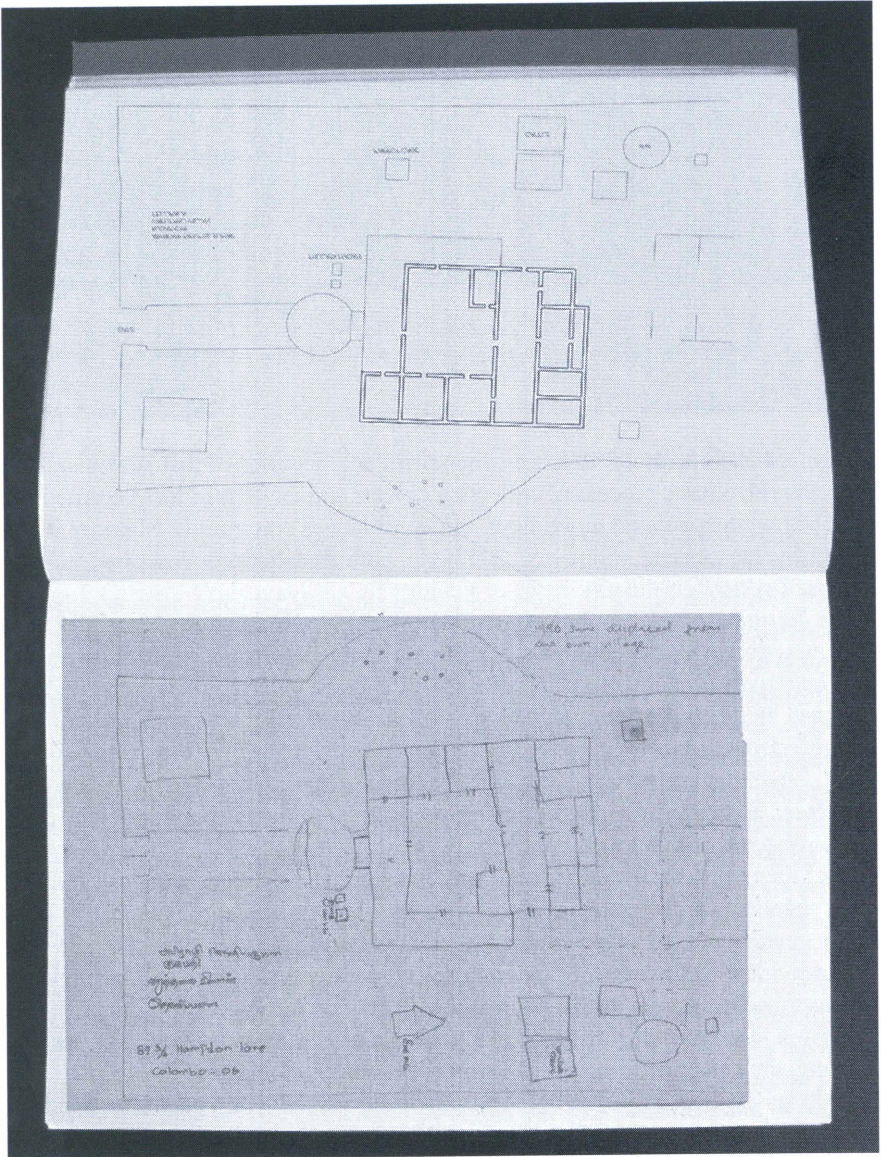
Figure 8. 'Imag(in)ing Home' (2009) / installation / Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. © Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan. Photographer Ken Mayer, image courtesy : UBC Museum of Anthropology.

of diversified and contested identities, memories and histories of lost homes and home-making, the rhizomatic process of collecting objects and feelings of loss became a thread that linked together isolated individuals and families as a community. Memory is always mediated by the present (Gibbons, 2007). In both installations described above, the objects on display became mediators of memory.

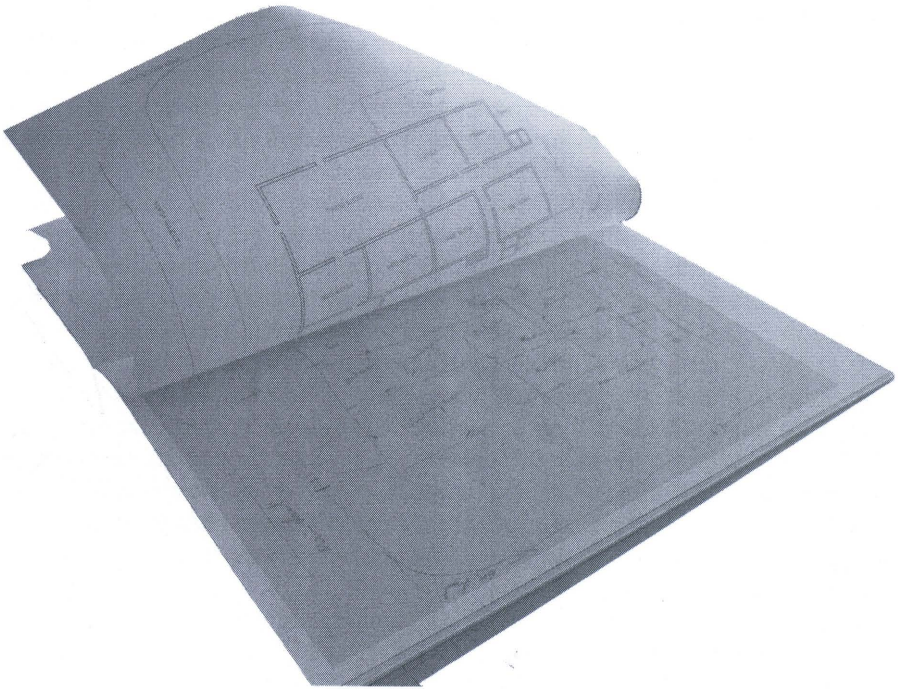
In the second project, *The Incomplete Thombu* (2011, see Figures 9 and 10), I developed a mechanism to collect and share memories of the displaced through an artist's book. The *thombu* documented land ownership in relation to the physical boundaries of land owned by others.⁷ Although there are various statistical pieces of information available on the physical loss of property and/or persons during the civil war, albeit contradictory and disputed, the emotional implications of these losses are yet to be registered. This book project addressed this lacuna by mapping the emotional boundaries of property soon after the end of the armed conflict.

One of the major challenges I faced was how to present the narratives of individuals who are not visual artists, and how to engage my skills in visual articulation in this collaborative endeavour. I chose a method of 'remembering through the act of drawing' to collect individual testimonies. I randomly selected individuals from my social networks as well as those recommended to me by word of mouth, asking each to draw the ground plan of the house most closely associated with his or her image of home. In the process of drawing, they shared memories of loved ones, objects, incidents, plants, pets, colours and smells associated with that building. Their narrations transformed the hand-drawn plans of their house to a tangible expression of home. I then did a drawing in response to the stories I heard and the emotions they engendered. To make these mental house plans

more 'legible', an architectural rendering of the original ground plan on transparent paper was inserted between my drawing and the hand drawn house plan. An extract of each narration was included on the reverse of the ground plan. The entire work was bound and presented in a form that recalled a *thombu*, or land register. The end result contains 80 documentations of memories of home by Tamil and Muslim civilians displaced from the northern part of the island and presently living either in Sri Lanka or abroad.



(Continued)



Figures 9 and 10. *The Incomplete Thombu* (2011). © Thamocharampillai Shanaathanan.

Below are a few testimonies from the book:

1. I moved to Colombo during the Indian Army occupation of Jaffna. Home is about the moments we shared together as a family. I also remember the vegetation in my garden. I do not know how to express these fleeting memories. It is something you cannot catch hold of ... (document 1)
2. I was a small child when we were displaced in 1990. We walked nearly 15 km to reach Jaffna. My family members carried household things that were portable. Since I was small they told me to carry my pet puppy. I carried him because he was too small to walk that distance. A few days after we reached Jaffna the puppy died ... (document 7)
3. It is hard to nurture a jasmine creeper in the heavy winter of Toronto. I covered the plant with a blanket and kept it inside the house. Last summer it yielded four flowers. Their fragrance brought me back to my Jaffna house. (document 15)
4. We had to leave our house because of the advancement of troops in 1990. My father carefully locked the doors and brought all the keys with him, with the hope of return. Now, almost 20 years have gone by, and my father passed away a few years back, without seeing his house. We still have the keys of the house even though it, and my father, no longer exist. (document 16)

5. I have my ancestral house in Jaffna. My elder sister's marriage took place in that house ... Now it is a military training camp. Once when my family visited, we received guest treatment in our own house. We sat in our drawing room tasting cool drinks and biscuits. Later, when I attempted to see the house, my request was rejected on the grounds that I did not have the right. Now I watch my sister's wedding video to see my own house. (document 7)
6. My father died when we were small. My mother struggled to feed seven children. I started working in the paddy fields when I was eight years old. My elder brother who was helping my mother to raise the family was shot dead by the Indian army. My elder sister is married and living in Switzerland and my younger brother is in France. Now I work as a university lecturer in Jaffna. One of my sisters was an LTTE cadre and was killed in 1995 during a military operation. My other two sisters are married. One of them was badly injured in the last phase of the Vanni war. Both my sisters' husbands lost their legs in the same war. (document 73)
7. The house that I live in now came under an air attack in 1990. It was the first night air raid by the government. Everything in the house was destroyed. I lost all my toys that I had kept since I was a child and all the glass bangles that I had kept in wooden boxes. I have since rebuilt my house but there are no toys and bangles to call it home. (document 74)
8. One of my brothers was in the LTTE, therefore my whole family moved to the Vanni during the Jaffna exodus in 1995. We settled in the Vanni but the war there forced us to move again. When we left we could only take one set of clothes that we could carry in one bag. I am now quite comfortable with this portable home existence because a permanent house can be lost and destroyed and is the cause of pain. (document 78)
9. I have resettled in our own house after nearly twenty years. I was displaced to Puttalam. Everything has changed here. My street does not look like it did before. Most of those who were displaced have yet to return ... Even in the refugee camps in Puttalam we lived with our relatives and friends. Now I am living with strangers. I am a stranger on my own street. (document 80)

Testimonies varied temporally, from the anti-Tamil riots of 1958 to the end of the war in 2009. They varied geographically from Mannar to Jaffna, to Colombo to Toronto. The narratives encompassed family, objects, plants, pets, festivals and villages, highlighting sociological, historical and material realities. The juxtaposition of these mismatching stories, objects, histories and memories produced a surreal location. Similarly, the stories are all very different in both style and content. Very few talk about tragic incidents; some are funny, others nostalgic, optimistic, simple, and ordinary. There is also a subtext of resistance. However, the overall feeling is a sense of loss. While making the private public and the individual collective, the format and layout of the book transform the ordinary into the extra-ordinary, and the mundane and everyday into something aesthetic, beautiful, yet at the same time fleeting, fugitive, troubling.

The book came into existence along with the demolition of all civil memorials associated with the last 30 years of war, the bulldozing and clearing of LTTE memorials and burial grounds, and the mushrooming of military memorials and victory monuments.

Right now, therefore, *The Incomplete Thombu* may be the only remaining material memorial to civilians who bore the burdens of the war. Unlike installation art, the book form allows this memorial to exist both temporally and spatially. Further, the combination of artist's drawing, architectural plan, ground map and accompanying text expands the possibility of multiple readings implicated with sociological, psychological, historical and artistic understandings of impact of common loss of home.

These various art projects channelled the image of home through empathetic identifications with associated objects, persons, colours, smells, incidents, or house plans, and made these visible through artistic representation. Every single object/narrative/drawing brought into the unified whole by the mode of presentation involved an artistic decision. Hence, aesthetics is located not in individual objects but in the mode of presentation. Productive tension operates at various levels in the relation between object and narrative, individuality and collectivity, subject and object, presence and absence, past and present, history and memory, and image and medium. This leads to an ambiguity or interplay between fact and fiction, which is central to the work of aesthetics. This aspect of ambiguity, or interplay, linking individual pain with a common loss, helps to unify isolated individuals as a community. In this context, the artist emerges as a facilitator, and aesthetics emerges as mediation.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. In the history of Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, displacement occurred due to ethnic riots, military operations, the creation of High Security Zones, government-imposed economic embargoes, internal battles between different Tamil militant groups and ethnic cleansing.
2. Jaffna is considered to be the cultural capital of Sri Lankan Tamils. It is situated at the northern end of the island of Sri Lanka.
3. Money and/or property that a bride's family must pay to the groom as part of their marriage agreement.
4. This installation was a collaboration among the people of Jaffna, my art history students S Kannan, T Vasanthi, G Thamilini, S Kumutha and myself.
5. This exhibition titled 'Agam-Puram', jointly curated by artist Jagath Weerasinghe and myself. For further information on this exhibition, see <http://www.theertha.org>
6. For further information, see www.BorderZones.ca
7. Winslow's (1862) Tamil dictionary defines *Thombu* (*Thampu*) as a public land registry. It is a word commonly used by both Tamils and Sinhalese and is probably derived from the Greek word *thome*, meaning a section, most likely of papyrus, which gave rise to the Latin word *tome* or large book. The Portuguese and Dutch, who colonized Sri Lanka in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively, used this term for the land registers in which they documented land ownership.

References

- Appadurai A (1997) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Belting H (2011) *An Anthropology of Image; Picture, Medium, Body*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Gibbons J (2007) *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*. London: IB Tauris.
- Shanaathanan T (2011) *The Incomplete Thombu*. London: Raking Leaves.
- Winslow M (1862) *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary of High and Low Tamil*. Madras: PR Hunt.

Author biography

Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan is a visual artist and a senior lecturer in Art History at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Jaffna. His current research interest in modernisms, art and Nationalism, and the politics of memorialization. He is one of the contributor to *The Modernist World* (2015) Edited by Stephen Ross and Allana C. Lindgren, London: Routledge