

MUTE ARTWORK STATEMENT

by conceptual artist Khaled Barakeh



On World Refugee Day, 20 June 2022, and as the number of refugees worldwide reaches the tragic milestone of 100 million people, the “MUTE” public installation uses its silent protest to remind all who will listen: oppression and human rights violations enacted by dictatorships drive the wars, displacements, and terror that continue to force so many from their homes and safety.

As a public art installation, “MUTE” began as a demonstration outside the Higher Court in Koblenz, Germany, in 2020. The trial brought Syrian regime officials to justice for crimes against humanity for the first time in history. At that time, health measures related to the pandemic prevented activists and the families of Syria’s detainees and disappeared from attending the court proceedings. Barakeh took inspiration from these difficult circumstances to make Syrians’ ongoing struggle for justice visible next to the court. “MUTE” assembled a silent demonstration of 49 figures, dressed in the ordinary clothes of Syrian activists who were residing in diaspora. Recalling the tactics that peaceful protestors in Syria used to avoid capture by state security forces, the figures’ clothes are dark, muted colors that allow individuals to blend anonymously into crowds. Headless, they are a silent reminder of the fates of countless people across the world who live under dictatorial and totalitarian regimes and whose voices are ultimately ours.

“MUTE” continues the historical momentum that began in Syria when the people rose up to claim their freedom and dignity. It also reflects on the story of an abandoned people who were left to fight for freedom on their own. Beginning in 2011, the Syrian regime suppressed popular assemblies and demonstrations in ways described as barbaric, medieval, and most horrendous since the Holocaust: besieging cities and towns; shelling them with barrel bombs to inflict mass casualties; arbitrarily detaining, torturing, and killing tens of thousands of activists as well as random citizens; and not

even shying away from using chemical weapons against them. And the world did not act. And so oppression continues today.

Today, we stand in solidarity with all refugees and displaced peoples globally. Asylum is not an issue restricted to any one country or continent, as the devastating plight of Ukrainians – with two million people becoming refugees in only two weeks -- has recently shown. “MUTE” remembers the oppression that led to the Syrians’ mass displacement, including to their current European homes. It reminds audiences that refugees are made: driven out of their homes and communities by acts of violence and persecution that the international community must act to prevent.

Finally, “MUTE” demands an end to the forced deportations of all refugees and vulnerable persons from Denmark or any other country. These communities endure the constant threat of being returned to countries where they face the risk of arrest, torture, or death. These threats are compounded intersectionally, as women and children in particular face distinctive forms of forced disappearance and gender-based and sexual violence. Syria is not a safe country for the return of refugees, a necessary truth that “MUTE” re-asserts at the heart of public space in Denmark. It takes up the creative legacy of the Syrians’ protest, and invites Danish voices to join them, in reminding governments that the right to seek asylum is inviolable – and that they should comply with it as they are obliged to.