

Lamia Joreige

Real Encounters

It is often said today that artists of every stripe are more nomadic than ever. One can react to this reality in a number of ways. On the one hand, it could be said that nomadism has caused a homogenization of the global community; for example, even though one may travel all the way from New York to Beijing, it is still common to encounter people who are very similar to each other—despite their cultural diversity. On the other hand, one might emphasize the diversification of identities encouraged by nomadism; for example, since artists are constantly engaged in encountering other artists, they are thus pushed to reflect on their own practices and on their identities in order to recreate them constantly. I think much is correct about these two positions; indeed, many interesting things could be and, in fact, are said about nomadism from them. Nevertheless, I do not want to analyze the causes and the effects of such nomadism from a sociological, economical, or anthropological point of view. Instead, despite the relevance of these approaches, I want to address the matter from my very subjective perspective as an artist: I want to question the value that such nomadism (or what is commonly called nomadism) has in relation to the specific question of what I call a *real encounter*; in what ways does itinerancy shape the kinds of encounters artists have today? Is what lies beneath a nomadic lifestyle the hope for an encounter?

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the nomad to the figure of the migrant: whereas the former is understood to be rootless, in a state of vital displacement and is only properly understood in terms of trajectories, the migrant becomes a sort of tourist, a visitor of locations with often only the practical on his or her mind. I am tempted to say that the circuitous nomadism of today's artists resembles the migrant more than the nomad on Deleuze and Guattari's terms. The migrant, like any traveler, is easily categorized; he poses no problem of recognition upon arrival or departure. As for the nomad, however, there seems to be a breakdown in such mechanisms of recognition: he fails to demonstrate the correct knowledge at certain circumstances and, in fact, appears to be totally ignorant of customs and obligations. How can such a figure become a transmitter of another culture? This touches on the possible uses of language in such circumstances; what if an artist is ignorant of linguistic conventions or norms that dictate expression? What if an artist employs terms and concepts idiosyncratically and thus distorts the preconceptions of others? I believe that something like this contributes toward a *real encounter*, and that it may exist, although not exclusively, in a kind of figure of artist that does not travel. I don't mean to idealize this figure in any way—or suggest that artists should follow that example, but I want to emphasize that *there was something originally valuable about nomadism which seems to have been diminished in being transposed to another concept like migration: we lose the possibility of real encounter.*

In 2009, I was invited to be a resident at the Serpentine Gallery in London as part of the Edgware Road project, and I was encouraged to produce a work that engaged with the history of that neighborhood and its diversity. Though I accepted this invitation and was eager to participate, it so happened that I could not produce anything; eventually, I realized that this had to do with my being outside Beirut, and it became clear to me that

my methods and practices, which had grown and developed in Beirut, were, for this very reason, ineffectual in London. Consequently, I experienced a strong tension between my incapacity to engage with the new city and my desire to displace my practices and methods; what was keeping me from fulfilling this displacement was that I did not have a deep enough experience with and knowledge of London—or rather, I lacked the type of irrational attachment that I have to Beirut as well as the desire to portray and reflect on my home town. In a word, I was simply not “seduced” by the city, and I neither had the desire to produce anything about it nor in it. Although I proceeded to make use of some of the methods common in my work, methods which I use in my own city such as collecting filmed notes and archival documents, and filming hours-long sequence shots in order to capture the passage of life and time in a specific location, I remained alienated from the work I was invited to create. In the end, this problem led me to consider including my very inability to engage with London as a part of the work I would eventually produce.

I am recounting this story because I want to know if that situation even offered a real ground for the type of interaction I was hoping to have in the first place, or if, *de facto*, it was an illusory opportunity. Given the way things happened, I began asking, on what common grounds artists can effectively communicate their cultivated practices without reducing the value of their contribution.

In my case, the residency lasted a few months, and yet I was still unable to make the impact I would have hoped for; this makes me wonder about even shorter opportunities such as festivals and biennials—are encounters possible within that context? Although artists are not asked to create works at these kinds of situations, there arises another (related) question: How is encountering others artists and their work possible in such circumstances that are even more intensely compact; where people are rushing around

seeing so many works in just a couple of hours, greeting acquaintances, meeting colleagues and friends?

These reflections push me to ask a question. Given that we so desire to encounter the other in our nomadic life/work-styles, what are the conditions for an encounter to genuinely occur? And what do I mean by encounter? It seems that this word has different meanings, and I wonder if it is possible that what many people today consider to be an encounter between artists or between practices is perhaps an illusory encounter? I see three aspects to this illusion that are worth discussing.

The sacredness of the Artist's presence

When it is possible, the presence of an artist during the showing of their work is almost universally preferred—almost required; this has to do with reasons that range from logistical concerns of setting up the work for exhibition, to the common belief in the aura generated by the artist's presence, a presence which can often be overdone. Often times, artists, curators, and spectators alike make the assumption that the artist's presence somehow ensures a fuller expression of the piece being exhibited just by being there physically—that his or her physical presence contributes to the meaning of the work exhibited; in fact, it is usually the case that the artist is often coping with practical matters, and engaging in a number of publicity-related activities such as advertising the work or advocating it in some generic manner. In short, physical presence does not imply the kind of mental presence required to fully express the meaning of a work; but people seem to forget this, and when they do they make a curious logical leap from the physical presence of the artist to the supposed full expression of the work exhibited.

In the case of the residency, perhaps something similar could be said since it was taken for granted that the presence of different invited artists working on site would contribute to a new reading of Edgware Road's history;

when perhaps there is an inherent difficulty with taking artists out of their habitual contexts and asking them to work as artists in other places.

The possibility of sharing

Another thing that gets emphasized about nomadic lifestyles in the arts is the way different perspectives can be shared more easily than ever before. Indeed, rather than having secluded communities of artists discussing matters in very particularized ways, we see today the growth of an exchange of ideas between what could have been isolated groups of artists. However, I think that, just as with the presence of the artist, this advantage can also be illusory. Consider the way that during large artistic events like festivals and biennials, it is common that everyone speaks a language in which artistic references can be universally understood. This language eventually comes to have a life of its own; so much so that when one is in such a general setting it is important to ask how much of their specificity can be properly shared? This can happen at both the level of the artist's identity, and also on the level of the meaning of a single work; these two get taken up in the general context of an event and often fail to transmit what provided the meaning of the work for them in the first place. I am not saying that this is all that happens; rather, I am stressing that there is a dangerous way in which this can—and indeed, does—occur. I therefore ask, is there a *false faith* that the specificity of cultures and of works can be transmitted adequately through a homogenized international language? I could list many examples such as when I was invited to participate in an artistic event and I ended up becoming a kind of cultural transmitter from which the audience was to learn about Lebanon, and my country's politics, customs, etc.—in some ways, even my work was reduced to that. No doubt, my work is grounded in Lebanon and its socio-political context, but that does not warrant such a narrow interpretation. It is easy to get caught in a situation where one's background

causes one to become totally defined by certain cultural, political, historical contexts, i.e., wars, revolutions, etc., that are taking place in one's country. What results from this kind of misapprehension is an illusory feeling that one has encountered the other, when in fact they have instead succeeded in summarizing this other in familiar terms; and any radical difference that may stand out gets dismissed or dulled.

The Myth of an International Community

Taken together, the presence of the artist and the efficiency of a homogenized international language gives rise to the obvious conclusion that a community has been birthed; a community, in this sense, is a group in which all interests and beliefs are adequately reflected so that particular differences are recognized by others. Today, we speak of a Global Community as if it was a fact, but it is beginning to dawn on many that perhaps this is just a slogan that covers over essential inequalities and misunderstandings. Admittedly, the art community is far more open to diversity than most other organizations; in this respect, it actually seems that the art community, if it exists, succeeds in acting as a community insofar as particular differences are not ignored and are in fact celebrated. There is therefore belief in an ideal circumstance in which artists, while maintaining what is specific to their identities, can come together and share something in common. This is definitely a positive thing, but do we not risk a dilution of the specificity of the artists and their work in all this mutual recognition in the other? If one is taken up by the enthusiasm of sharing a common 'language' or an artistic practice with someone else, for instance, are they not tempted to shed those aspects of their work and personal life that are not homogeneous with this international context?

The main thing that I wish to emphasize about the nomadism of artists today is that it is related to both the sacredness of the presence of the artists as well as on the assumption of cultural sharing such that the

idea of community contributes to an illusory encounter. I think that we are often led to believe that if these three factors attain, then we are to experience a real encounter amongst artists and between works, when in fact this rarely occurs.

So how does a *real encounter* occur? From my experience, it can take place when a displacement of methods and practices is experienced by those who take part in the encounter—when something feels awkward, but is nevertheless pursued by both (or all) parties. Displacement of a practice—as I have come to see it—involves making use of some artistic method without anticipating its reception; in so far as artists are pushed to consider the impact of their work on an audience and seek out ways to homogenize their forms of expression with those of the others, then I believe they could in fact minimize the chances of a real encounter taking place. What I mean is that a *real encounter* involves the employment of the methods familiar to an artist without anticipating the way that they will be understood, i.e., without tweaking them to plan and facilitate the reception of one's work by a foreign audience.

Although language remains one of the central means by which artists can come to express the meaning of their works, an important feature of Displacement is when participants in an encounter accept the impossibility of a common language that is adequate to both and see that this is as a crucial part of the encounter in question—not an obstacle for it. Making the work itself becomes the ground for that encounter.

Finally, it is important not to confuse the possibility of making a real encounter with the time spent in a particular location; in a manner reminiscent of love, *encounters* can occur in a moment's breath, leaving much that is either ungraspable or irreducible beyond that moment. Throughout all my reflections, I have not wanted to explain how this is possible (for how does one describe something at once so specific and intangible?), so much

as I wanted to question the absolute value of a nomadic lifestyle and its possibility of providing for such an encounter between artists and the works that they travel with. I believe that there is no direct relationship between today's itinerant lifestyles and the sort of encounter artists deeply value between each other; such engagement is the product of something else.

Deleuze and Guattari importantly emphasize that the nomad does not move, if motion is understood in terms of migration from one point to another or across a circuit. In this way, taken metaphorically, the artist who does not travel can be a lesson for other artists. There might be something to be admired about this artist who stays put, who refuses to learn and speak an international language, who refuses to be reduced to one's identity. Would not such an approach perhaps enhance the capacity of an encounter?

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Lamia Joreige is a visual artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Beirut. She uses archival documents and fictitious elements to reflect on the relation between individual stories and collective History. She explores the possibilities of representation of the Lebanese wars and their aftermath, and Beirut, a city at the center of her imagery. Her work is essentially on Time, the recordings of its trace and its effects on us. She is a co-founder and co-director of Beirut Art Center, a unique non-profit space dedicated to contemporary art in Lebanon.