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Be Still my Beating Heart

In the past few years, most of my 'curatorial' projects have been based on research about a recent past that is yet to be written in scholarly form. I have had to rely on an oral history that is practically impossible to fact-check. The trappings of this process have fascinated, rather than deter, me.

Contemporary art theory, as well as curatorial and artistic practice have engaged in many ways and at several levels with memory, remembrance, affect, archival traces, documents, rumors, hearsay, forensics, etc. The 'trick' is in re-telling of the story, the reconstitution of a forgotten, silenced or unwritten event, or practice.

I have come across situations, or interviews where I have totally failed at finding the right framework or syntax to transmit what I have been intimidated, precisely because the interview itself is a situation of delicate staging. It involves seduction, trust, the bequeathing of private information or knowledge, manipulation... At some level, we always fictionalize past, present and future, but in my failure to retell what I have been told, I decided resorted to fiction to say what I felt unsayable without the protection and impunity of fiction, precisely because it can unlock secrets by exploring a recent past stripped of facts, documentary archives, and captive to the absolutist tyranny of the market, precisely because the production of art historical knowledge has surrendered almost entirely to the logic of the market.

In what follows is an attempt at an impossible dialogue with an inanimate object that cannot answer me back. Namely, a book titled *Maalesh, the Journal of a Theatrical Tour*, by Jean Cocteau. I, for one, never suspected Cocteau would write a journal and title it *Maalesh*, it's Arabic dialect for "it's okay", "it will pass", "I will let it pass" or "it does not matter". I found the book in the 1 euro shelves of a second-hand bookstore in Paris. It's full of self-assured, serious and thorough annotations in pencil, that suggest they might have been made by an editor. In preface, and at the risk of being pedantic and causing you unnecessary pain, some context to this mysterious journal.

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau was born in Yvelines, near Paris, in 1889 and died in 1963 from a heart attack. He died a day after his much beloved friend, Edith Piaf died, rumor has it that he was so heartbroken from news of her death, that it simply gave in. Between the months of March and May in 1949, Jean Cocteau and a troupe of actors visited Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Istanbul and Ankara to present several of his plays. *Maalesh* is the diary of this travel, written on planes, boats, while riding cars, or in the hallways of hotels. Cocteau wrote: "*For the span of two months and ten days, I was assigned all sorts of titles and names". I left a Man, and I return a Man.*

Not a man of letters, just a man." *Maalesh* is dedicated to A. S. E. Mohamed Wahid-El-Din, the epigraph reads: "*Dear Wahid, you asked, one night, if I would accept to sign a book for you. So many of this book's pages were written only because of you.*" *Maalesh* is a very interesting read, it is at times amusing, others infuriating, in the overall compelling because of the unguardedness of the writing. If it was reviewed by an editor prior to publishing, then it must have been a very quick and forgiving eye/hand. The epigraph ends with: "*Accept this theatre's journal, with my apologies for the notes that transgress the codes of hospitality. Can the garrulous be reduced to silence? Blame me in public. Love me in secret.*"

I have not done enough research to find out who Mohamed Wahid-El-Din was, but clearly, he hailed from the élite and was extremely wealthy. He dedicated several cars to Cocteau and his troupe, and assigned his personal secretary, Carullo, to accompany Cocteau everywhere -at the cost of irritating Cocteau at times. (Needless to point out that the idea of an Italian-Egyptian personal secretary running after this temperamental French diva prince in the streets of Cairo amused me to no end.) But I digress. As I am quite the superstitious, I decided that this book, in fact, this particular edition of the book (with the compulsive annotations), did not fall in my hands by meaningless coincidence.

Maalesh begins with a morbid scene, the death of Christian Bérard, a set designer who committed suicide at the Théâtre Marigny. He was buried next to Raymond Radiguet, at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. After the burial, Cocteau flew to New York, to avoid facing the loss. He writes: "*I adopted Bérard to the extent that I no longer dared to speak about him, out of fear that I would seem to be speaking about myself.*" We only learn that he was on his way to Egypt when he discloses that it was Bérard's last set design for *La Machine infernale* that was traveling with him to Egypt. He continues to explain, and this time explicitly, that he traveled to Egypt to avoid being in Paris, a city that exalted Bérard.

What is so meaningful about *Maalesh*, precisely because it is Cocteau's least remembered book? It spoke to me firstly as the chronicle of a physical encounter with Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, in other words, a version of the so-called "Orient", the encounter of a seminal figure in the West's modernity's. It was an obviously physical experience, the extent to which it might have been intellectual, poetic or even spiritual is debatable. When Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky or Natalia Gontcharova traveled to a similar version of the so-called Orient, it had, by Klee and Kandinsky's accounts respectively, the tenor of a life-changing, if not career-changing, journey. New horizons, new sensibilities. They encountered abstraction in Islamic calligraphy, traditional crafts and architecture, and in the hieroglyphs. They also discovered Sufism. And this is how some of us over here stake a claim on modernity 'over there'. But I digress. Cocteau's journey is different. On the one hand, it was not his first trip to Egypt, he had traveled there in 1936, as part of a voyage around

the world. His uncle was then the ambassador of France to Egypt, so it was an obvious stop.

Cocteau's travels reminded me of our own contemporary travels, as artists from Lebanon, Egypt -the 'former' Orient-, who present their work west- and north-ward, and also as curators who travel to unfamiliar places on assignment, to engage with artists, deploy their subjective gaze and mechanisms of interpretation to propose a singular or particular representation (hegemonic, critical, subversive, of any sort) of the world, in the form of an exhibition, event, festival. This representation, or exposition, is also a production of poetics, and a form of production of knowledge as well.

The industry of contemporary art however expects travel, encounter, delivery of goods, production of opinion, selection, showcase, text, catalogue, to happen at warp speed. When I travel to a place under these guises, I am often received and aided by colleagues who become guides, or, 'native informants'. I don't use the term pejoratively, because I have gladly played that role myself and often enjoyed it. Cocteau's journal describes several characters who were 'native informants' in one capacity or other, beginning with Carullo, the Italian native of Egypt, and his host's personal secretary. From the first pages, I immediately felt tremendous empathy for Carullo. Cocteau notes his encounters a string of socialites before and after his performances, at dinner parties, or in his official capacity as a film director, but they are not as present as Carullo.

Far from being anywhere near the prolific creative genius that he was (or lured by fascism as he was), I did also empathize, perhaps even identify, with Cocteau himself, as well. I recognized that ambiguous blend of relying on others for guidance, relinquishing control over one's habits, use of time, likes and dislikes, the thrill of learning to decode the secrets of a place... Save a few exceptions, I am usually overwhelmed with the generosity of those who have hosted and received me, shared their address book and private knowledge. I have often asked myself, what do I do with the stories that each has told me? Do they not accumulate to build a repository of informal knowledge about a place, at a specific time? Very little of this information finds its way into an exhibition's catalogue, or a festival's introductory essay, and perhaps rightfully so, perhaps their place is elsewhere. But where might it come to life?

Cocteau's journal is interesting because it seems embattled. It contains elements of a conventional travel chronicle, but it is also peppered with introspective notes from an emotionally turbulent phase in the man's life, and meditative observations about people and places foreign to him. In reading the book, I have decided to imagine the voices of those 'natives' who accompanied him in a few short passages. Might that be what is missing from narratives of modernity and post-modernity, the chronicle of a polyphonic conversation, not as a postcolonial restorative or retributive gesture, but simply as a new code for both to write oneself in the world, in the present.

For instance:

On pages 34-35 Cocteau writes: "*Elisabeth Prévost and a friendly crowd were waiting for us, and accompanied us to the customs. There I found again the shouting, pushing, and disorderliness of the Mediterranean people. The suitcases were lost, found, and hovering overhead. Obviously, some powerful angels were guarding us. Waiting in the cue for customs, usually interminable in Egypt, did not last longer than a few minutes. We were suddenly outside, in the sun, lost, regrouped, then lost again, until one of Mohamed Wahid el-Din's cars picked us up. It was driven by his secretary, Carullo. From that minute onwards, Wahid's car and his secretary were relegated to us. He would be second-guessing each of our least steps. No matter how we would try to conceal our enterprises, car and secretary will invariably be at our service. In Egypt, cars are magnificent and powerful. At least they incarnate Egypt's power, because she cannot make use of them. Save for the road to the pyramids, the highway linking Cairo to Alexandria built by the Shell company, and the road from Cairo to Fayyoun, there are no other roads in Egypt.*"

And this is how I imagined Carullo's diary entry: "I had spent the morning overseeing the drivers cleaning, wiping, and shining the car. *El-Khawaga* seemed in a state of joyful excitement that spread a good mood throughout the household staff. He had insisted I drive the car, and explained what an honor it would be to accompany and assist that French theater director, a personality, an artist, a genius, he said, then repeated: "a genius!" I was more curious about the French actresses. When I arrived at the airport, I noticed the group of foreigners immediately, they gathered and walked haggardly in different directions, shouted at each other, grouped, then separated, then regrouped again. If one is expected to be picked up, why all this useless movement? Why couldn't they stick together in one place and wait quietly? Artists! I began to dread the weeks to come, and worried about how complex shepherding them all the time will be. As I pulled the car curbside and parked, the French film director was standing in the sun, looking feverishly through his suit pockets as if he had lost something. I smiled and extended my hand, "*Bonjour! Monsieur Coctou?*". He seemed pale, his face was hard, slightly angular. I dreaded the weeks to come."

And then this passage from Cocteau, pages 35-36: "*Wahid's car came to drive me to the embassy, where I had an appointment with our ambassador, Gilbert Arvengas. We crossed the ambassador's car, who had sent Yves Régnier, secretary of cultural relations, to fetch me from the hotel. I apologized and explain to the ambassador how difficult it is to elude Egyptian kindness. He apologized in his turn for throwing a reception in our honor on Monday. "Three hundred people, each of whom will beckon you to accept an invitation." [...] In Egypt, it's the reign of fifty families. There is no middle class. The rest dawdle, brew, rebels confusedly. The king is at constant risk of regicide. He only likes to go out, and only goes out unannounced, from club to club, surrounded by police. The anti-European crisis seems less sharp. The ambassador considers that we ought to do our best possible in accomplishing*

our duties knowing that events rule over those who imagine themselves rulers. [...] While I write (we are the 10th, I stop and come back when I have a few free minutes) troops returning from Palestine march towards a grand parade for the king. The square is bustling. It is quite cold. This cold has not let since we have arrived in Egypt. This March cold is known as "the old woman's cold". The tanks, music, infantrymen march in disorder amidst a cheering crowd that howls, with individuals climbing on one another. A police truck watches over this multicolored purée, under our windows. And it rains. A few droplets fall. It never rains in Egypt. These few droplets of rain play the role of a storm. Policemen in the truck cover their headgear with a tarp. Men in long dresses run in all directions, with newspapers covering their heads. Fezes are covered by handkerchiefs. The crowd disperses. The cacophony of car horns reclaims its dominance. One guesses that the revolt of these people will be confused and lest their political opinion become precise and profit from the simple fact of a mob."

Cocteau's writing is vivid enough that I can imagine the scene. I would not have watched it from a window of the Semiramis Hotel. The returning soldiers were probably disoriented, hungry, exhausted. They had just lost the war to save Palestine. *Be still my beating heart.*