As If I Forgot: An Attempt to Re-write my Memory of the City

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"I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?"

Sans Soleil - **Chris Marker**

When I first started working on 'Not-Nostalgic', or for a more literal translation: 'As if I Forgot', I didn't have a clear idea of what I was going to exhibit. I just knew that it was the right time for me to look back at my photo archive. I spent weeks going through thousands of photos that I had taken during the last 15 years. I would like to think that I didn't select the photos, instead each photo actually stood out by itself. I had no idea in the beginning why I was picking out one photo over another. After I had compiled around 40 photos, things started making sense. It was all about home and how I kept it in my memory.

We always refer to 'home' as 'here'. For the last four or five years I kept asking myself: Where is my 'here?' I have never found the answer. I was slowly losing my connection to the city I grew up in as if it had never existed. The places were there, more or less, but the connection wasn't. I felt like a stranger in the streets where I once walked as if I owned it.

I lost a friend or two. I lost the sea.

It is a matter of attachment and I am trapped. We are all trapped in our ideas of home. I took the decision to leave for Berlin in search of a new home.

Just before I left to Berlin, I decided to hold this exhibition as a farewell to the Alexandria that I remember. Moreover, I was aware of the fact that it was not only a farewell to the city, but

to myself as well. I made this exhibition about my memory of Alexandria between 2010 and 2019. I was trying to picture and map how I remember it. Perhaps it was to distract myself and those I love from facing the fact that I was leaving. It didn't work.

29 photographs, three different sizes taken by one vagrant heart.

One day before the opening, two of my friends were helping me hang the photos and put them in order. After we were done, I walked around the gallery and at that moment I was sure that this was how I would like to rewrite my memory of this city, at least for now.

Here is the sea that I used to go and sit by safely. I would spend hours looking at it, the city behind me, and I would just forget about everything else. Now, when I sit by the sea, I cannot help but look back every few minutes; I do not trust the city anymore. On my left, I see three photos of a cafe and an old bar where I spent most of my twenties. The bar was demolished and replaced by an ugly building, and I decided not to step foot in this local cafe again after the owner insulted my friend, a human rights activist who was arrested at the time, and who is still detained. She was always nice to him, I remember, but he forgot.

At the end of the hall stood the biggest photo of the exhibition, a 100 by 70 cm aerial shot of a huge demonstration during the Revolution in 2011. I took it from the window of my room. When the gallery manager first saw it, he thought it was a funeral. Most people thought it was a shot of a funeral, not a demonstration. It is a demonstration I am sure.

Just beside it, hung a back shot of a young woman standing beside the oldest city court where we used to demonstrate as well. Her hand was on her waist and she was looking at the empty street. Everyone thought it was taken after one of the battles between 'us' and the police during the Revolution. However, it wasn't after a battle. It was a while before the Revolution and it wasn't taken at a demonstration, but I liked the fact that people saw it that way. They are right. I saw this scene hundreds of times during the days of the Revolution, but I never photographed it at that time yet it stayed in my memory. It represents a key moment in my memory and it matches my narrative and how I want to remember the city. I never said it myself, but I decided not to correct anyone who thought it was taken after one of the battles.

I looked at him in a 70 by 50 cm frame, smoking a cigarette on a black couch, his favorite in our office which we built together dreaming of reaching the sky seven years ago. I turn my eyes a little to the right, heading to the next frame, and I see in an aerial shot that I took from the window of the office the same black couch standing in the street waiting for the removal van to arrive.
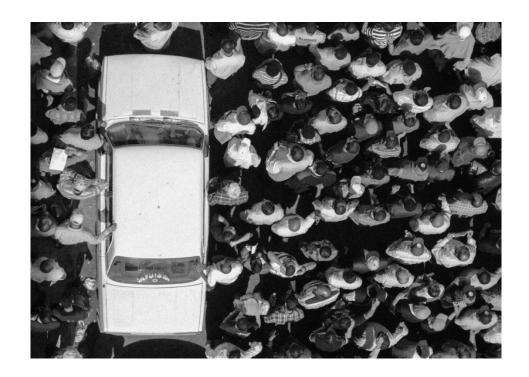
We eventually shut down the office. He left us four years before we finally closed the office.

I go back, and stare at him for some time. I remember cruising around the city in his tiny car before it got stolen and how much I was making fun of him because he lived in the suburbs and he was not 'Alexandrian'.

I knew I would meet him the next day for the first time in a long time. I would meet him before the opening. He feels uncomfortable in big gatherings and that was why he would not attend the opening. I still remember when I kept talking about him for two hours with my girlfriend, then she laughed and told me "you are not talking about a friend who left you, you are talking about a lover who broke your heart". Her bold statement shook me and it has stayed with me ever since. But I have also never properly faced it. The next day I went to see him three hours before the opening and I told him that I couldn't tell my story of this city without mentioning him. He is an essential part of my narrative. I never dropped him out of any new versions of my memory. I told him: 'There are many things that happened in the past, and maybe I didn't understand you or what you needed at the time, but I love you. I love you and no one will take that away from me'. He was smiling, listening, and overwhelmed I suppose. I don't know if he understood what I meant by 'I love you', but I don't know what I meant by it either.

I could have kept telling stories about each frame. But as I walked out of the gallery and into Fouad Street, one of the oldest streets in the city, I realized that I am done with this city. I don't know it anymore, but I left a glimpse from the city I once knew up in the gallery. Now, I need to move on, search for a new place, yet accept the fact that this city will never stop haunting me.

Now I live in Berlin. I miss the sea in Alexandria. I went there last month. The sea was there, but I couldn't find it. I feel stuck. It is like moving forward while looking back, as my friend once told me.