

Airport Hotel

by Natascha Sadr Haghghian

The story begins at the airport hotel in Dubai. A place in which non-presence has hypermaterialized. A non-place.

Wait, it actually starts earlier. Passengers from various flights pour into the airport terminal at four in the morning. They have all missed their connecting flights. All bodies are tired. The bodies of the travellers are tired from endless hours in terminals, airspaces, taxi, and transit. Now, stranded without connection, they become part of procedures, procedures that include vouchers, shuttle busses, and airport hotels. Bodies are exhausted, exhausted also in their relation to one another. They become mere destination, suspended, bundled, and listed on sheets of paper held up by other bodies designated as airport staff: Shanghai, Beijing, Seoul, Jakarta, Sydney, Manchester. Bodies equipped with boarding cards and passports are being divided into destinations. Some are stubborn, they want to keep moving, travel on, but in the end even the exasperated ones are too exhausted to resist the measures put in place for them. The measures follow standard protocols, shaped by regulations, decided by insurance companies and law firms. Rights, responsibilities, negligence, minimum damage, customer contracts bring all the traveling bodies, submissive or resistive, into this non-place called Millennium Airport Hotel.

There are other bodies that take care, carry out those protocols and procedures written in international aviation law. Airport staff, shuttle staff, airline staff, hotel staff, restaurant staff. More bodies. Most had their passports taken away under the *kafala system*, a sponsorship system that applies to migrant workers in the UAE. Their bodies are brought in, exhausted, and spit back out to their countries of origin. This system is part of what makes non-places possible. These bodies are not permitted to show their tiredness. Relentlessly, they offer vouchers, desert tours, jewelry shopping, tea, coffee, water, room service, housekeeping, pool music. They clean up after my tired body with permanent smiles that are part of their contract. Returning the smile, my body tries to pay respect to their tiredness. The passport still in my hand feels sticky and absurd.

Everything in this place speaks hypermaterialized non-presence with its specific sensation of numbness, similar to clogged ears after a rough landing. A sameness algorithm of cultures, lifestyles, religions, eating habits, and corporate interests has come to make a non-place. Everything seems coated with an organic skin, kept fresh and rosy with endless amounts of water, oil, and other fluids. The hotel buffet with its time-and-placeless variety of foods, the evergreen lawn around the pool, even the perfectly tanned, shaped, and depilated Russian-speaking bodies draped on sunloungers around the pool seem like ambitious renderings of living things. Non-place in leisure mode, erasing distance, context, memory, future. The perfect camouflage for everything and anything.

You talked about the distance between things, actual things—concrete and tangible—and abstract things of different registers, emotional, known, learned, seen, heard, researched. You described how figuring out distance towards a thing or between things happens in writing and in visualizing writing in moving images. This process involves different modes of gauging, maneuvering, and looking in variations of outer and inner observations. Looking through the retina as much as with the mind's eye to help understand distances and displacements of things that belong to different registers. Donna Haraway calls this “becoming worldly.” It is a strenuous, often painful endeavor to become worldly, to measure out the displacements of bodies, things, and language, to gauge how things operate over long distances, different time-zones and entirely different realms. Non-place tries to erase any understanding of distance or prevent us from “touching it” as Haraway would say. It deletes coordinates, anaesthetizes the senses, and coats the numb voids with Photoshopped derma. It's hard to know what you're touching, but the quest for it seems ever more important here.

I now understand much better why you prefer to write or work on long-distance flights. You throw your body into a situation of translation rather than transition. In the passenger seat of a long distance flight, between the too-short blanket and the too-small inflight entertainment screen, your body abandons form and becomes something else, maybe a little closer to the state of a jellyfish, an animal that according to you “constantly shifts its nearly invisible self—having no backbone, no structure—something whose inside is outside—in between itself *always*.” It is

in this state that you can begin to apprehend those other distances, those other languages. Not the distance between departure and arrival. After some time the body forgets about those notions and hovers between disembodiment and hypermaterialized physicality on the molecular level, a state of becoming that opens other ports to embodied knowledge of distance. And not those languages that you find listed in the menu of your inflight entertainment. In this state language becomes foreign from within, in translation processes that don't follow protocols of translation. It is here where you gain access to a foreign language within language, one that allows you to see words transform into wave lines, metro stations into caves, data centers into museum galleries, deserts into beaches, jellyfish into pink noise, literature into moving images. It is here where you find sunsets that last for the length of an entire movie. And it is here where the imaginary space and the world of things become one overturning motion, similar to the motion of waves breaking on the shore in a perpetual dispossessed actualization of form and appearance. This is the place where the gaze can register distances between actual and abstract things and the tongue can speak those foreign languages within language.

I learned about this while I was in the non-place. Stretched on the hotel bed, I remembered our conversations about alienation and displacement, and suddenly my senses were able to make out coordinates in this numbed environment. Things around me started to point towards each other and connect. Scenes from your videos *Waves* and *Notes From Underground* popped into my head and my bleary eyes couldn't make out whether they were playing on the hotel room's flatscreen or in my head. The image of your finger making the world revolve on an airplane monitor while you talk about Fukushima, the image of an incoming train in a Stockholm metro station with Susan Sontag's voice from fifty years earlier, and the alternating reverberations of a sonar signal and water drops in a cave that seem to gauge impossible distances between the emergence of a stalactite and the next incoming train. Things that occupy the same spaces without belonging to the same realm, yet we ridiculously try to manage their co-existence in what we encounter as reality. How do we come to think we can manage a green lawn in the desert of the UAE? Or the ocean water used to cool the myriad of hard drives so that I can see the Google image of Courbet's wave? Or the radioactive waste that leaks

from the storage tanks in Fukushima? The reemerging scenes from your videos express this impossibility while not shying away from the vertiginous cliff that they reveal. They don't try to depict or explain or secure reality, but joyfully summit and enter that space, the cliff over which things fall, transform, and evade our possession, use, or management.

This might sound a bit spectacular, but it actually happens in the most banal, often familiar moments, places, and settings. This is why your videos helped me in this air-conditioned hotel room in the desert. All three videos, *Sunsets*, *Notes From Underground*, and *Waves* are anchored in your desk, your computer, your screen. All images and sounds are rooted here, and with shifting transparencies we have access to their directory and neighboring files. Edits are not cuts, but rather shifts in focus of simultaneously open windows. They form sequences that are not seamless or linear, but instead allow for a complex tentative play with the many layers and appearances of language, visibility, and embodiment. The cliff opens between windows on your screen or between the keyboard and your writing hand. Sometimes we only hear you type, like when you Skype with your translator in *Sunsets*. Sometimes we only see the moiré of the screen like in *Waves*, or the oscillating wave line of Susan Sontag's voice in *Notes From Underground*. We hear the intimate sounds of silence, the ventilation of a laptop, a refrigerator, the air conditioning on an airplane. These simple signs of a familiar environment create a sensual knowing, a sense of orientation that viscerally guides to the ports and into the imaginary space that inhabits those environments, any environment, actually. Watching becomes unintentional, a dreamlike experience between being awake and sleeping. In retrospect, watching any of these three works feels like something I experienced rather than watched on Vimeo. Maybe I really did, and watching your work rather has the quality of an experience. It does not represent experience, it does not depict embodiment, it does not recount literature. Instead, it inscribes itself into my memory as an encounter. Your desk could be my desk, your screen could be my screen, and this hotel room could be your hotel room, any hotel room, really. And like any hotel room or desk or refrigerator the Millennium Airport Hotel is also full of ports to imaginary spaces and to becoming worldly.

It was already afternoon and I had given in to the experience, to the exposure to hypermaterialized non-presence, the pain it creates in

invisible limbs that you didn't even know you had. Suddenly I thought why not go to the gym. I felt reminded of the suspended time in Kabul's Serena Hotel three years ago. I was there for research, but we were not allowed to leave the hotel without a driver, so we spent a lot of time in its compound. To ease the urge for movement, I went to the hotel gym. You would find a combination of bodies there, silhouettes of the different foreign operations in Afghanistan: supple, pear-shaped bodies of NGO workers next to enormous, highly trained, beefy bodies of security sector contractors, and indifferent bodies of politicians. The TV screens showed what the filmmaker Reza Haeri had pointed out to me as the Fashion-Military-Complex, with a combination of pret-a-porter and weapon *défilés*. He claims that this specific combination of television shows first appeared during the Iraq invasion. Uncannily, I found the same set of images on the screens of the Millennium Airport Hotel gym on entering. Military air show on the left, pret-a-porter on the right, both devices blaring respective soundscapes. I got on one of the machines in the middle of the rather small room and started running. I wanted to know what happens to my brain while running in this seemingly incongruous stereo field that could easily rip my senses apart. No, actually I felt that it was the only appropriate place to occupy in this space, and quite similar to your desk, or mine, or any desk, really.