



Dadaab Commons

The GoDown Arts Centre, March 2025



**What does a refugee camp teach us
about making a commons?**



Let us think with the multigenerational refugee camps near the town of Dadaab, Kenya. Established in 1991 in lands crossing present-day Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, the Dadaab refugee camp complex has been one of the UNHCR's largest and longest running establishments, currently engaged in a proposed process of integration into the Kenyan state. Kenya's third largest grouping of people, after Nairobi and Mombasa, the Dadaab settlements have systematized architectural and planning practices carried out since, in international responses to crises elsewhere in the world.

Yet, looking closely at Dadaab, we find African ways of knowing. These are expressed in generations of migratory building and craft practices. Ancient understandings of the landscape and ecology. Historical particularities and a politics in oceanic, riverine, mountain, desert, plains, and urban relations. Song and oral traditions of sharing. Socialities and ways of living on land that supersede the proprietary. We acknowledge the elders and communities in Dadaab, whose lives and work hold meaning for us all.

Acknowledging the ecologies and aesthetics of a camp settlement and the land it occupies, the partitions and borders it reifies, the domesticities insurgent in the act of sheltering in emergency, and the sedentarizations embedded in interregional and international migration is part of our artistic and architectural embrace of Dadaab. We move beyond reductive understandings of refugee camps, and turn to ways of life and habitation undertaken by people in extraordinary conditions. Our works reflect the architectures and ecologies of Dadaab, which open onto knowledges common to us all. In this, we hope to find ways of living together, and building an intellectual commons.

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi

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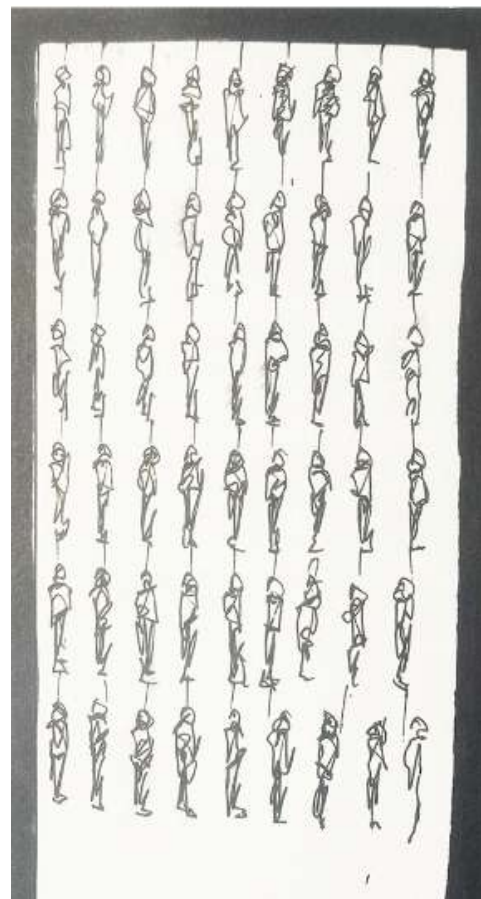
Dadaab Commons includes the works and insights of AbdulFatah Adam, Cave Bureau, Deqa Abshir, Elsa MH Mäki, James Muriuki, Peterson Kamwathi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, with contributions from Awjama Cultural Centre in Nairobi, Thirupurasundari Sevvil and Devika Prabhakaran of Nam Veedu Nam Oor Nam Kadhai in Chennai, Anjali Grant in Seattle, and Lauren Hardy in New York. *Dadaab Commons* is organized by the GoDown Arts Centre and partner and guest curator Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi. Organic materials from the exhibition will be donated to the local community for cooking fuel and building material.

Access is core to the character of the commons: common access, a sense of communal ownership, a sense of sharing. A commons includes this form of protection. There is a permanency in that.

Dadaab was never established with permanence in mind. In Dadaab, there is an identity based in a place of impermanence.

Peterson Kamwathi's *Untitled* imagines a doorway as a form of access, offering possibilities of inclusion. Acknowledging that a doorway is also a potential barrier, this portal is porous, the door leaf spanned by a membrane of suspended elements. They recall the beads that hang from door frames across Kenya and other parts of the world, which invite us to part them with our hands and move through the door.

The suspended galvanized steel elements are modeled on photographic documentation of people within the Dadaab camps and the refugee processing points outside. Kamwathi fashioned the pieces from ink sketches drawn from photographs, relying on the rigidity, yet malleability, of steel to build a membrane. Citing figures from Dadaab, *Untitled* remarks on access, inviting us to walk through a door.







Scent of return.

Burnt acacia-resin incense. Desert essences—dung, salt, milk, smoke, herbs, and ghee, the yearning for rain. Akai-ma said good smells melted bad spirits. *We'll meet our cows at sunset*, Odidi promises. *Home* is the cream of hot milk of their animals, gulped down when Galgalu the herdsman was not looking, chewed-grass, slime-layered goat tongues on skin as they licked the stolen salt he and Ajany fed them with. Small Odidi watches Baba shave, his angular face lost in soft white lather, experiences again the wonder of Baba's smooth-faced re-emergence. Baba winks. He is stretched out on his large, peeling tan leather arm-chair, head leaning back, a whiff of Old Spice, filled with big laughter. Just when Odidi would have thrown himself into Nyipir's arms, a chill shadow crashes into him, stabbing into his body.

Now.

They were chance offspring of northern-Kenya drylands. Growing up, Odidi and Ajany had been hemmed in by arid land geographies and essences. Freed from history, and the interference of Nairobi's government, they had marveled at Anam Ka'alakol, the desert lake that swallowed three rivers—the Omo, Turkwel, and Kerio. They learned the memories of another river—the Ewaso Nyiro—four moody winds, the secret things of parents' fears, throbbing shades of pasts, met assorted transient souls, and painted their existence on a massive canvas of



The Somali waab – an architecture for dwelling that persists beyond cultural ritual – offers an allegory for Dadaab, a place that is simultaneously liminal and permanent, a site of displaced identity and the rebuilding of a new identity: a community whose interiority is at odds with its exteriority.

The handmade hereditary craft papermaking processes Deqa Abshir used for *The Intimate Fabric of Identity* are representative of the breaking down and re-forming of identity. Through the exploration of the structural interior of a waab and the experience of light and privacy it provides to a space, Abshir explores the interiority redefining individual identity, while exploring how this contributes to a collective identity, within Dadaab, and in an imagination of Dadaab. The overlapping processes of self-identifying and shaping collective identity are intertwined with the creation of a commons.

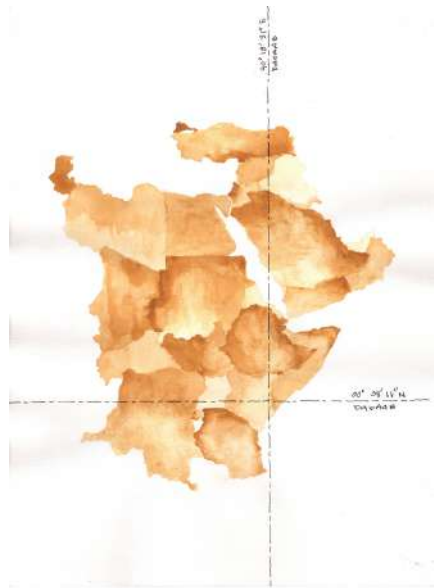




out of whispers. To protect new post-independence citizen children, like most new Kenya parents denying soul betrayals, Nyipir built illusions of another Kenya, shouting out the words of the national anthem when he could as if the volume alone would remove the rust eating into national hopes. Keeping mouths, ears, and eyes shut, parents had partitioned sorrow, purchased even more silence, and promised a "better future."

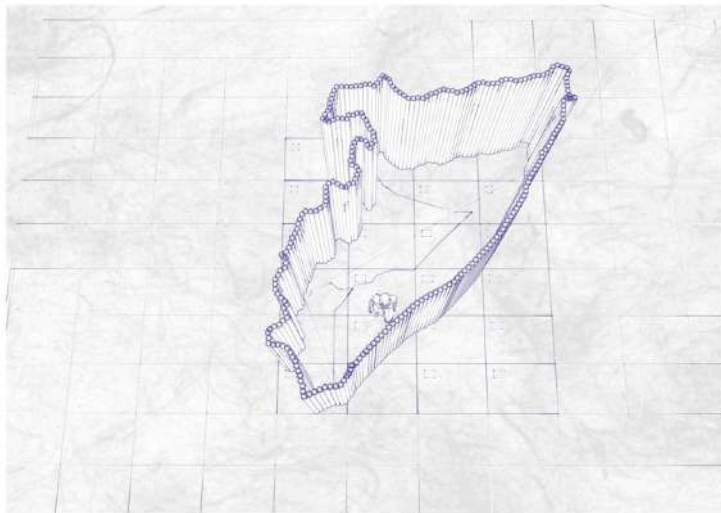
glowing, rocky, heated earth upon which anything could and did happen. They mapped their earth with portions of wind, fire, sky, water, and nothingness, with light, piecing tales from stones, counting footsteps etched into rocks, peering into crevices to spy on the house of red rain. They lived in the absence of elders afflicted with persistent memories: no one to tell the children how *it* had been, what *it* meant, how *it* must be seen, or even what *it* was. Because of this, they re-created myths of beginnings. "The first Oganda was spoken into existence by flame," Odidi once told Ajany. She believed him. His sister trusted everything he said. Glimmer of a smile.

Origins. Some historians claim Somalis are descendants of the pharaohs. Geologists have also claimed the oil deposits in Somalia are greater than those in any other country in the region, even on the Arabian Peninsula. The existence of Dadaab could be attributed to this gift, or curse.



What is the expression of the modern nomad? What is an architecture of pastoralism in the present day? In *Origins / Soomaaliweyn*, AbdulFatah Adam examines origins in the boundaries and unboundedness of Soomaaliweyn, the Greater Somalia that formed a precolonial political imagination in the region, long before camps in the Kenyan Northeast reinforced the confinements and sedentarizations imposed upon the imaginaries and realities of pastoral life.







A bird somewhere cackles with a hint of hysteria. In the library, a cold feeling starts at the base of Isaiah's spine and rushes to his head, making his hair stand on end. *Is the night watching me?* He blinks away the

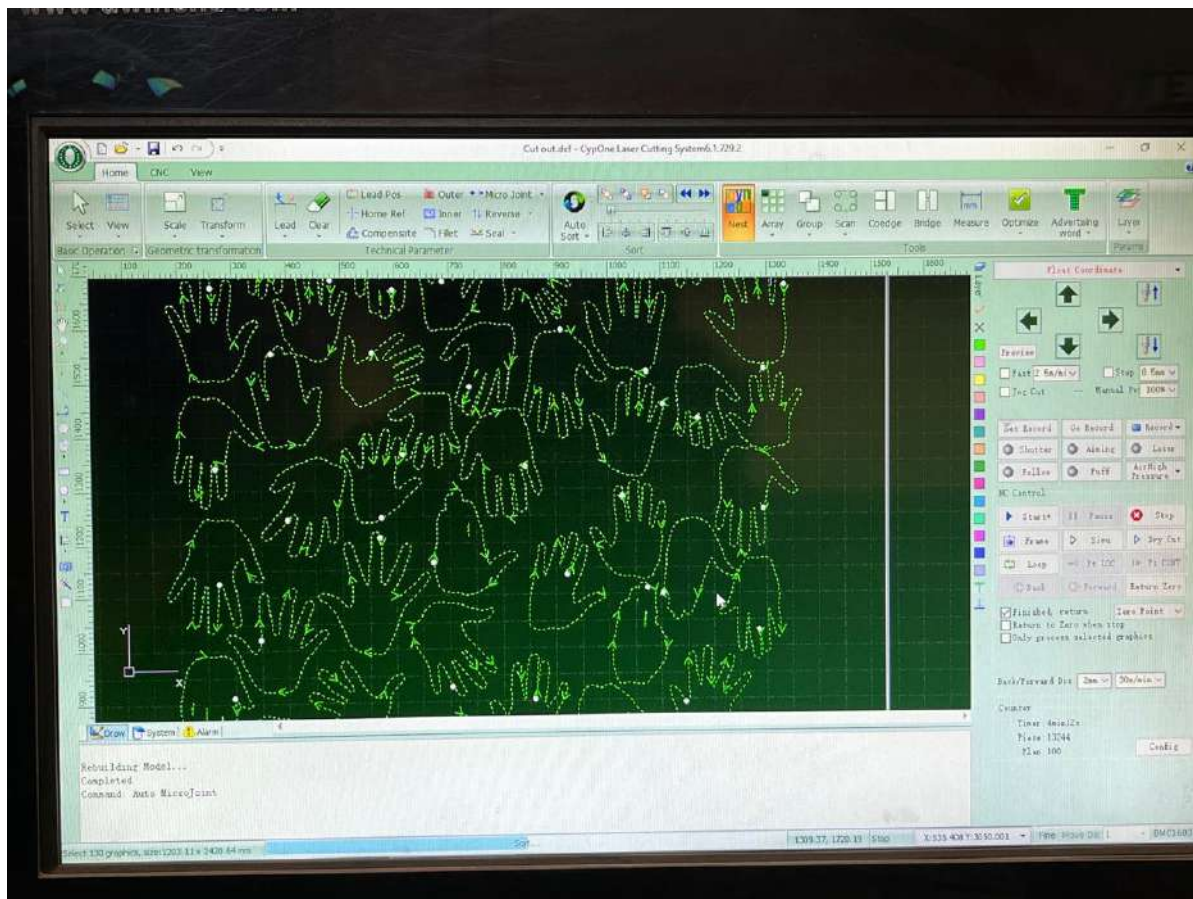
"Masala tea." Ajany slumps into the chair, planning her escape, just as she used to when this same gang of girls stopped her at school under one pretext or another, usually to do with access to Odidi as his star ascended. She scrunches her nose. Exhales at the unrepaired past. Notes the paraphernalia of their present lives: small technology idols—phones, beeping, purring, bleeping objects that expect to be fondled mid-conversation, pieces of a shape-changing land with grand fiber-optic tentacles plugging into old histories that refuse to rest in peace. Ajany listens. One woman's words are fringed with New Age positivity as she debates an activist. "If we breathed more and grounded our

being, connecting to the womb of the earth, and looked upon each other with kind eyes, we would feel that we are already one."



From the walls of caves to the pages of passports, each hand belongs to a unique individual. Yet, hands mark our shared condition; they create a gesture of collective action. Like in the common action of ants, the strength of the gesture of the collective is in putting an organism together. Individuals become a collective, and that collective emerges as a figure. If we think in geological time, it is those collective figures that stand out. Yet they are made from the marks of unique individuals.

This sculpture, *Untitled*, is made from hand prints gathered by James Muriuki from dozens of people in Nairobi and across the world. From a photograph to a traced silhouette to a stenciled cutout to a metal sculptural form, these layers build upon real gestures that bring together real people. The hands are laser cut from stainless steel, a material that, for its resistance to corrosion, has become synonymous with the kitchen and the hearth and home it recalls. These hands are joined by visible welds. The joints are left as raw as possible, recording the connection between real people— if blemished, then also humane.





☐☐☐ Ceaseless dryness, as if there were no God. Nine half-moons of waterlessness. Even the camels died. It was a bad time. The Trader

A slender red line lacerates the sky. A night insect stings Isaiah's face. He scratches the place. A lone jackal watches him, lets him pass, golden gaze puzzled. Small blue insects get a free ride on Isaiah's body. The silence. Old presences appear, like the floral perfume that a woman he loved used to wear. Delicate, hopeful, like tender dreaming. He wonders again why he still lives. He reads the new sky, tests wind direction and the position of stars. Finds pattern and rhythm. God-roamed-land. He might start singing litanies to nomadic deities. Later, dog-tired and

fiercely fed up with loneliness, he just stops walking, sits down dust-drenched, curls into himself, and sleeps.



Jitterbug wonders how image-making at extreme distances affects human understandings of place and control. This project loosely combines data on the Dadaab Refugee Camps from United Nations development plans, hand-drawn ground surveys, aerial photography, and satellite imagery.

The first iteration of this work was a drawing that studied a 2003 failure of Landsat 7's Scan Line Corrector that created gaps in the resulting imagery, which conveyed more about the sensor's machinery and movement – its way of capturing the world – than it did about the world itself. Elsa MH Mäki uses a technical failure to understand how failure itself reveals a generative method of working: how interfaces of mechanical, computational, and technical “glitches” consolidate into smooth forms that appear intentional and intact.

Jitterbug expands the scale of consideration to capture the growth and evolution of the camp complex around Dadaab over its three-decade history and the imperfect technologies that have snapped up data to represent – to compose – Dadaab, as a place, from extremely far away. *Jitterbug* questions how we know Dadaab, how we know or remember any place through pictures, and how we get to know one another through – and in spite of – the spectacular, almost invisible array of surveillance technologies that now observe our lives.





A pale tree stump, dry and carved by water, leached by sun, warped into a humanlike face with its nose pointing north in the direction of the water's flow. Its shorn branches point skyward. Ali Dida Hada strokes the bark. He rocks it until the loam loosens. Above, sulky clouds approach in phalanx. Ali Dida Hada murmurs, "Rain." The tree stump rolls forward. "It'll flow." He watches the wind bend the low-lying, yellowed grass.

Twelve days later, in the northern reaches of Kenya, rain clouds withdraw. The earth gulps down and stores water for later. A congregation of birds chirp, a raucous choir in need of a sane conductor. Transient storm-rivers disappear as the Ewaso Nyiro starts its reluctant crawl back to old boundaries. Oryx gambol; giraffes browse on the extended banks of streams, among pockets of flowering shrubs of all hues, mostly peach, a desert supernova of frozen flame, fragile blossoms, frantic in bloom, as if they were angels relishing a temporary reprieve from celestial certainty. A golden finger-of-God stirs clouds.

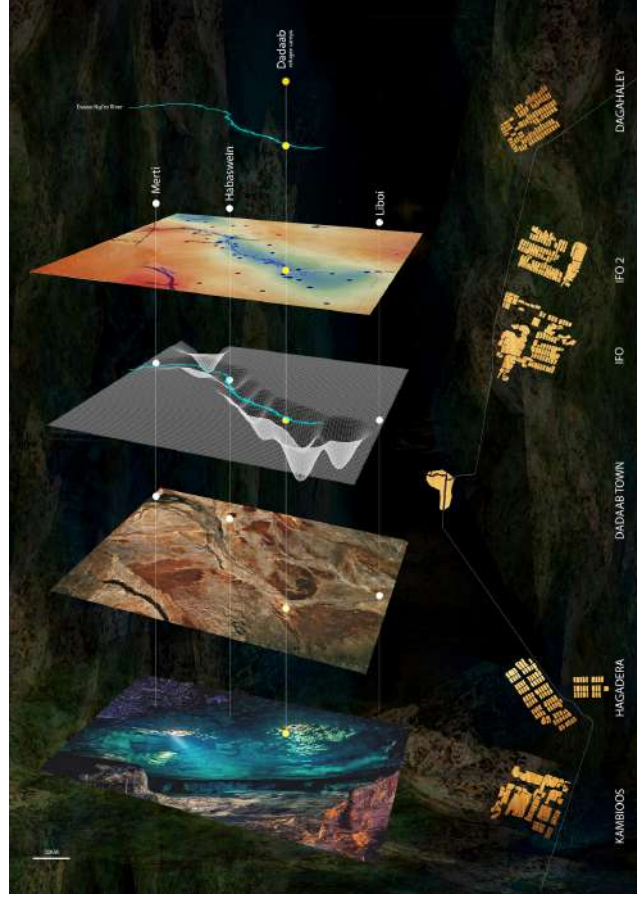
At the top of Cave Bureau's *Merti* is a steel disc, laser cut with the profile of plans of settlements in the Dadaab complex. The worked steel mimics the worked ground, deliberately worked land, ground that has been settled upon, the crust of the earth. Shaped on an urban scale, the constellation of settlement points define the entire region.

Beneath that, sisal hemp ropes hang to form an inhabitable structure, tapping into the ground below the camps, toward a Jurassic water catchment infrastructure: the Merti aquifer. The sisal structure represents the stasis between earth and aquifer, a habitable realm.

A new ground is set below by eco-briquettes, on which we can stand and look above through an archaeological topography to the steel cloud above, light seeping through its cracks into this imagined underground habitation.

Inhabiting this spatial realm connects us to an underground, a kind of undercommons, bringing a geo-consciousness into the field of view, so that we understand what development and urbanism mean, the unique urban manifestation of Dadaab.









Protest Library: Partitions, Borders, Camps

Curated by "Bombay!" working group (Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, Anupama Rao, Shayoni Mitra, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, Debasree Mukherjee) [New York], Sarover Zaidi [Delhi], A.R.T. Library (Art, Resources, Teaching: Annapurna Garimella, Sindhura D. M.) [Bengaluru], Madras Literary Society (Thirupurasundari Serval, Uma, Vinayagam) [Chennai], Elsa MH Mäki, Peterson Kamwathi

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Postcard station with audio recording of Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor reading excerpts from *Dust*

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A lesson I take from Dadaab is to trust the many connections that persist in spite of partitions. Because of that, this work is dedicated to the elders and communities who have lived in Dadaab and in refugee camps around the world, who demonstrate the fine grain of how we may live together, owing each other debts, and together building common heritages, knowledges, and futures.

