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Love in the Time of Corona

Isabel Lewis at Cabaret Voltaire

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The last event for the foreseeable future took place in the city of Zurich on the 14th of March. A performance by Isabel Lewis, an *Occasion*, as they are called. Lewis has been hosting these events since 2014, but none have been conducted in a context quite like this.





Isabel Lewis, *Love in the Time of Corona*, Cabaret Voltaire 2020, photo: Gunnar Meier

The *Occasions* are an early body of work that explore different modes of hospitality, from the emotional labor of the perfect host to the collective self-abandonment of the dance party. The *Occasions* have been held in many different venues, from Sao Paolo to Berlin, and Lewis hasn't resisted the slight formalization of them, so that even if you had never seen one before, you could feel the history of prior performances in the event on Saturday night, as if the dimensions of the piece, so well-known to Lewis, made it an instrument through which she could test the room, or probe the density of the invisible bonds that make up an audience. That mattered in this case because of «the situation,» as people called it, sometimes without wanting to give it a name. «The situation,» or sometimes, «the present circumstances.» The euphemisms were a way to describe a tea party on the edge of an abyss, euphemisms that Lewis debunked by subtitling her performance «Love in the Time of Corona.» The room was as empty as a theatre rehearsal. The director of the Cabaret Voltaire had capped the numbers to a total of thirty people (staff included), to keep the density of the audience low, but most people in the room knew that even small events like this were about to become illicit. By Sunday, although a full program had been planned, Cabaret Voltaire was shuttered.

The meeting room at the Cabaret had been transformed into a jungle of bamboo, wired up with loudspeakers and lights, with small groups of chairs and wooden platforms for reclining. Above the jungle, slowly rotating, was an old Byzantine disco ball. The space was arranged so that people could cluster in small, intimate groups in what could be described as half therapeutic garden, half discotheque. People who arrived together, stayed together. Old friends tapped elbows and laughed as if they shared an in-joke, or as if the new mode of greeting was ironic, but few embraced. Audience members wanted to see each other, be near each other, but not touch, an odd mixture of affection and angst kept audience members to fleeting looks, as if flirting in the communal dining hall of a 19th century sanatorium. Lewis carefully made eye contact with each guest as she went around the room, placing small black squares of scented paper in their hands. The smell of rationality, she called it. It smelled to me like it had a lot of aldehydes, like rationality smells a little bit like Chanel No. 5.



Isabel Lewis, *Love in the Time of Corona*, Cabaret Voltaire 2020, photo: Gunnar Meier

Lewis, unruffled, proceeded to deliver a gentle lecture to the audience, about the history of virtue from the classical world, about prudence and justice and courage and temperance. In particular, she spoke of Plato's symposium on love, with the easy geniality of a radio lecture. She retold Aristophanes' famous story of the origin of love in the splitting of early humans, who had once been conjoined in big spherical balls of fulfilment, into hungry pieces in search of each other. She chose one member of the public to gaze lovingly at, another to tease, and convinced a late arrival to play the role of Alcibiades in a short tableau – Alcibiades was the intruder into Plato's symposium who comes to declare his love for the ugly Socrates. The late arrival, a middle-aged gent called Paul, obligingly stood wearing an imaginary toga for a good ten minutes. Lewis' lecture on Plato was a pleasure, not only because it was erudite and sympathetic, but also because she found within the most canonical text in the canon a series of radical questions that she wanted to unfold: how do we learn to love, and what does it mean to expand the field of love beyond the human? What does it mean to go beyond rational love, to be fully present, open to the transcendent, or immediately embodied? Lewis acknowledged the universally known conclusion that for such questions, questions about what lies beyond the limits to rational inquiry, there is no positive rational answer. At which point something happened that I had always wished for in my undergraduate philosophy classes: the professor began to dance.

Even in a small performance, Isabel Lewis dances the way that only a lifelong trained dancer can dance. She can signal that she is dancing with a turn of her hand. She can occupy the room with a few gestures. She can transition between simply walking and emphatically not walking with a single step across a room. The difference is not one of acceleration, or of any obvious outward gesture, but rather a palpable increase in concentration, an intensification of her experience that somehow, seemingly automatically, intensifies ours. And, of course, she can go from a seemingly casual movement to flinging herself across the room. When she performs, Lewis sometimes occupies the position of a shamanist or medium, someone who calls forth and embodies—makes present—a person or a force or a question that up until now has been absent. When she dances, she channels not only her training in ballet, but West

African dance, street dance, the entire expressive potential of our beat-up collection of prat falls and triumphs that we call culture. From Plato to Zebra Katz, from Martha Nussbaum to Heidegger without skipping a beat.

The talks really are that far ranging, and they are delivered almost as performance lectures, except that Lewis attempts to connect with individuals within the audience to overcome the distance implicit in the genre. Lewis, like others, is interested in the problems of both attention and presence, in all their valences. It's not that «attention» is a new question for art, but in all the chatter about networks, concerns about capitalism (that in the meantime seem to have transferred into concern *for* capitalism), and scandals both pseudo and real, it was something we, well, stopped paying attention to. And it needs to be emphasized that the call to return to questions of attention, to the problem of what it means to be present – committed to being *with* an artwork or a person – is not just a refraction of a wellness program or a fashionable exercise in «mindfulness» with the goal of personal well-being. It is a call to return to the most radical mode of aesthetic experience, that absolute openness to the outside that slips from aesthetics into ethics in its most immediate and most personal sense. Martha Nussbaum, in her concept of a «lover's understanding,» attempted to open up the work of reason to include the reasons of the heart, that emotional knowledge that precedes predication and cannot be fully expressed in sentences, because it is also a comportment, an attitude, a kind of readiness. Lewis calls this comportment «radical receptivity,»* and extends it to interspecies relationships and non-human life. And then a substance that is at the absolute boundary between living and dead decides to roll in and spoil the evening.

The reference to Heidegger (and these days, quoting Heidegger is the most transgressive move you can make in an arts venue, much more so than sampling hip hop) was to one of his overloaded etymologies, this time *Gelassenheit*, the beautiful German word meaning «equanimity.» But the stem of the word, *lassen*, goes beyond the connotations of the Latin. It means something akin to letting be, to letting things be in their uncertainty and in their mystery. Lewis's quoting of Heidegger was a direct response to the thing in the room, the situation. It's not that we have nothing left to do. It is that we have to do nothing.



Isabel Lewis, *Love in the Time of Corona*, Cabaret Voltaire 2020, photo: Gunnar Meier

The meaning of distance has changed. Ironic distance has long been an over-cultivated virtue within the arts, but the arrival of the six-foot rule – Abstand halten – has changed its connotations. Irony no longer seems possible, nor does looking down on anything, or even looking askance. All the pretentious distance of the disinterested spectator is now underscored by the ever-present knowledge that it is not possible to get close. It's not safe. Cabaret Voltaire, or at least the ideal of Cabaret Voltaire, was always to create a venue that encouraged immediacy and personal exchange between artists and non-artists and anti-artists. It is supposed to be a place that takes risks, and gets up close and personal. Now, we sit in our chairs and look almost longingly at the six-foot distance from our peers, like two aesthetes in Izumo, who when they meet do not bow to greet each other, but rather to acknowledge the empty space that will forever separate them.

What had been planned as an opening weekend became a closing weekend. Isabel Lewis's Occasions, what she does to a room with her presence, what she does to people, how she manages each time to reinvent a common ritual anew, are a call for a deeper, closer notion of a community that goes beyond being a mere audience. Rather than getting closer, the community has now become entirely virtual. We obsessively keep to our six-foot distance and talk endlessly online. No one yet knows when the situation will change, but the last night provided a call to ask questions. Should arts venues now move away from justifying their existence in terms of visitor numbers, and rather think in terms of proximity and intensity? And if so, how can the value of proximity and intensity be quantified? Six feet cannot be the final measure of love.

* What is this radical receptivity? I can't explain exactly what it is, but I can tell you what it is not, via an anecdote that Isabel Lewis did not tell: surgeons in the 19th century, seeking to penetrate the secrets of heartbeat, would stick their fingers into the cardiac arteries of horses they vivisected. Horses had hearts large enough to accommodate a scientist's fingers. It was his accumulated disgust at this practice that helped drive Etienne Jules Marey to invent the cardiograph, a machine that makes a trace of the vibrations of the heart from the surface of the skin (E. J. Marey had conducted more than enough vivisections as a hippologist himself; there's a great book on this by François Dagognet called *A Passion for the Trace*). The cardiograph is non-invasive. It touches the surface of the skin, and it owes its capacity to record to its delicacy and sensitivity, not its penetrative power.

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