

Finding ‘a now’ to Inhabit:

Between the Performative in life and Professional Practice

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In Italo Calvino's (1874) *Invisible Cities*, the emperor Kublai Khan asked his guest, the traveler Marco Polo, whether his understanding of himself, of the world, and of his place within it is inevitably predicated on his own history. Polo replied that “the more he was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more he understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive at” (Tan, 1999). Kublai Khan interrupted him with the question: “You advance always with your head turned back? Is what you see always behind you? Does your journey take place only in the past?” (Tan, 1999). Polo replied that what he sought was always lying ahead of him, even if it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the traveler again finds a past that he did not know he had. The foreignness of what he no longer is or no longer possesses waits for him in foreign places.

The migrant's experience of “foreignness” that unfolded in Marco Polo's travels reveals to me certain dialectics of time and place that shape my understanding and construction of the self and of cultural identity. According to Polo's notion of place, homeland is no longer necessarily located in the past. And when it becomes located in the future, it is not necessarily as the destiny of the migrant's journey, but more as a narrative component, which can, or perhaps has to be, integrated into the migrant's notion of self.

Away from home, studying in the Netherlands, my relationship and understanding of this entity called “self” – its forms, roles, desires, possessions, values, narratives, and geographies – was questioned through internal and external confrontations with

my self and others, both in a new cultural context and in a broader platform of professional art practice.

In the last couple of years, my work has revolved around issues of place, displacement, otherness, personal histories, kinesthetic embodied memory, and communicating/sharing experience. I will be talking about two projects, one that I started when I arrived in the Netherlands in 2003, and the other is one of my latest ongoing projects titled *Where We Are Not*.

In their approach and concerns, these projects uncover my process of searching for a framework, a language, a context to address and be inspired with, and a place to inhabit personally and professionally.

Report on Body: Mapping my Context

My first project, *Report On Body*, was inspired by movement research (Skinner release technique, Contact Improvisation, Alexander technique, Body Weather Laboratory, etc ...) and the language of physical theater. It consisted of a set of exercises that I put together into a lab/workshop situation. The aim of these exercises is to listen to the body, and pay attention to its impulses, vibrations, dynamics, departure/arrival points, desires, anxieties, (im)possibilities, and communicative abilities. Suggested mental images, textures, sounds, and direct physical and verbal feedback are active tools in this setup.

These workshops allowed me to trace physically certain memories, narratives and experiences and to map the interrelations between the “here and now”

and the “there and then” of my embodied memory, patterns, cultural body, and personal versus collective history. They also pointed in my body at “how I am”, and when working in a group, at “how we are”. They provided a specific momentum where time unfolded and was measured inside the body: its impulses, detailed movement, and place were mapped internally through perception and externally through relations to other bodies and their movement.

Suely Rolnik (1989) writes beautifully in *Sentimental Cartography*:

To geographers, cartography – distinct from maps which are representations of a static whole – is a drawing that accompanies and creates itself at the same time as the transformation movements of the landscape. Psychosocial landscapes can also have cartography. (p. 15)

The body itself can be seen as a resonant entity. Rolnik (1989) describes it as an affective circuit, which affects and is affected by the world around it, so that the self opens up to an intimate relationship with the psychosocial landscape, allowing both to lose and constitute themselves in relation to each other.

This resonant apprehension of the world can be frustrated in a surrounding milieu that is inhospitable to this quality of relation. A hostile social or political environment can even anaesthetize the body, paralyzing its resonant capacity. But the capacity to let oneself be affected by a multiplicity of forces can also be exercised:

The cartographer of the psychosocial landscape makes use of a hybrid compound, made out of his eye but also out of his sentient body. Gently placing himself not vis-à-vis but amidst the drift of life, he tries to mobilize a constant process of action and reaction, orientation and reorientation, as means of creating sense. (Rolnik, 1989, p. 15)

There were a lot of questions left open in *Report*

On Body, such as “the definition of my position” – whether it was that of an artist, a participant, an instructor, or a therapist etc...

I was interested in exploring new relations with the audience through the lab/workshop situation, where the participants are themselves the audience of their own experience and that of the group. But at that point, I wasn't really interested in defining my role; what interested me most was creating the possibility to research the role of a “sentimental cartographer” and to exercise it – finding tools to access and understand a (some)body's history and geography, and the crucial differentiation between macro and micro politics in my practice.

Macro politics, which deals with perception and identification with ideologies, visible images, or representation and positioning oneself on one side of the political debate or the other, has, to my feeling, often been a framework for cultural practice in Lebanon and it feeds into its content. I have been struggling to find a way to relate to the political scene in the Middle East being away in Europe without having to take sides or finding myself caught in a defensive reactionary position based on a limited perception of “otherness”. It was difficult to liberate myself from the urge to refer to and contextualise myself within such a socio political framework.

However, I found, by shifting my focus to micro politics, a larger, more progressive and full of potential space to address the “effects of otherness” and “the reality of the other” in our body.

Micro politics is the politics of relation with “otherness”, especially with ourselves. It is the space for being affected, for being vulnerable. It is the space of tension between sensible reality, where things are perceived as forms and representations, and our subjectivity. Confronting and dealing with this tension allows life to breathe and opens up our capacity to receive, to affect, and be affected.

The micro political resides in what our affective body remembers. What the body remembers (i.e.

kinesthetic memory), unfolds as we move and relate to things, discovering that our understanding of the moment is affected by experiences of a similar moment or a larger, more general experience. I realised, for example, that I had never perceived myself as belonging to the war generation even though I lived through wars in Lebanon. However, my body remembers those experiences in very subtle, detailed ways; for example, in its reaction to speed, surprise or loudness, and in its perception of a movement as violent or an energy as aggressive, and in experiencing certain physical positions as oppressive or submissive or scary, having evacuation, bombardment, demonstration, darkness, and mass chaos experiences in war situations as my reference. I moved on with these ideas and explorations at hand, developing several performances of which I would like to present my latest, *Where We Are Not*, looking at it through the dialectics of time and place that Calvino's text presents and the way the thinker Ernst van Alphen discusses the notion of homeland and identity in his text, *Imagined Homelands*.

Where We Are Not: Absences of a Cultural Body

Through migration, place is radically disconnected from culture. The relationship between place and culture becomes one of disconnection, displacement, and incommensurability. This makes the relationship between cultural identity (the self) and place more crucial and their respective perception in time becomes quite puzzling.

What have made the relationship even more crucial and urgent in this project are the conditions under which it has developed: As a student from Lebanon, I was denied my residence permit for the Netherlands for strictly bureaucratic reasons. Having appealed against this decision, I was not allowed to leave the Netherlands and re-enter the country. The decision created a "state of exception" that excluded me from my own home country, and placed me outside the zone of "contemporary mobility". My project *Where We Are Not* is framed by this state of exception, in which I found myself a migrant, and by the disparate narratives and impossible scenarios it produced.

The Project and its Presentation:

Not being able to travel home myself, I cast a replacement and sent Aitana, a Spanish dancer/choreographer, to Lebanon for 10 days as my stand-in, messenger, and recording device. She visited different people – my family and friends – and traced the places of my memory and what constitutes the idea of "home" for me.

In the reading/performance, Aitana and I appear together to explore the possibility and the impossibility of putting oneself in place of the other, and of sharing memories and experiences. In an intimate one to two encounters with an audience member, we try to challenge the personal private space of each of our bodies and that of the audience. We attempt to cross the physical separation/border of "the other", and we shift the position of spectatorship among the three of us.

In a negotiation of power and authorship, among different confused layers of identity, sameness and difference, channeled through a mix of intense emotions of jealousy, manipulation, disappearance, exclusion, love, desire, fear, and embarrassment, we go through our memories enacting them and enacting our identities, and all the places that have formed us.

This project deals with memory and identity and their performative aspects in different ways during its different phases. Preparing my stand-in to carry out her role(s) in Lebanon in the first phase, I worked with her physically, looking for possibilities to experience the way we each embody space and carry our body arriving and departing from different intentions, motives, feelings, abilities, forms and embodied memories. If she was to sleep in my bed, hold my mother like I do and touch the surfaces I long to touch, then let us explore each other's weight, the texture of our hands, the resistance of our backs, the shifting of our centre as we stand facing each other at a very small distance, and the details and patterns of our walking posture, lying posture, and sitting posture. These explorations put forward the desire yet the impossibility of two bodies, two cultural subjects, to occupy the same space.

Where We Are Not also poses the question: What if, if you take my place? Can you feel what I feel? Can I share my body-memory with you? Can you share my body-memory with me?

The intimate, the familiar, the instance, the non-thought sensations of everyday life that are all housed in our system and cannot be filmed, or painted, or photographed, can only be hinted at. They become significant when we are distant, when there is a need to bridge that distance, when we are impeded from access to these sensations.

The notion of time and place that Calvino's (1974) text presents is puzzling, yet fascinating because it distorts the migrant's perception of past and present, real and fictive, remembered and imagined. It dictates the way of relating to images or stories of the homeland in the past. Places and sensations from the past are re-enacted in the places where "the migrant" resides in the present.

Tracing Absence: Notebook, Guidebook, Instruction Book

In this project, I found myself, like Marco Polo, in an endless process of combining fragmented images and stories from the homeland and those places I lived in after the homeland, of places real and imaginary, past and future, which contribute to the construction of my identity in the present. I wrote an extensive and detailed guide/notebook for Aitana to give structure to her trip and to clearly specify her tasks. I described people and places, smells and flavours, situations and relations that seemed to constitute my idea of home and establish my relationship to it. I asked her to touch hands and faces, smell breaths and pillows, taste favorite and nostalgic flavours.

This notebook has been experienced by many people who have read it as a "metaphor for love". For me, addressing those places and relations of my past in writing was an act of love – love being the degree of attention you give certain things, rather than the general definition of love as attraction and affection.

It is a reconstruction of my memory, an exercise in projecting my past onto the screens of the

present and future. It is written in the future tense, putting dates for Aitana in the future where she will encounter my past and how I remember and imagine it in "the now".

Written slowly in clear, neat handwriting, this notebook touches the pain and fear of loss – losing the love, the security, and references felt and given at home. It represents these memories as fixed and represents the tension in the desire to keep them as such to confirm my history and identity on the one hand. It undertakes the risk of idealising home, and on the other hand, it opens up completely the possibility of sharing this personal history with a stranger, with another subject who will look at it with different references, and later with the audience. (see images)

It is as if by asking Aitana to notice my mother's breath after coffee; by sharing that moment, it is alive in the present, it is actual, and it grows to bring me new places and bring Aitana and the audience their own memories and relations.

In *Imagined Homelands* (2002), Alphen writes:

Ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places cannot be conflated with geographical place. The place is imagined rather than real. But what 'imagined' means remains to be specified. For imagined is not the same as imagination. 'Imagined places' are not fairytale places, they are not just fantasy. In one way or another imagined places do have a connection with a place that exists geographically. However, the mode in which this geographic place is experienced is not ontologically different: geographic place is experienced not through real interaction but rather through imagination. (p. 56)

In this project, however, my home was experienced through my stand-in's body, projecting my desire to be in two places, or my desire to have an extension of my body that can interact directly with home. In addition, imagining home happened through someone else's subjectivity and experience of my own personal history. The web of images

Thursday 20 >
 [Take Lemon+salt+knife from home]
 Visit my cousin Nagham and teta
 in the village with my father.
 (mum could come as well) - 20 minutes
 ride.

- > After resting - preparing of Lunch
 By car to 'Marwanieh' my dad's
 village.
- > In Marwanieh lives my grandma
 with Salma, my aunt.
 Next to them & around them live my
 uncles & their families.
- > The village has been big part of my
 childhood, games, friends, outdoors, nature
 and lots of family.
- > When we lived in Sour, as a child we
 went there in the weekend.
 As we moved to Saïda, closer, we
 were there more often.

> you'll arrive to teta's house.
 She'll receive you at the balcony -
 or in the Living room.
 She might be just finishing her prayers
 as you arrive, or checking on someone
 in the house next door, but then Salma
 will receive you.

- > Some fruits.
 Some tea.
- Kiss her as you cup her head with
 your hands - and give her my greetings.

Lina bet salem â lay ki kteer
 (Lina greets u a lot) ↵

- > Give her my picture, to put it on
 the Living room table.
- > I would like you to sense the quietness
 of the house.
 - the temperature.
 - the colors & the texture of the floor,
 walls & external walls of the house.
 - the texture & colors of her veil & dress.
 - the texture of her feet & hands.

- > sit next to her.
- > Later Nagham will arrive and take
 you to 'Balayet' - the name we
 used to refer to the spot we played
 as kids.
- > Go there with Nagham alone.
 - As you walk, keep senses attentive
 to the soil textures, the houses, the
 looks of the people.
- ⇒ Find a spot to sit on the rocks or
 grass or the 'Balayet'.
- ⇒ Ask Nagham if you can sit facing the
 deserted blue house on the other side of
 the hall, where we used to pick up
 flowers.
- ⇒ Find a moment, to bring out the kimon
 & give it to Nagham to peel it off...
- ⇒ If she has a picture of her son, Karim.
- > back to my teta's house
 - probably my dad will give you a tour to say
 hello to my uncles... greetings.

- > back to Saïda.
- > At home, prepare, write... work -
- > On T.V. with parents.

Teta:

- > name: abdet el zouhra / just teta
 age: ≈ 80
- > solid, strong woman.
- > straight back, broad shoulders & ~~also~~
- > small wet eyes.
- > She wants to do everything herself still
- > She baked bread the traditional way
 as we sat next to her eating fresh warm
 bread dipped in Labneh & olive oil.
- > Always received us at the balcony - &
 said goodbye there.
- > She raised 11 children.
- > Knows the character & needs of all around
 her & tries to care for all of them.
- > she remembers details if you tell her
 & follows its development with you
 even if after a year.

and narratives that constructs my identity is now interwoven with those of another subject coming from a different place and understanding her self and history through different parameters than mine.

Jeroen Fabius (2006), who followed my work and wrote about it, brings forward some of the interesting problematics of this experience as he says:

This project has become a hyperbole of the impossible. Sending a stranger to your intimate world to perceive the familiar can only produce misunderstandings. A 'journalism' into the intimate can only distort what is found. The stranger disappears into the world that is intimate to you, and thus becomes no one. What are the moments in our society when people are reduced to disappearance? (p. 11)

In Lebanon, Aitana became a "function". Her presence triggered and allowed remembering and imagining to happen on the side of those involved in the project in Lebanon. Later, during the performance, Aitana presents her stories and impressions, re-establishing her subjectivity and reflecting on the potentiality of the "disappearance of the subject" to explore other modes of "identity", "presence", and thus encounter.

Aitana's experience and narratives from Lebanon, what her body received within the emotional space of the family and the intimate framework I set up for her, made the memories in my notebook far less static and presented them as available or

communicable through someone else's experience of them. This experience brought forward similarities, differences, and a lot of confrontation. It did not reveal anything I did not know or bring about any major discoveries about my own history, but it definitely brought different intonations and urgencies to it.

The most important issue explored was not the truthfulness or plausibility of the autobiographical narrative, but rather its performative effectivity which I would like to pursue exploring in my coming projects.

While working, in general, I also pursue the best conditions in which experience can be communicated, avoiding the expectation that the resulting artwork should be a spectacle, trying instead to develop my sensitivity for conditions that are appropriate for the sharing of experience. Above all, I realize that these conditions are temporal and transitory – only visible at the moment when the sharing of experience is happening. I would like to locate my work at an intersection where the micro-scale of the individual meets the macro-scale of wider cultural and political issues. And my desire is to place the audience at this intersection.

"Ultimately, I only see Amsterdam. And it is in the sight of Amsterdam that past, faraway places await me" (Alphen, 2002, p. 67).

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