

once again



on the travelator

As I expected, the bathroom could be found just as soon as I got off the plane, just as they always are. I entered and began to wash my hands and face, both parched after spending so long in an air controlled environment. The woman alongside me had finished fixing her hair, and she too opened the tap to brush her teeth, wash her face, and generally freshen up. She opened it to the maximum, and left it running while she continued, even applying hand cream and new make-up in the presence of the her small basin waterfall. Once she had finished, she collected her things and was about to stroll out. By this point my anxiety was visceral, as I imagine it would be for any South African since the drought that was still affecting most of the country. As soon as she turned I reached over and slammed down the tap handle to stop the flow. The woman spun toward me: ‘Whoops! Sorry!’ I said nothing, but looked immediately at the sign that had been in front of her just above the tap the whole time, hoping her eyes would follow mine there. ‘Save water; water is precious, open the tap slowly, close it when you are not using the water.’ When I peeked again to confirm whether or not she had seen it I caught only the last of her fiery red hair in my peripheral vision, on its way to leave either for a holiday or a connection. It had confused me even more to realise that she was an English speaker.

The day prior I was in a bedroom, packing my bags to return to Switzerland and put myself in airplane mode: ready for the procedure that is connecting from airport to airport, replete with homogenous architecture and coffee that all tastes the same. Ready once again to move from smoking lounge to smoking lounge, all seamlessly designed to be easy enough to discover wherever you are, ensuring my move to the appropriate gate when the time is ready, confirmed by the continuous and regular appearance of boarding screens announcing departures and times.

The bathrooms are also the same. So much so, that one no longer needs to be cognisant of the signage or instructions. Or so it would seem. I took a connection in Cairo this time, which means flying for at least fifteen minutes from when the lights of a dense city start, before reaching the airport which seems smack bang in the middle. But don’t be fooled by the crystal clear pools visible in all of the tourist resorts, clear even from the small portal window of seat 52A. Like in South Africa, things are dry here - precipitated by a distinct lack of rain. But once you are packaged and inside travel parameters, everything changes and nothing does.

Repetition, repetition, repetition. What is it that may make the difference, or may draw attention to the ways in which the geographies are so different, when the ablutions are all the same? When the spaces are all arranged ‘properly’; are all designed to have the abundance of resources - water, electricity and lighting, toilet paper, soap, full length mirrors, cushioned seats, travelators and universal charging points - that have become the custom for a global minority. These pin points of ‘proper’ environments now proliferate everywhere, and it makes me recall a Trinh T. Minh-ha’s writing on difference: ‘There is a Third World in every First World, and a Third World in every First.’ It also makes me recall what Robert Carr described as First World (mis)readings of Minh-ha’s appraisal, in which Third World is equivocal only with poverty. These comprehensions neglect access as a point of discourse, and fail to recognise that resource flows and goods availabilities are far more geographically complex than simply determining and highlighting them with different colours on a map. Rather, the map needs to be cracked up when it’s opened, to take into consideration that it consists now as a sequence of layers, and each has its own absences and impossibilities.

The reason for this is far too many things take place which are invisible to the proper, for which the proper does not account, and for whom the proper was never devised. In order to think about an everyday practice in these terms requires an observation that the city exists in multiplicities which I am tempted to say are uniquely contemporary, and which rely on technologies that have have also become a resource subject to schemes of visibility and availability which ring true with Min-ha’s words.

In reality, the only seemingly universal resource exists in the arsenal of individuals, and is expressed by their capacity to trick their way through infrastructure, and construct a practice of the everyday contingent on the expedient maneuvering of urban spaces. It doesn’t work, then, to simply say: there is lots here, further away there is some, and far away there is none.

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