

HOME IS WHERE YOU ARE

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CONVERSATION BETWEEN LYDIA OURAHMANE
AND ELENA FILIPOVIC

EF: *Where are we right now? It might sound like a silly question but there are so many ways you might answer that, so I thought I would start there.*

LO: We are sitting amongst the various household effects, pieces of furniture and objects that once inhabited my apartment in Algiers. The furniture alongside many of the items belong to the family of my land lady, who trusted me to borrow them for the duration of the exhibition. Within the cabinets and surfaces are an overlapping of the things I accumulated over the course of my two-year tenancy, enmeshed between the many items which were already there, accumulated over decades of the previous owner's life.

EF: *There are many questions that this project raises, but one of them is: what makes a home? Is it an architecture, the belongings of a life lived in a place, or the memories generated in and about any or all of these together? And what do you have when you take the entire contents—from photographs and dinnerware, furnishings and appliances, to even chandeliers and doors—of a deceased woman's former apartment in Algiers and transport these 2,625 kilometers to Kunsthalle Basel? Is the result somehow a home?*

LO: I came across a mug my father bought me when I moved into that apartment with the words "home is where you are" embossed within a heart on the side. I'm sure it was a joke, but with a measure of precision universal enough to be mass produced.

When I began thinking about moving the entire apartment from Algiers to Basel, it was as subconscious as the longing to belong somewhere. That somehow transposed onto the intensity of physically moving that amount of stuff from a distance. Not being able to return to Algiers since the borders are still closed, I relied on my close friends there, to negotiate, dissemble, pack, liaise with shippers, customs, the ministry of culture etc. and the emotional labor embedded in that process while I was tethered by various means of communication. I also thought about the potential for objects to move while people cannot.

I remember having a conversation with my dear friend Myriam Amroun (one half of rhizome, Algiers) when I first began thinking about this...she was sat in my living room as we had a very sobering conversation about her anxiety of the gesture meaning that I would not return. And that somehow the treatment, organization and moving of my apartment felt like dealing with a death. I thought about the weight of objects, having loved ones organize your material remains in your absence is something which usually happens when someone is no longer there. And them having to make decisions for the very weight that the departed chose to carry.

Home is a return to the familiar, and to be honest I felt more at home during the close contact that I had with my friends in Algiers as we embarked on this project and worked through the questions that it brought into the foreground, both emotionally and logistically, then around the objects themselves. In this way I begin to understand the work as engraved in the relationships that drove its becoming as akin to understanding the question of "home," which the objects stand in for. Because they became the point of contact. I remember unpacking everything and seeing the care that was put into protecting every plate, every glass... that attention was rooted in love.

EF: *It seems that this question of "home"—as in homeland—is at the very origins of your desire to return to and grapple with Algeria, where you were born, in the first place.*

LO: Since leaving at an early age, and returning often with my family, it processed my relationship with Algeria under very specific terms, being ushered through a familiar network linked to the context my parents operate within and never quite feeling like I was able to decide where I stood. My longing to articulate my own relationship with my homeland often saw me going back and spending periods of time there alone, often under the pretext of work. That "returning" became concentrated, condensed. Time becomes erratic because it is pressurized by the pull of leaving again. So, in that

sense, I felt it was important to put my body where it could speak from a place of love, rather than the euphoria of polarity.

EF: *Once there, you were forced, because of circumstances, to occupy the home of someone else, filled with all of her things...*

LO: It was the 34th apartment I visited in Algiers. The socio-cultural subtext where by women rarely leave home (except when wed) meant that it was difficult to find someone who would rent to me as an unmarried woman.

I often think about the generation that I am growing up in today where most of us will never own a home, that low ebb precarity in renting someone else's space means that "stability" is transient. It becomes a rootless endeavor of locating "home" within its constant seeking and the temporality of relief is what drives it. When occupying a space, which is articulated by objects and furnishings which belong to someone else, you begin to adapt to a preset of gestures that haunt that space, to which you reorient your habits. There is a silver platter resting on a plastic stool in the kitchen, which I began to use to serve tea and coffee to friends who would come over. I would load it, carry it down the corridor and lay it upon the marble table in the living room: an action I inherited due to the presence of the tray. I recognized the potential in that object to implicate a gendered state intrinsically linked to the act of service, speaking from a very specific context of domesticity in that cultural domain which predates the concept of women's roles within the home where my own body became a stand in for these gestures, processing them, repeating them and reinstating them.

EF: *Gender expectations and roles, then, are a quiet undercurrent of this project, but also nationalism and colonialism. There is a history to the building you were living in that speaks to this. Can you tell me about it?*

LO: The apartment was built in 1901, it was one of the first buildings to be commissioned by the French as they began developing the center of Algiers. It sits on the second street closest to the entrance of the city by sea. It was important for the French to first claim Algeria by way of its façade, for the cities to look like France when approached by boat. Architectural colonization prioritizes a line of vision. The blueprints of the Haussmannian apartments were lifted and placed onto the landscape. Not taking into consideration the geological differences that should otherwise determine a blueprint, instead the building was shifted by the land itself. This is why in so many buildings in Algiers you

would notice that they become very thin at points, they triangulate, because of the incline of the land. I was struck by the original refusal to adjust the blueprints of those living spaces to actually be suitable for comfortable living. Because what was important [to the colonizer] was the façade. This got me to think about space being forced into a building in parallel to the process of colonization.

It's important to mention that the furniture originally travelled from Germany to Algeria shortly after independence. You can see labels on some cabinets with German addresses, likely where they were bought, as the owner lived in Germany before her divorce. She returned to Algiers with the household she shared with her previous husband and continued to live (alone) amongst the furnishings they shared during their marriage... I often thought about the memory that these furnishings carried for her, and their imposture in her ability to move on.

EF: *This new project is a fitting continuation of previous works and the ways in which they persistently tackled the question of bodies: how colonial histories are inscribed in and on them, how they resist, how they map memory onto them, how things like administration, nationalism, or xenophobia discipline them...*

LO: Bureaucracy is a tool for enslavement. It rationalizes its "order" to exclude certain people from society where by resistance would mean the inability to function. That discipline becomes psychological, charged by the very enactment of its adherence, that once rooted is often unspoken, un-seeable, and default. The body becomes the location where these orders are interrogated so it is constantly doing the work, to adapt in order to survive.

EF: *In your case, it is never the "body" as some abstract entity, but you put your own self, your own body on the line in order to talk about these issues. For various projects, you've pulled one of your own teeth (and implanted a gold one in its place), cut off all of your hair, laid bare your family's administrative attempts to gain French nationality through the "droit du sang," and now moved all of your possessions (and that of another woman's) to Kunsthalle Basel in the name of art...*

LO: While it's difficult to explain necessity, in many ways, my work is a lifeline. And so, my body becomes the site.

EF: *Pressing that idea a little further, I recall that in an interview, you described the experience of emigration as a "physically violent process, to be lifted out of*

a situation, and also a way of understanding how your body exists in a space.” And I can’t help think of that description and what you have done here: forced the emigration of things, your own and another woman’s whose own emigration is also the specter that haunts this project.

LO: I think the material affects could only be felt once the household arrived in Basel and I began to unpack and reassemble the layout of the apartment by memory. I realized almost immediately that what I had done, in fact, had the opposite effect of what I had imagined. I thought there would be a sense of reunification, like seeing someone you love after time spent apart. But that confrontation was alienating and I felt unable to recognize anything, maybe that was the initial shock, which introduced this very question as a problem I had to articulate.

I went on to meticulously re-order everything as I remembered it to be, likely I felt that if everything was in its rightful place, or operating within a language that it understood, it could make sense of its new surroundings, almost to seek resolve in this misunderstanding. But in many ways, this project became a mirror...

EF: *In relation to the apartment’s front doors, which you extracted from their architecture and transported here, you realized (and here I’ll paraphrase what you wrote to me): “Only when it does not function can its mechanisms be laid out.” Actually, this is what you have done for each of the items in the show, taken them out of their daily life of functionality so their mechanisms could be laid out. Let’s start with the door.*

LO: The wooden door is the original door from 1901, and the metal one was added during the 1990’s civil war between the government and various Islamist rebel groups. And even though Algiers was under a strict curfew, there were many disappearances during the night. Nobody knew which side their neighbors were on, whether they were rebels or police informants giving false accusations under suspicion. The epicenter of that conflict dismantled the notion of trust within a community, and so reinforcing the entrances to the home was rooted in fear. Besides bearing that history, the very extraction of the doors disabled them as a threshold. At once unearthing the violence of their removal and releasing them as an object of fear.

I often thought about what I might do if there was an impending threat on the other side of that door. What was my escape route, being protected by nine locks and two doors on the 3rd floor is merely an order to buy time...

EF: *Behind the displacement and borrowing of those nine locks and two doors as well as thousands of other objects, there were weeks of negotiations, layers of administration, and these too, I would say, are the work...*

LO: This is indeed where most of the work is...the continuum of negotiation meant that each day would present entirely new and often unexpected circumstances. For example, when Khaled Bouzidi (the other half of rhizome) and I were figuring out all the possible ways the objects could move, and after exhausting some of the initial options, we realized that we could register the apartment as an art work with the ONDA (Office national des droits d’auteur et des droits voisins), the Algerian agency for intellectual property rights to then move the thousands of household effects as an artwork. This meant that we had to register the apartment as an installation which previously was not a category under which art could be registered. He went on to go through numerous meetings with their office, as they debated the history of the “ready-made,” which eventually led to an agreement to add a new section to the registration paperwork so that it could include “installation” and we could attain the right paperwork for shipping household affects as art.

Transactions that happen in the material world require a lot more negotiation to make room for grace. But beyond the paperwork and boundless administration are the interpersonal relationships that are fundamental in revealing these systems, rooted in the rituals of exchange, which is entirely faith based.

EF: *Speaking of faith... Can you speak of the title Barzakh?*

LO: *Barzakh* is the limbo, the in-between state. There are many translations which relate it a space where the spirit awaits; somewhere between life and death, or a physical space; a thin strip of land between two seas, a refuge. But it is also a place of judgement, where a spirit waits while its earthly deeds are counted.

Just as my home has become a waiting room... it is suspended, and through the shift in its utility, it is relieved. I’m trying to figure out why I think that, but it’s interesting because in a way I was denied being able to go back (because of COVID-19 measures) so therefore I decided to further deny myself that space, even if I could return. But again, I also think moving the apartment as a gesture is a stand-in for the complexity of displacement that I simultaneously locate elsewhere. Exposure introduces a level of scrutiny. At one point I wanted to count every object in the room, somehow, I felt that giving them a numerical value might neutralize them or weigh them in, which I realize was an attempt to introduce a distance to tackle what was so uncanny.

EF: *Yeah, we had to stop you from trying to count every single thing! [Laughs] This project that essentially exposes your quotidian life to an audience of strangers—invites them in, and lets them see how you’ve lived and with what you have surrounded yourself—making the usually private public is connected in the show to questions of vision, sight lines, and lasers. Can you say something about that?*

LO: Opacity and the utility of information here is key. In Arabic, we use the term *eayan* (eye) but more specifically in relation to when someone looks at you with a negative intention, that they could curse you by the power of thought and that their very thinking would prescribe itself upon you. Linguistically, “the eye” can be hidden within a compliment, which is why they are always followed by a prayer uttered by the receiver (I wonder which object is the prayer). This is about the power of the gaze as a definition of intent: the gaze is the enemy. Therefore, protection is to do with cutting the sight line, obstructing vision as a means for protection. It is always about someone from the outside looking in. Or an external force gaining ground, meddling with the course of a path simply by looking. The laser piece in the exhibition is titled *Eye* because it is precisely about this path of vision, the laser brings what is outside in. It transmits information by a single point of light which is received by a surface, reflected then translated as it is projected inside. What we hear in fact are the moments of disruption, where elemental affects such as wind, rain, and snow break the path of the laser light.

I decided not to install curtains, which came in the shipment. Because curtains obstruct vision, they disallow direct eye contact and in turn become a threshold of fear. But the show is overtly visible. My books, clothes, trinkets, etc. You can see the extraction of the doors, behind each piece of furniture, open the cupboards, you are allowed to touch, to sit, to occupy. I was thinking about what this kind of disruption could do to the otherwise meticulously reconstructed/controlled space, to let others’ hands change that order/take/add something? And what that agency might do to the work because there is something at stake?

EF: *Of course, there is also something martial or even quasi threatening about the lasers, used as they are on weapons to indicate a target, or in security systems, where a breached laser light sets off an alarm...*

LO: The laser’s activation is precisely to do with its disruption. When someone’s body obstructs the light, she or he or they causes the live transmission of sound (from the outside) to stop, or hum without the presence of information. She or he or they turns the room into

white noise. In that “breach,” I think about this suspension, or the silence that happens between the realization (that an alarm has been set off) and its panic—kind of like crossing a road and freezing or running at the sight of oncoming traffic.

The lasers’ ability to indicate a target through a distance, for me, questions the nature of responsibility. If shining a light can tell you that the subject of that measurement is palpable, then it collapses the pursuit, removing the adrenaline of the chase. In the language of warfare, the light becomes the only point of contact, but it also tells you that you have been seen. It braces you, it makes you look for its source.

EF: *And there are also listening devices spread throughout the space...*

LO: I wanted to relay the feeling of being watched within the domestic domain to overturn its association with rest/safety/retreat. This demarcates the ability to do any of those things, and completely absolves the home from its responsibilities. By the audience having their movements echoed around the room and their bodies cutting the signal, it implicates their presence by both providing (sonic) information while their movement hinders its transmittance. But while these various surveillance technologies rely on physical presence as they require the body to both produce and cause an audible disruption to the room, the bugging devices can also be activated by someone calling from anywhere and listening in.

In many ways the listening devices become vessels, conceived to act as witnesses with no history, or ability to foresee, and they can’t retain any of the information that passes through them.

EF: *And why the particular outward form that the devices have?*

LO: The glass sculptures that encase the electronics of the bugging devices are based on the shape of bound skulls, flattened and reformed during childhood so that the head grew upward. It was believed that a long head meant that one was closer to the spirits, around the idea of the “unfinished self.” This practice was discovered throughout time and across civilizations, with no explanation for the coincidence other than the repetition of its practice among the lower class in order to imitate nobility. Though the very practice of binding itself reveals a social standing, at the cost of comfort and ability.

I relate the concept of the “unfinished self” to that of surveillance; the gathering of information for the purposes of targeting the subconscious. To locate and nurture desire while remaining unaccountable for

the privacy it denies. In this way, it acts under the assumption that there is a lack to be fulfilled, somehow overturning the mystical concept of an invisible “third eye,” which seeks perception beyond ordinary sight.

EF: Connecting these ideas, the title of each of the blown glass sculptures that visibly contain bugging devices is a phone number that anyone can actually call and listen in on your show, day or night. Thus, there is a sign at the entrance of the exhibition that warns visitors that the show is under “24-hour surveillance.” Can you say something about where this impetus came from?

LO: I think signs often act as substitutes for security—while they aim to instill fear, I’m not sure they demonstrate liability. In the context of this show, they both warn the audience of the potential that they will be listened to while tempering the impulse to take things... My hopeful projection was that the language of the show, being so recognizably domestic might mean that the audience would treat it with the same respect as if they were entering someone’s home. But I also recognize the potential for the public nature of an art institution like Kunsthalle Basel to shift that responsibility because the work also invites a public to “live” with it and unpack it, in a way. When something is public it assumes that its responsibilities are shared, but again that is totally subjective. The fact is that much of the exhibition is borrowed, and the rest of it are my personal and intimate belongings. Besides wincing at the idea that someone might go through my notebooks or read unsent letters to friends, I trust in that givenness to meet with the fear of loss.

Conversation on the occasion of Lydia Ourahmane’s exhibition Barzakh, March 2 to May 16, 2021, at Kunsthalle Basel.