



**A Response to Sophie Sabet's exhibition, *Since We Last Spoke***

**Flux Gallery, 27 October – 4 November 2017**

**by Noor Bhangu**

A few nights before the Winnipeg opening of her show *Since We Last Spoke*, Sophie and I sat down to talk about her family, and art practice. As with most diasporic couplings, we didn't waste any time before going head first into topics of migration, alienation, and sense of identity – where was home when we felt ourselves stuck between nation and diaspora? Did we feel that we belonged anywhere, or rather come from anywhere, now that we felt ourselves estranged from our parents and their histories? As we grappled with these questions, Sophie began to speak of a “cross-cultural dialogue,” that she felt characterized her interaction with her family in their shared domestic space. At first this notion of “cross-cultural” disturbed me. All I could think about were the nights I stood across the living room from my own parents – silent and shivering but wanting to be recognized. For me, “cross-cultural” felt like a slap in the face, like occupying a home and a body that was divided and could never be whole. I asked: Why were we the ones kicked out of our own culture? As I continue to reflect on Sophie's important work, the notion of being across culture is beginning to slowly settle in. I'm thinking that, perhaps, this feeling of separation and standing apart is the only tool we have to unravel the complexity of living in diaspora and occupying diasporic space.

*Since We Last Spoke* is an installation borne from Sophie Sabet's discovery of her parent's correspondence spanning their early years as immigrants in Canada. A few years after the Sabet family had re-settled in Canada, Sophie's father began to travel back to Iran to visit family and, in some ways, return to the man he once was before the discomfort of migration softened his skin. The physical separation between her mother and father eventually led them to write to each other... about mundane life moments, like visits to the bank, to voicing feelings of resentment and disconnection. The letters resurrect past conversations centered on feelings of being within and without home. Under a glass vitrine in the gallery, the letters are assembled in an overlapping fashion to subvert easy access to the family history while, simultaneously, serving as a symbolic entry into their material archive.

Together with the letters, the three channel video installation facilitates a kind of recovery of the past, which at first might seem trivial and un-revolutionary. As her audience, we stand in front of the central video and wonder about the unmade bed, the

loud and barren windows. What could possibly be recovered in such an ordinary and forgettable setting? But in Georges Perec's words, Sophie has set aside the exciting and the exotic for "the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual."<sup>i</sup> The setting (her parent's bedroom) heightens the intimacy of the memories. By asking them to revisit the letters, she has found a way to insert herself into and also witness the stories that lay underneath the skin of the everydays that took place behind closed doors.

In her paper, "The Turn to Diaspora," Lily Cho describes how the diasporic subject is constantly negotiating and renegotiating the everyday. Paraphrasing Homi K. Bhabha, Cho writes, "To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint, ambivalently ahead of their time yet behind it too."<sup>ii</sup> By being located in a culture, which is marked by displacement and dispossession, Sophie experiences discomfort about the everydays which passed before her, and the everydays which built the kind of domestic space that now facilitate the dreaded "cross-cultural dialogue." Returning to the letters, both as a symbolic and material past, becomes a way for the diasporic artist to bring the past into her own movement within the present and towards the future.

Through the interactive space of the exhibition, Sophie invited her visitors to make the return with her and understand some of the way in which her "cross-cultural dialogue" materialized: to witness the conflict within her. First exhibited as part of the MFA Thesis exhibition at Ryerson Image Centre, *Since We Last Spoke* occupied a small room, whose close quarters emphasised the claustrophobia of the work. Although claustrophobia has its own place in diasporic spaces, Sophie and I agreed that the physical opening up of the exhibition in Flux Gallery's larger space more keenly resembled the prolonged spatiality of diaspora as well as giving visitors more room to become enveloped by the heaviness of the work.

As I entered the exhibition space on the opening night of the exhibition, I keenly remember a kind of nervous warmth wrap around my body. Walking around with my cold Sapporo pressed to the nape of my neck, I hoped for my temperature to fade so I could begin to engage with the work itself. But upon relaxing, I realized that the shock

my body had just experienced was related to the feeling of walking into the living room of my own memories. Like my parents, Sophie's parents sat fixed at the opposite ends of the room wanting me to listen to their stories and then pick a side.

I was reminded of being in a sound envelope. Theorized by the late psychoanalyst Didier Anziou, the sound envelope is the integumentary cover of "embryonic mental life," which seeks to hold together and care for the development of an embryonic figure (an emerging diasporic subject in Sophie's case) through the triple use of audio, visual, and tactile senses.<sup>iii</sup> Speaking in soft Farsi, her parents' voices crafted an environment that was both caring and alienating in its envelopment.

The challenge of being within a sound envelope is that it cannot hold forever. Cracks become apparent and threaten the legitimacy of the whole structure. In *Since We Last Spoke*, the crack is the position of the artist herself. As Sophie attempts to revisit the everyday of her parent's past she hollows out her own place within the diasporic drama. Always the documenter, she restricts her position to that of listening and recording, far away from any meaningful participation in the dialogue. For me, as her audience and fellow diasporic body, it is this hollowness that is the centre and strength of this project. In pointing to the holes within the domestic sound envelope, Sophie reminds us of the limits of empathetic witnessing.

For some of us the envelope of our parents' culture is often not enough to cover us and give us new life. While it is important work to bear witness to the histories of our parents, in turn we must learn to respond with and fill up our own agency. So for the moment, let us hold on to the "cross-cultural" in hopes that it can prompt us to cut across.

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<sup>i</sup> Georges Perec. "Approaches to What?" in *Species of spaces and other pieces*. London: Penguin Books, 2008: 205-207. p. 206.

<sup>ii</sup> Lily Cho. "The Turn to Diaspora." *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (Spring 2007): 11-30. p. 19.

<sup>iii</sup> Didier Anziou. *The Skin Ego*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1989. p. 162.