

Aitana Cordero, Jeroen Fabius & Lina Issa

Where We Are Not

Not being able to travel home herself, Lina Issa casts a 'replacement,' sending Aitana Cordero to Lebanon for ten days as her stand-in, messenger and recording device. The stand-in visits her family and friends and traces the places of her memory and what constitutes the idea of 'home' for Lina.

The reading/performance, a collaboration of Lina Issa with Aitana Cordero was first presented in Rotterdam in 2006, and later in Paris, London, Beirut, Amsterdam. *Jeroen Fabius* was advisor of the project in 2006. In the reading/performance Lina Issa and Aitana Cordero invite a visitor to become part of a shared reading of the diary that Aitana has written during her stay in Lebanon. This text mixes the three perspectives, of this project that hovered between instruction and documentation, score and notation: the person giving instructions [L], the person executing these [A], and a third person.

Hug

L: At the airport, waiting for Aitana to arrive. Loaded with the desire to receive home—all that I miss, carried back by her. My body was anticipating a hug—a hug that my body has never experienced before, it needed to be a hug that incorporated all the sensations of home coming. An impossible hug.

I was waiting when her partner also showed up at the airport to receive her.

I wanted to disappear. I couldn't bear the thought that her partner would receive the first hug—the 'fresh bodily traces' of home. Another moment of exclusion.

Art as an encounter. Art is a social practice of offering opportunities for sensation. Sensations that have never happened before. This project certainly can be understood as a social event. I meet with two women to take part in a conversation. A conversation about a diary. I am invited to select a page and to ask. This is a form of art that invites me to participate. I ask what Aitana has written in the diary. She has replaced Lina. Lived Lina's life in Lebanon. With Lina's relatives and friends. I am caught between two stories. A confusing embrace of irreconcilable versions of reality. I continuously feel wonder about the estrangement of dislocation, a continuous and multiplying dislocation. What is framed here from chaos? It is the flow of chaos itself in which I find myself. When I enter the room I see a table where Lina is sitting. Aitana greets me. We know each other. But the greeting feels different than other times we meet.

A: I check my smell, I check my hands, are they sweating? I don't want to be rejected...but do not take it personal Aitana.

I wait at the door, I feel nervous and curious, not knowing who will come in next. Will I know this person? How would this new person react to me, to my body and to my hug?

I say my name and offer my hand, as a fake way of greeting, as a trick to hold this person's hand. This is my first checking of this person's physicality, am I welcome? Am I invited? Is the hand soft, concrete, slippery? Trying to escape already, comfortable in the grip? I hold the hand and then make a small movement, I walk towards this person and hug him.

L: My body leaning on the chair, anticipating the quality of that embrace. Excluded again, yet actively sensing the negotiation of those two bodies and their vulnerability. Witnessing an intimate moment—an invitation. Nervous, shifting my gaze between myself, Aitana and our audience. Being a spectator in my own performance.

She holds me longer than we normally embrace. It makes me aware of myself. Of how I am during an embrace. How an embrace can become invasive, an invasion in my private space. A place where I become awkward, lose my sense of what is right, how to behave. I have been communicated that this event is a different occasion. Here something else is at stake.

A: I keep on listening, can I go farther? But I stay there, still close; it is not an imposition but an invitation to be with me a bit longer. I am not hard or forcing the hug, my arms are relaxed but active, the person could leave but I am clear in my physical statement, 'I would like to stay here: with you a bit longer'.

There is an imposition, an imposition into private space, a place that is close to my skin, a place that makes me aware of my heart, of my breath, of my gestures, my gaze.

L: A moment for me to imagine Aitana in my intimate spaces, in the arms of my mother, father, grandmother...And to question what has been touched, what has been embraced?

I listen to how her body and that of the hugged audience resonate and negotiate the meaning of that encounter on the table—next to me. I get emotional.

Home

Wednesday 12 – Aitana arrived in Lebanon

- > At home, in Saida, relax ...
- Watch 'news' with Mum - inform on what is 'in the news'...
- Write - Record - Reflect on your day...
- you can look in my closets -
- Sleep early you need to wake up early.
- If night be full moon - we will all be seeing it !!

conigo.

me fuera a comprar zumos.
anime

Sumaia → intent por comunicacion,
y tranquilidad al no conseguirlo... NO.

Frustración (agotante, urgente o desajustada)

ACERCAW E INTENTU.

→ agotado, el idioma → construye
just mi tools.

el lenguaje de la expresión. el lenguaje
del cuerpo 7010, adorno, agua, sexo,
hubs, todo la boca, un part de mas...

A: Lina asked me to visit her aunt Sumaia, in the music shop where she works, and spend some hours there, as she used to do when she was living there.

She gives me her attention as a present
Her time, her flattering comments,
Her caress, her love for the food,
Her secrets, her desire to share them with me

Sumaia → she forces-encourages me to buy juices
We try to communicate and we are calm as we don't achieve our purpose...
THERE IS...NOT FRUSTRATION (no urgency or uncomfortableness)

→ I 'learn' the language → we, together build more tools

(I follow Lina's book words, and practice them with Sumaia, she gives me new ones...we mix them together to build some sense...half Arabic, half English...I wonder what we understand...)

The language of expressions, the body language. I touch, hug, grab, kiss, smells, I open my mouth, I share glasses...I almost pee with the door open...

There is something in this comfort that frightens me (what if I go too far, if I make a mistake?) and something that gives me a deep peace-calm

AND THESE SLIPPERS

I would not wear them if I would not feel comfortable

Thursday 13 >

AT Home

- ⇒ my mum wakes up to her coffee and cigarette on the one-seat ~~the~~ couch in the 'Salon'.
- ⇒ you'll hear her sipping - her legs crossed and probably already in a 'planning' mode for the day! I caress her hair sitting there, kiss her and sit on the couch to her left side.
- ⇒ Look around the house - unpack!
- > Meet Bolou - hug and kisses. → LA MANO
- > Enjoy breakfast in the kitchen. *Ummmm!*
- Mum normally doesn't have breakfast, but she always snatches a piece of bread with this or that. (better for her stomach since she smokes, she always repeats).
- I really feel like our 'Labneh', 'Zaytoon', 'Halloum', cucumber and tea. (Labneh extra olive oil) *of course, matter is important.*
- > Go with Mum by car to 'Sour', my home town; where Mum grew up, to visit her 2 sisters/my aunts Soumaia and Salam and her 4 children.
- > Back to Saida in the late afternoon.

Today she does... she looks elegant elegant w/ her baby that eye.

→ NO

A: Lina asked me to play a specific music tape in the car, during the ride with her mother to Tyre. Lina and her mother used to always listen to this tape together.

Your mother used to translate me songs. She would sing, enjoy the lyrics and translate them for me without missing any sentence, with a nice responsibility to fulfil my total experience of the song as if I must understand it...

I remember the day I was travelling with your mother in the car...in the book, you asked me to play the tape, with a song that you used to hear together with her, while travelling between Saida and Sour. I always loved cars and to be driven. I remember that when I was a small child I did not want to sleep at night...My father then would bring me to the car and drive me for hours until I fall asleep.

*Cons from notebook
I'm thinking
concepts...*

Books

Reading the instructions by Lina it is striking how these are written by hand. With differently coloured pens. A thick book of over 150 pages. The extent of detail is staggering. It starts out as a tourist guide that helps understanding the history, the language, the geography of Lebanon. Then family members, relatives are introduced. Descriptions of specific rooms, sites and sights. These introductions are accompanied by the most detailed instructions. It reads as a funny mixture of a girl's diary and a desperate attempt to describe everything. Everything that is left behind. The sheer amount of instructions becomes more and more impressive as to the detail and intimacy they pursue. Up until the moment Aitana can take a breath, a rest, a sleep. The instructions do not just describe things to do, but describe experiences. The book reads as an obsessive and totalitarian occupation of the messenger's time. The listing of the intimate encounters with family members reads as assertive declarations of landmarks of affect. The gap only seems to be broadened as how can Aitana ever attain that intimacy. The obsessiveness makes me wonder what drove the totalitarian attempt. It makes clear that the obsession is about the obvious, the obvious things that are left behind by those who migrate.

L: Writing this book, I experienced the memory space as space of the real but not the actual, and the ideal without being abstract. A space of fiction and projection. A space of embodiment. An imagined space to inhabit.

This book is like a reconstruction of my memory, a confrontation with how evident certain people, feelings, senses are in my body, on my skin (a thick cheek, spongy hands, coffee breath, nervous eyes...), and how much these things actually constitute my personal history and identity.

Due to the political conditions that have framed this project, writing this book was driven by an urgent desire to access those places I have been conditioned to be far from—excluded. An urgency mixed with pain and fear.

I was experiencing my memories as fixed in the past yet endlessly active within me in the present. I realized that growing up in the unstable unsafe political situation in Lebanon, I obsessively captured and conserved images and sensations of my close surrounding. I held on to things with a lot of love, love being the degree of attention you give certain things, rather than the general definition of love as attraction and affection.

A: I accepted to enter into a trip about Lina without judgments or expectations. I was seduced by the idea of walking another person's steps, to follow an established path and to inhabit Lina's desire of being remembered. I was not in Lebanon but in Lina. How would this affect my own self? How would I affect the others?

By writing this book Lina has described not only her life but how she positions herself within her life, what she chooses to remember, what she chooses to share. I was not there to replace Lina but to confirm her. Her absence, with my presence there, made her more present.

At first glance the diary looks the same as the book of instructions, it has the same cover and paper. But this book falls apart, it contains scribbling, little papers and leaves of flowers and plants, photographs. The writing is hardly legible and varies in size and expressivity, a broad range of emotional expression speaks right off the page. If the book was ever conceived as a letter from a messenger about the experiences, the first obstacle to obtain any information is the language. Lina will not be able to access this book. The book is written mostly in Spanish, not accessible for Lina, nor most of the visitors to the project. The witness account of replacing Lina's intimate life needs a translator. That motivates the performative event. Aitana will be needed to translate the scribbling, that does not provide information on its own, but provides another crack in time.

L: I listened to her different intonations as she read and translated. I followed nervously her eyes and hands as she tried to recall, reconstruct and touch her moments there again—here—on this table that we share with an audience. I argued with her about the authorship of certain memories. I enjoyed her metaphors, and the sensitivity of the skin she was recording and writing with. I admired the complexity with which she engaged in the project. I envied her having been so close to my home. And I saw my memories and my identity being formed in the moment- here- on this table we share with an audience.

Absence

A: How do you construct yourself while meeting new people? I wrote there: 'My image is here formed in a different way... I am not how I describe myself, I am not through my answers, I don't have the control of how I want people to perceive me, I am not allowed to 'narrate' myself magnifying these events of my life that have constructed me. Rather, my presence, or 'Aitana', is defined through how I listen, how I contemplate, how I react, how I touch, support, how I 'am being'... with no explanations, narrations of my past or of my desires... I am in an actual tense, with no space for pasts or futures...'

It was, in one way, a voluntary unfair and unequal sharing process but, nevertheless, it became an intense experience for me, a learning process about what it means to be, to receive and to give.

L: Thinking of the project, I found the term 'stand-in' an interesting metaphor for my relationship with Aitana. It is a term used in cinema for the one who substitutes for an actor during the lengthy set up of a scene; while the lights and camera are adjusted. (dictionary.com)

It stands for a relationship between two people—two bodies, one is absent and the other is present, one is performing the action that is initially to be performed by the other. The act of the stand-in is based on repetition, it proposes the 'as if' as 'real' in order to construct the scene.

What does this proposal do to both our bodies- in conditioned absence and in conditioned presence—what happens to their physicality, their communicative abilities, their voices, and the activity of fulfilling each their presence in the here and now when part of it is a cast shadow somewhere separate from each their actual presence?

A: Why do we become closer and stronger where we are not? I think about my own life... Are only those things that I left unfinished what will always remain open? Is only by going away how I will become unmovable for those that I love and that love me? Is there something more romantic than saying goodbye?

Missing has a strong effect... I would like to study the physical reaction that love experiment when distance is included, when progression is disrupted.

Notation

L: Aitana sms-ed me from Beirut: 'you did not tell me the difference between a Taxi and a Service...aye-aye. I enjoyed Cola. Now a second of calm in Hamra. What do u want to eat? Beso full of sounds'

I sms-ed her back: 'Oooo! It is funny I feel I miss 'you' and 'not home'. Don't panic. It is as if u are the active part of home. What about a sandwich at Chez Andre?'

She told me later that as she arrived at *Chez Andre*, following my maps, they were destroying the place to build something else in its place. It was no longer there.

> I wonder if the place remembers me would you check that for me?

> I drank red wine, rosé or beer from winter to summer & mixed my fingers with low quality nuts & delicious cucumbers cut in rounds with a pinch of salt on them -

> Later a 'grilled Halloum' with toasted bread & green olives... 'Labneh' when I wanted to sleep light!

Chez Andre: it is a very small leftist bar, in Hamra, one of the main streets in Beirut, where Lina used to be a regular.

But then the instructions start to become a collection of memories, they start to sound as an uncertain probing of the memories of an exile. Asking Aitana to tell if things are really as Lina remembers them. They deal with places where we are absent. The places that are part of us, or rather that have made us who we are. Where we are not, is not about anywhere, but about those places we carry with us in our bodies. The place where our absence is felt. By the people who have known us so well, the objects that are not handled by us anymore, the trajectories that are not passed by us anymore.

The separation, the distance from the place where we are not can be felt in our bodies, a distance in time as well as in space. Sensations that are profound but gradually sink into larger wholes over time. Sensations that contradict increasingly with those lived in daily life of the surroundings where we are. Where we are becomes where we do not have these sensations. Where we are feels more what we are not, a place that excludes what we were, again, where we are not.

This project deals with both instruction and documentation: a score and a diary. I am invited in a conversation in between the score and the diary. I am in the sandwich from which it is hard to tell what is going on. The instruction can be read as a notation for replacement: a set-up for failure. Or, notation as an act to remember, rather than to execute. Very much like the roots of 'choreography' in European dance history in the 16th century. The effort of Arbeau, encouraged by his student Capriole, not to forget his steps. A score in reverse, not for future use, but for relating with things past. Read as a score it becomes a score of erasure, a production of resistances between what is held on to from the past to the unpredictable contingencies of the future.

Is this art an expression of exile blues, or nostalgia art? Is it a Proustian exercise of remembrance? When Proust writes about the Madeleines it is not just about the spontaneous surge of associations that is produced at the moment he soaks them into the tea he hardly ever drinks anymore. It is striking how hard Proust works to try to understand what is happening at the brink of his conscious perception, to retrieve these memories he thought were lost. Up to ten times he soaks the

Madeleine in the tea to see how the memories well up and later wane. To render Time itself sensible is the task of the artist, says Deleuze. In making sensations live, art is where life transforms itself. In this sense art is politics continued by other means, says Elizabeth Grosz. In this sense art represents the future, things to come. This project moves both back and forth in time.

To touch :

- my mum's hair, cheeks, hands.
- my dad's forehead, cheeks, hands.
- my grand ma's head, veil, dress, hands.
- my grand ma's house external walls, couch.
- my ~~bed~~ bed sheets, closets, pillow. x
- the couch's in living room + salon.
- edges / barriers of cournich at Manara.
- the trolley at the airport.
- fish as you eat it with your hands.
- the Lebanese bread, as it folds & dips in the food. x
- the oily olive oil.
- metal chairs at 'Whimpy' Hamra.
- greasy bar at 'Chez Andre'
- sand
- plastic chairs and plastic table cover in the sea cafe, Sour, Al Jamal.
- Zainab's hair & carpets.
- stones of the stairs at Roman Ruins in Sour.

A: Lina gave me a list of things to touch, to listen, to smell, to taste and also to feel.

Her instructions mixed both physical task and feelings quotations. I tried to embody these gestures but I was sometimes unable to execute them, I was unable to feel the magnificence of some things and other times unable to repress the direction of my attention or my feelings within some situations.

How do you look for a smell?

Repeating her gestures...following her instructions. I tried to dress them but, sometimes, they felt faked, imposed.

The instructions, though they were very clear, had a fast ending sometimes. Once my body was invited to feel and to be open and receptive, all the adjective and expected feeling from Lina's instructions disappeared and ceded the space to other interpretations or possibilities, my subjective physicality of reacting. I could instruct my body positions but not how I would react to the things.

Borderline

This project recognises that in its attempt to share it ends up in creating new situations of dislocation. Even in meeting my double I find only difference, only misunderstanding. On the other hand it offers us ways to read traces, to listen, and to ask, and to meet, to receive intimations of this borderline of where we are not, of disorientation, of disappearance. It also offers an invitation to travel, to search another and other places, in space, in time. An invitation for an encounter, a meeting, an act of love.

- > Probably you come home and my parents are having a nap!
- > I always hug my dad long and smell his cheeks when I first see him.
- > He stares & stares at my face & eyes, caresses my cheeks and smiles... as if not believing.
- > He is quite the first day - just looking at me. He repeats that my eyes, are still the same as I was a child, receiving him at the door when he comes from work...
- > Enjoy the dinner -
- > filling the couches of the living room the T.V. doesn't distract you from each others presence, anxiety, longing and flowing emotions.

A: Nadwa is protecting his nap. I think he is nervous and that he needs to recover to confront our meeting.

Meeting:
HE BREAKS MY BORDERS and holds me in a hug where I would spend my evening and asks me for things that he does not want to know. 'LA WHEN LINA?' (where is Lina?).

(I transformed between his arms for a second, I lose the control of my emotions for a second, I remember being surprised, being 'crossed', I remember placing my face in his shoulder, surrendering my head and my thoughts for a second and feeling small, very small and vulnerable). The skin of his face is calm, smooth and consequent...his laughing like a boy, his shoulders going down, his knee pointing up. His face of a nobleman. How he thinks before speaking in English, how he repeats words until he finds the next one to keep on talking...

the sound (aye-aye)

He prefers the Arabic to the silence...we talk about the language...about its limits...First I drown because I cannot communicate with him, and I do not want to lose the chance to meet him just for the lack of few constructions...

JOKES

stories as answers...

Nadwa listens to him, she admires him, corrects him, she gives him more food, galash!, she goes out to the living room to fart while she keeps on listening and watching at him... they love each other, a lot... respect, gestures while sharing... tenderness...

AISSA.

nadwa protege su sueño.
creo que está nervioso y que necesita
reprenderse para enfrentarse a mí.

encuentro:

Él ROMPE MIS BORDES.

se retira en un abrazo en
el que pierdo la noche y
se pregunta cosas que
no quiere saber. "LA WHEN LINA?"

La piel de su cara → serena,
bursa, consiente...

Su ma de chawal → HOMBROS
HACA ABAJO
MOLLA HACA
ARRAÑA.

SONIDO (Caja ba)

L: While describing the hug of my father, Issa, to Aitana in my book, I felt that I eternally own that moment with my father that I could share it and it won't be taken away from me. It was the first thing Aitana translated/ revealed of her experience there, and the pain of not being there myself to receive his hug is still intolerable.

And when I asked Aitana in one of the performances about what she would like to have been addressed to her, what she would like to keep for herself from what she was 'given', she said: the hug of Issa.