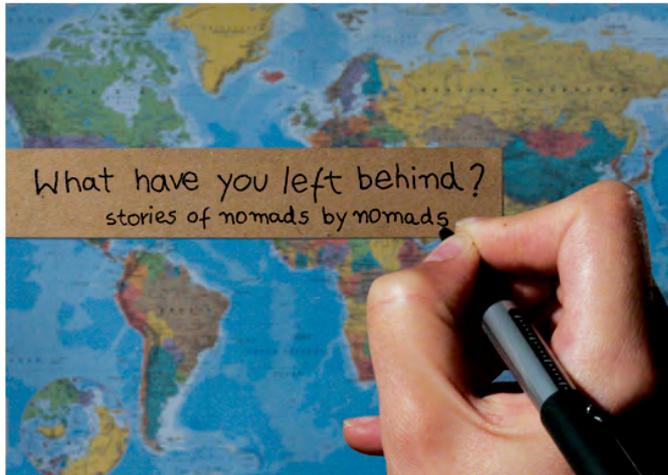


'What have you left behind?' - stories of nomads by nomads

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Abstract

'What have you left behind?' is an interactive media Masters project that focuses on individuals rather than their nationalities, with the aim to break the concept of cultural national borders and to show that we all could be considered as nomads for we are in constant movement and leave things behind.

This is a collaborative project with the audience generating the content which was applied to different kinds of media, both digital and analogue: real notebooks were sent to different parts of the world to collect testimonies from people; a blog documented the whole process of development and made the communication between the participants and myself possible; and the final website collects testimonies and presents a conclusive 'nomads map'. Such constant exchange, between the physical and the virtual, has been an important aspect of this project. Real notebooks, the blog, and the website with a tactile aesthetic (based on paper and a hand-made layout) reinforces this aspect.

This paper aims to describe the process and outcomes and to discuss the authorial decisions made along the way, in order to consider ways of representing ideas about identity and belonging in a globalised and digital world.

Introduction

The foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. (...) The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arise, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unnameable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva 1941: 1)

Influenced by the high level of migration and digitalization in the contemporary world, national borders do not necessarily determine cultures. In mixed cultures, individuals should be focused on - rather than their nationalities. When individuals are named by their nationality, cultural stereotypes are often created by the idea the viewer has of the specific nation and influences the idea they create of the individual they are seeing:

We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him, and in the complete picture of him which we compose in our minds, those ideas have certainly the principal place. (Proust 1922: 15)

This generic idea of a national culture, and the idea that an individual who comes from that nation is like everyone else from that area, hides individuality. This broad idea of national cultural groups doesn't necessarily fit each and every individual who comes from that place. As a result, the word 'foreigner' arises when individuals are considered as strangers, outsiders, not fitting into the stereotypical understandings of national culture and identities. Nevertheless, if we all see ourselves as foreigners, not belonging to any place, we acknowledge ourselves as individuals, not attached to any specific land but all belonging to the same land, with mixed cultures.

This project aims, therefore, to focus on individuals rather than their nationalities and proposes that we should see ourselves as nomads, for we are constantly moving and leaving things behind, either from place to place or simply because time passes by.

What have you left behind?

In order to achieve this aim, thirty-two notebooks were sent abroad by post to people from and in different parts of the world ¹ with the question 'What have you left behind?' The participants were asked to fill in a page and pass the notebook forward to any person of their choosing, with the notebooks to be returned by a certain date. The following month, about 140 testimonies were collected from people from different countries and different social, cultural and educational backgrounds.

In the following I discuss the methods used on making the notebooks, the process and it's outcomes.

The notebooks



To get written testimonies from people, real notebooks sent abroad seemed the most appropriate media: the notebooks themselves travel from place to place in the world (notebooks as nomads) and reinforced the concept. This process allowed the involvement of people from different backgrounds to record stories of their lives in a personalised and more human way - people's handwriting.

¹ The notebooks went to: Australia (Jolimont, WA), Brazil (Búzios, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro and Teresópolis), China (Shanghai), Cyprus (Limassol), Denmark (Frederiksberg), France (Grenoble and Paris), Germany (Berlin, Halle and Hamburg), Italy (Florence), Portugal (Lisbon), Russia (Moscow), Switzerland (Vaud), Taiwan (Taipei City), The Netherlands (Amsterdam), United Kingdom (Bristol and London) and USA (New York and Valencia, CA).

The notebooks were designed in such a way to make people feel as comfortable as possible to write about their lives. Many aspects had to be considered when asking such a private question through a piece of paper; aspects which came mainly from emotional design studies, but also some aspects of qualitative research and documentary film studies.

Several aspects of the physical appearance and other characteristics were carefully considered beforehand: the size of the notebooks, number of pages, colour of the pages and typography used for instructions and title (i.e. the question):

- The most important aspect was to not have any blank pages. Subsequently on each and every page the question handwritten by myself. This means there is a question to each and every person who opens a page.
- The notebooks are all handwritten. This helps to reduce distance between myself and the participants, also they might feel more comfortable to put their handwriting on the page.
- The notebooks are A6 Kraft paper, 20 sheets. This size was chosen for ease of portability. The number of pages helps the strategy of how the notebook will travel (the more pages written, the further it has travelled from the first person).
- A black ribbon closes the notebook to give the idea of 'what is written here is carefully closed' - a sense of privacy and valuing. The title 'What have you left behind?' does not appear on the front cover and is only visible on opening the book.
- To ask people to write about their lives, to encourage them, I gave a bit about my own life. The first page of the notebook is my story of what I have left behind, signed by myself.

The process

To fit with in the schedule of the project, the process of sending and receiving the notebooks should take one month. Parcels sent abroad by post, especially long distances, meant the actual time to generate the data would be reduced. For some

parts of the world, it can take a week or more to arrive and then the same amount of time to return. For that reason and because of the risk of notebooks not being returned some methods were applied to reduce this risk and make the process faster:

- Rather than the original plan of sending ten notebooks - which supposedly would generate enough data for the purpose - over three times this amount were sent (thirty-two to be precise). The higher the number of notebooks sent, the more probability that some of them would be returned on time;
- Choosing appropriate people to send the notebooks to was essential in terms of guaranteeing their return. In the first layer there were friends, friends of friends (who indicated people residing in another country), and colleagues. In this way, there was already a connection between the notebook and the recipient in the first place.
- The number of pages in the notebooks also determines the far the book will go. The more pages, theoretically, the further they go. The fewer pages, the least distance travelled from the person who received it in the first place.
- In the notebooks there were instructions of how the process would be carried out. It was explained that the participant could write (in any language), draw, glue, paint in one or more pages and they were asked to then pass the book to any other person. By a certain date, whomsoever had the notebook was asked to contact me so that I might arrange the notebook's return, or for them to send it directly to my address. It was also explained that all content contributed by the participants in the notebook would become part of an online artwork that would accompany the project through the blog.

The website



While the testimonies were travelling and being filled in by participants, I created a means to show the collected answers on a website; a means of communicating, in an interactive way, with people in all over the world.

The aim of the website was to present the data received but also to express the aim of the project - as the project is about showing the process and questioning the real/digital relationship. A pixellation animation was made depicting the construction of the website - my hand appears drawing the buttons and putting them in place and the real notebooks appear in this pixellation - reinforcing the fact that they are real, tactile notebooks.

Due to the large amount of text on some pages, different levels of navigation were created. In the first level, the users see quotes taken from the notebooks, which I highlighted from each testimony. In the second level of navigation, the user can see the full page by clicking on a specific button. The quotes appear in the website randomly. All the pages are included in this animation. The first idea was to put the quotes in order and make a narrative out of it, but because of the large number of quotes it became impossible. Also, by doing that, the quotes were appearing predictive, veering away from the positive aspect of randomness, the surprise and contrast between sentences.

Outcomes

Twenty-two notebooks out of the thirty two sent were received, with 140 testimonies. People from a variety of different backgrounds took part in the project, which made it richer in terms of content. Participants included not just people who already see themselves as nomads, but also people who simply answered the question with stories of their own life experience, - a goal I had hoped to achieve when I posed the question originally.

Ten notebooks arrived within the time I asked for them to be returned (a month later) The remaining twelve arriving during the process but could also be included in the project.

From the data collected, some categories appeared:

- Use of the page:

Written word: 61.5% of people (in which Handwritten: 80% / Computer: 20%);
Drawing: 4.6%; Written + Drawing: 22.4%; Written + Collage: 10%; Written + Collage + Drawing: 1.5%.

It was a surprise to see so many printed contributions (typed on the computer and glued in the notebook). Most of the time in these cases, there were the signature of the person, which indicates they were typing by choice.

- Languages used:

As the notebooks went to friends, colleagues and friends of friends in the first place, many notebooks went to people who have the Portuguese language as their mother tongue (as I do) but were living in different parts of the world. Therefore, there are a high number of pages written in Portuguese (44.6%). However, in most cases people wrote in English, influenced by the question. The whole notebook was written in English, even though the contributors' original language was different (43%).²

- Content of pages:

This was divided in five categories:

² Portuguese: 44.6%, English: 43%, None (drawing/abstract image): 6.1%, French: 2, Spanish: 2, Chinese:1, Dutch: 1, German: 1, Italian: 1

- Points (when participants made a list of points/items/things of what they left behind): 54.6%
- Journey of life (when participants described the ways they journeyed to arrive at this point in life): 31.5%
- Questioning/thought (when participants wrote about the question itself, what means to leave behind): 17.6%
- Day-by-day (when they wrote about their routine and day-by-day life): 16%
- Abstract/play (when the participant made an abstract image): 16%

The pages can appear in one or more categories.

The question seemed to be provocative, as many participants wrote about the question itself - what it is to leave things behind? - as well as writing about their own experiences.

How the pages that were already filled-in influenced how the individual made their own page (if it were all written they tend to just write, if it was artistically filled, they tend to be more creative). This fact can either block or inspire each individual user - as was clearly seen in the notebooks received: a notebook fully glued with typed texts, a notebook fully written, a notebook mainly creative (drawings, photos, illustrations).

References

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