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listening to listening | listening letter

SARAH VANHEE, FLORE HERMAN

During her PhD research *bodies of knowledge – the public space as a forum for the exchange of repressed or underexposed knowledge*, Sarah Vanhee tries to bring about an exchange of underexposed knowledge by non-dominant voices. During this process, Vanhee and her collaborator Flore Herman were repeatedly confronted with the importance of deep listening, and the lack thereof. The following texts are an attempt to understand what deep listening is, as a mental, physical and political practice, and from a feminist perspective.

Tijdens haar doctoraatsonderzoek bodies of knowledge - the public space as a forum for the exchange of repressed or underexposed knowledge probeert Sarah Vanhee een uitwisseling van onderbelichte kennis door niet-dominante stemmen tot stand te brengen. Tijdens dat proces werden Vanhee en haar medewerkster Flore Herman steeds weer geconfronteerd met het belang van diep luisteren, en het gebrek eraan. De volgende teksten zijn een poging om te begrijpen wat diep luisteren is, als mentale, fysieke en politieke praktijk, vanuit een feministisch perspectief.

listening to listening

Sarah Vanhee

I started writing this text because we've been talking a lot about listening in the past years. 'We' that is, the people I find myself surrounded by, through work and life. In the following text I will try to elaborate on listening as a (life) attitude, as a transformative act and artistic practice; and on the painful lack of listening in today's mainstream Western society.

For the publication of *Lecture For Every One*, I had a conversation with Daniel Blanga Gubbay about my work. He said: 'Listening is not a passive act, but an active act that creates the condition for something to happen. You often set the conditions to invite the audience, or the viewer, to expand their awareness about listening as a political act.' [1]

Because my work is non-disciplinary, it's difficult for people who like categories to place me.

Sometimes they call me 'visual artist'. But I think I'm the least visual of all artists. I think I'm a listening artist.

Above all, I'm a dilettante in everything, so I'm aware that I'm developing the following thoughts as a dilettante listener.



Our (a work of art is never made by one single author) latest creation is a school, called *bodies of knowledge*: a place for the exchange of non-dominant, underexposed and suppressed knowledge. People whose voices are not often heard, come to share their embodied knowledge in a tent or – Covidproof – during a 'learning walk'. One of our most urgent observations is – not surprisingly – that people sometimes have a hard time to really listen to one another. And – it must be said – men seem to have an even harder time with it than womxn: To not cut someone off in the middle of a sentence. To not interfere. To not jump in when someone simply takes a breath or a break to think. To not take over when someone doesn't find her words right away. To not comment but to ask questions. To be receptive. To be conscious of one's responsibility as a listener. To listen actively and deeply.

'Hearing is a way of touching at a distance', Valeria Luiselli writes when she quotes R. Murry Shafer in her novel *Lost Children Archive*.[2] The main characters in this novel are two people who work professionally with sound, but don't necessarily hear each other very well. Each chapter starts with a list of books (often related to sound) that have inspired the chapter. Luiselli's writing is interwoven with her reading. Through the novel, one reads along with her through other texts, listens along with her to other sounds. Her work is not so much a work of referencing but of interconnecting, interweaving. It's a work of amplification: one page is many pages, one story opens many stories, a sound becomes a wave. I recognize this work of first receiving and then interconnecting and multiplying. It's a fragile work where the writer is as much motor as medium, she's present and dissolves at the same time. The author is many, them-authors. It's almost a spectral work. As Luiselli writes: 'References to sources – textual, musical, visual, or audio-visual – are not meant as side-notes, or ornaments that decorate the story, but function as intralinear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past.'[3]

When I refer to knowledge, I always refer to many voices.

‘Touching at a distance’ could have been the title of my first (and only) dance piece I made after I had graduated. It was a duet, called *How They Disappeared* (2008). At the time I didn’t really understand that title, it came from an intuition. Maybe the intuition was: I’m embarking on a professional path of practising disappearance.

The disappearance often relates to the dissolving of the visual, the visible. When the eyes have nothing to attach to anymore, the other senses grow stronger and the ‘spectator’ (can I say ‘receiver’ instead of ‘spectator’?) is also invited to let go of the primacy of sight, to move into the realm of feeling, listening, sensing, intuiting.

I’ve always shied away from pictures, from images. Even when I made my first film, the image was blurred and constantly moving. I was working with seven convicted murderers and I had to make sure their faces could not be recognized but also: I did not want to tap into the perverse fascination with seeing ‘a real murderer’ on screen. In *The Making of Justice* (2017), there is no way to ‘capture’ anything with the eye: no hard-lined faces, no clear-cut identities; it’s rather a choir of seven voices; visually, the constantly moving vague landscape of clothes, skin and space is there to softly distract the eye in wandering.

I called it ‘a film for listeners’.



TURNING TURNING © Phile Deprez

Initially I had been very hesitant about making a movie. I thought I would feel too much like a manipulator; I was afraid I would feel like I was ‘using’ people and then also ‘cutting them up’ for the sake of an artistic product. It turned out to be the opposite: I felt I could use film as a medium to amplify voices, to lift them a bit closer to the ear, to make hearing possible.

My favourite step in the process was to make the final sound mix with Kwinten Van Laethem: We were working on milliseconds: inserting or suspending silences,

breathing, the sound of the room. To invite the ears of the receiver to tune in even more, to be able to take in the voices of those hardly ever listened to.

> *The act of fixation by two eyes... is equivalent to the birth of the world, in the sense that Man possesses a world – that is, as a picture, as a world before the eyes, as a world... of perspective distance, of space and motions in space... this way of seeing... implies in itself the notion of domination. The world – picture is the environment insofar as it is dominated by the eyes... The world is the prey, and in the last analysis human culture itself has arisen from this fact.* [4]

So wrote philosopher of history Oswald Spengler, in 1931. Spengler was announcing the 'decline of the West', 'tracing the tragedy down to the historic defeat, thousands of years before, of an auditory culture attuned to the life-giving voice, and the victory of an ocular civilization focused on an impersonal external world.' [5]

This 'perspective distance' enables the spectator/a person to dominate, to judge, to control. We 'look at', we are always external to that object/world/being we are targeting with our eye, it is *in front of us*.

We don't 'listen at'. We 'listen to', and we can only do so while we are *amidst*. You can never be *in front* of what you listen to.

When I talked about listening with Katharina Smets, radio and podcast maker, she said: 'For me, listening is mainly about being of service.'

Once I asked Kwinten Van Laethem: 'Why does it seem like listening and looking have to be opposites? Why am I not asking you, for instance: What's the difference between listening and tasting?' He answered:

> *I read the other day that the badger can smell as sharply as we can see. That he can perceive sharp fragrant forms in a landscape where we only*

smell vague clouds. That this perception is much sharper for them because they live so close to the ground, whereas for us the vast majority of scents have already dissipated after one and a half metres. This made me realize that our human perception is not the only one possible, that in other living beings there is a different hierarchy, which makes them look at life and the world differently.

I realize that my life as a listener fits well with my character. I prefer to make my mark from the background, from there I try to be meaningful. Should our means of catching scents also be sufficient, I could actually imagine an existence as a scenter or feeler. I would like to discover this largely unknown world.

To me, the creatures that still have a close connection to that 'sensory culture', to the 'being amidst' to the different hierarchies and the creatures who embody them, are young children.

For the piece-world-world-piece *unforetold* (2018), I collaborated with seven small beings. It was a piece in near-pitch darkness. In darkness we are sensory creatures. Since we cannot see, we have to amplify all other senses. I wrote:

Certain realities are often possible only because they don't catch light, they are not being seen. A shelter, a womb, a dark room, a mole's network, a hole, a cave... In those positive dark spaces, we recourse to feeling and listening. One could say a bat asks questions when she sends out her high-pitched frequencies and waits for the surrounding objects and surfaces to answer. The bat doesn't look for answers, she receives them. The body of the bat is a resonating body.

And about the performers-children, I wrote:

> *I imagine the small bodies on stage all together as one resonating body. Sending out signals, not knowing what will bounce back, but ready at all times to receive it, to act upon it. Everything is made with them. It comes from them. Through acts of evocation and intuition. Through listening and being. I've not been a director, rather a listener, a feeler.* [6]

Sonic Meditation No 5 by Pauline Oliveros goes as follows: 'Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.' [7]

Daniel Blanga-Gubbay mentions Oliveros's work when he refers to 'reclaiming the politics of listening as part of a historically fundamentally feminist practice.'

Admittedly and maybe suspiciously – I talk quite a lot for being a listener.

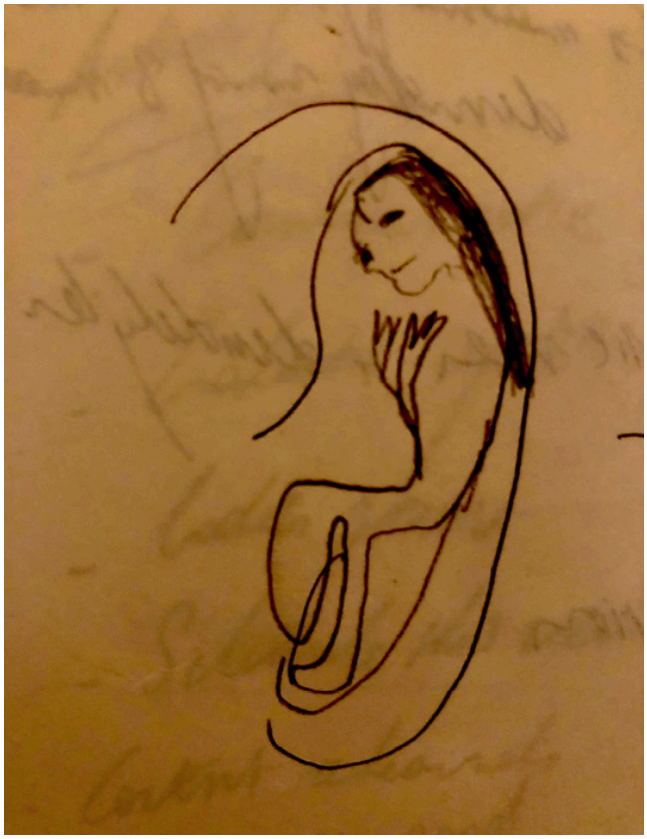
Not to excuse myself, but I think there can be listening in the talking.

Daniel Blanga-Gubbay: 'There is no contradiction between the affirmative action of speaking and the one of listening. They are part of this cycle of how to be in relation.' [8]

Turning Turning (2011), at first sight, seems like a practice of constant talking. I think it's as much an act of constant listening.



SOLAR PANEL PLANT © Sarah Vanhee



LISTENING EAR © Sarah Vanhee

In *Turning Turning*, three performers tried to grab all the thoughts that were simultaneously going on in our mind. It required an immense state of concentration, for we were trying to be conscious of all the simultaneous tracks of thoughts, emotions, impressions – racing through our brains. We realized that we cannot experience or realize first and then articulate, that way we were always too late. We understood we had to try to articulate all the layers of consciousness before we were even aware of them. We called that principle: 'talking ahead of our thoughts.' Or: 'turning turning'. The physical position we ended up adopting to achieve this the best was with a quite strong tonus, standing up straight, legs stretched, and slightly wider than hip-width, arms and hands lifted, stretched away from the body, and turned slightly outwards. As if creating as large as possible an area of skin to receive it all. Someone who saw our practice thought we looked possessed, someone else called it an utter state of receptiveness; I always thought I felt like one of the plants I have at home, whose leaves look like solar panels, creating as much surface as possible to capture the light.

Although we were speaking non-stop; we were producing as much as we were receiving. I felt like an empty channel for consciousness to pass through. I felt like I was disappearing. Maybe – to use a word of Kwinten's again – I was 'sponging' at that moment.

When I asked him about synonyms for 'listening', he answered:

> *When I talk about listening, I often talk about making a connection with your environment. Maintaining an openness to that environment, allowing for wonder. Being, more than doing.*

> *When I come to a place I don't yet know, or find myself in a situation that is foreign to me, listening helps me to understand it. So, understanding could be a noun, or trying to understand. Wondering. Breathing?*

> *In an interview with Anouk De Clercq, I came upon the term porosity, a description that has stuck with me ever since. Being porous means absorbing your entire environment, perhaps even becoming one with it, for a moment. Or the Dutch word for downloading: sponging. As a translation for downloading it is incredibly outdated, but perhaps it could serve as a synonym for listening?*

It can be exhausting to be listening in life.

For works like *Untitled* (2012) and *bodies of knowledge* I meet people I have never met before and I work with them. They put a lot of trust in me, in opening themselves up. When I meet those people, I tune into them, I feel the tensions in their body; I observe their breathing, how much they entrust their weight to the floor, what their energy is like, which volume they take up, what their pace is, where the humour potentially is. I try to resonate with them.

I'm not doing all that consciously. (I might unconsciously use my background as a trained performer.)

It puts me in a state of receptiveness and it's something people recognize. When I was working on *Untitled* in the neighbourhood of Forest, in Brussels, I had to wait for a friend at some point. I was standing on the pavement and people incessantly came to me to chat and air their feelings, to confide in me. I'm sure this had to do with the listening aura I still had around me, from working on *Untitled*. I was wondering if this could count as a minimal performance, a listening performance: 'Imagine that all the cells in your body become ears. Go and stand in the middle of a public square. Receive what comes.'

Sometimes I wonder: who will do all the listening?

Because even when people dare to talk,

if no one is there to hear all those people who urgently need to be listened to, are they then not actually silenced again?

Listening doesn't mean: agreeing.

How can we dare to let each other in?

How can we be confident that this other, the person we listen to, won't steal anything from us, won't hurt us?

Can we trust the air in between us to carry the meaning as it was intended?

What are the spaces and instances where one can let down their guards?

In an interview about her book *Grieving*, Cristina Rivera Garza says:

> *I'm convinced that one of our greatest enemies is indolence, the incapacity to feel the pain of others, the incapacity for empathy. On the other side of indolence – exactly why the Spanish version of this book is*

> *called Dolerse – is a willingness to feel the pain, your pain to begin with, but the pain of others too.* [9]

Active listening, deep listening, empathic listening, includes *dolerse*.

Even if there's a degree of pain involved, I maintain my work is not meant as therapy, because I don't listen with a goal of 'improvement' of the condition of the speaker in mind. Through listening, in the first place, the speaker appears and with him/her/them the different worlds.

The listening experience is deeply political and it's a transgressive act of always-becoming. Listening requires responsibility – the way Gayatri Spivak has it:

> *Spivak's usage of 'responsibility' (like her dialogic understanding of 'speaking') is akin to Bakhtin's 'answerability' (otvetstvennost: sometimes also translated as 'responsibility'). It signifies not only the act of response which completes the transaction of speaker and listener, but also the ethical stance of making discursive room for the Other to exist. In other words, 'ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship' (Introduction to The Spivak Reader). The ideal relationship is individual and intimate. This is what she means by 'ethical singularity', the engagement of the Other in non-essential, non-crisis terms.* [10]

Bodies of knowledge, which starts from the problem of knowledge, is a call to a relationship. Hence, the problem of listening became central in our quest to detect *other* knowledge.

In my radical imaginative future of education, listening would be one of the main courses.

In the same praising way where the twentieth-century human beings would say 'he has a lot of discipline', or 'she's very good with maths', twenty-first-century human

beings would say ‘they have a lot of listening’.

Other people do listening better than I. Flore Herman for instance, one of my co-workers in *bodies of knowledge*. She takes her time for listening.

You never know what you will receive when she starts to lend you her ear.

listening letter

Flore Herman

November 2019

Dear L.,

We met one afternoon in Place du Conseil as you were leaving school.

Two of your friends had already come to speak at BOK and give a session on ‘what to do when you witness an attack on someone or an act of violence’, and you were chatting together before going home. I suggested that we have a short conversation about learning, right there on the pavement. For this, we began with a few questions gathered in a booklet (‘the little book on learning’) that we use to invite people we meet in the street to come and talk at BOK, the alternative classroom initiated by the artist Sarah Vanhee, whom you later met on several occasions, with Nadia and Luisa. One of the questions we discussed was: ‘What can young people teach older people?’

That day we had a nice discussion. You explained to me how you advised people, often older than you, who were going through a difficult patch at some point in their lives. You agreed to come and give a session on this subject in the BOK tent, which was set up for a few weeks at the Abattoirs of Anderlecht. I was surprised to see that you were confident and interested and immediately willing. I thought to myself, she’s thirteen years old and maybe she’s more interested in doing something else in her spare time. But it was clear that you saw your experience as an ‘adviser’ as something valuable, that it was ‘special’, and that this knowledge could be useful to

others, whatever their age. So, you came one day to ‘give a session’, as we say at BOK. For 30 minutes you told us how you helped a friend who was on the verge of dropping out of school, how you practised listening to people who confided in you as best you could, sometimes people you didn’t know very well or just via social media. You explained that, in general, you were interested in psychology and art and that you wanted to do something with it in the future. And many other things. That day, there were around ten people who came to listen to you and ask you questions. I remember you warning me that you were shy when it was your turn to speak. You did indeed speak in a low voice, with your face hidden slightly by your hood, but you spoke out with certainty. And for us, the BOK team, it was a powerful moment, which has stayed with us, because of what you said, but also because of the sensitivity with which you spoke.



BOK TENT 1 © Luisa Marc

Today, we still reach out to people as I reached out to you. And we try to understand how, in artistic projects such as BOK or others, we can work to disseminate stories and life experiences that are not recognized as much in the public sphere. You may have more experience with/in this than I do, age often being a reason why we are listened to less. Besides that, there is of course also gender, skin colour, class, education, religion, social codes, etc. For that matter, during the session you gave, some people rather ‘advised’ you, and that’s something that we’re questioning with

Sarah and Nadia. The main idea of BOK is that knowledge is passed on and heard, not ‘commented on’, ‘replaced’, or ‘explained’.

In the long list of 98 BOK questions, number 12 is: How to listen more and better? When you shared your experiences, I had the impression that this is also what you addressed. That’s why I’d like to share some thoughts with you that I’ve had since we met, and if you agree, ask you a few questions about the listening you do when you advise someone.

I only recently understood that listening is an active and not a passive practice. Perhaps you remember the intentions we read in the BOK tent, one of which was ‘BOK is a place for listening as well as talking’, which puts both practices on the same scale of values. Working with Sarah, and through my experience of mediation, I became aware that we all do this more or less naturally: putting our attention at someone’s disposal. We can then choose the intensity with which we listen: with one ear, with both ears, with our head, with our other senses, taking into account either only what is spoken, or also what is said with the whole of the body. You can listen to the tone of the voice, the gestures, the emotions, the energy in the room, the words behind the other words. You can listen to how these words resonate in the room you are in, or even beyond the windows into the city. In fact, you can decide the extent to which you engage and the degree to which you are ready to receive and perhaps respond. It may be abstract, but when I emerge from a discussion where I’ve really listened, I’m full up and exhausted! I can’t talk anymore. Do you feel the same? There are also discussions that are so intense – or so lacking in intensity, for that matter – that you feel you can’t follow, or give anything back, because it’s been denied to you, or because you don’t have the sensitivity, the knowledge, the energy in you. The rhythm, the flow, the tone, or the grain of the voice – all this influences your ability to concentrate, to take into consideration, to acknowledge that ‘you’re there’. Sometimes you’re not given the time to listen, or your listening does not even really matter all that much. It is the expression that matters or dominates. And there are moments when the whole body is in a listening position, but you just don’t remember anything, it doesn’t leave any impression; you realize afterwards that there was

nothing but posture. There are also moments when we let our ears wander, but I think that's something else... That's because curiosity preceded the intention.

These are in fact all fairly traditional scenarios – scenarios that we come across every day. But if you begin to look at all these dimensions and intensities, it becomes a complex and fascinating business. And in fact, the vertigo often originates in the ear...

We could try to understand listening by reading the theory or by studying the workings of the inner, middle and outer ear, the eardrum, all the nerve endings... We could observe other humans or animals in action, or train ourselves to perceive the sounds coming from the trees we pass every day or watch for the electromagnetic waves that envelop the city. We could practise listening to a newborn baby and the seeds of speech that emerge as it grows. We could try to recognize when we empathize with someone (or not) and why. We could ask ourselves whether we 'hear' better when we recognize something we already know, something that reactivates our memory, or if, on the contrary, it is what is radically foreign that leaves the deepest impression. In short, we could practise listening everywhere and all the time. And then there is of course the big question of who we listen to and why.



BOK TENT 3 © Nadia Mharzi

I'm curious to know how you, in your thirteen years of life, came to the conclusion that you were good at listening, that you liked it, and that it was knowledge in itself. You already have to listen a lot at school, at home, in your circle of friends, sometimes out of obligation or duty. How did you come to tell yourself that you wanted to listen to others more often? How do you make yourself available for an experience you don't know? How do you listen via social networks? What do you pay attention to? In which situations is it easier? Do you try to memorize the things that are confided in you? And where do all these stories that you hear go?

For me it's easier to listen when I'm engaged in a conversation with just one person. I then sometimes imagine a shape beginning to float between the two of us. This shape can grow, it can open out in the air, but it is also very fragile and can vanish just like that. It is a kind of tension that must be kept alive and cared for. It doesn't necessarily appear when we understand or *understand one another*, but rather when we learn together from this situation, even if one person remains silent and the other doesn't. I then imagine the ears developing muscles, the eyes widening their field of vision, the heart swelling slightly, the nervous system quietly electrifying itself, and the brain getting back under its skull. I also imagine my body expanding around me and connecting with other bodies, stories, experiences that remind me of this conversation. And then I forget everything again and come back to this shape which, fortunately, is still floating there.

As I write to you, I try to hear you again. I don't remember your exact words, but I do remember the quality of attention that was in the air. I don't hear sounds, but I hear with my memory. In these times of physical distancing, or when we have lost someone, I wonder how we can continue to listen through time.

Writing to you was a chance to listen differently. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

F.

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1. Blanga Gubbay, Daniel. "A broken bone: facilitating a void where other things can happen." *Lecture For Every One*, Sarah Vanhee, Art Paper Editions, 2020, pp. 272-279. ↩

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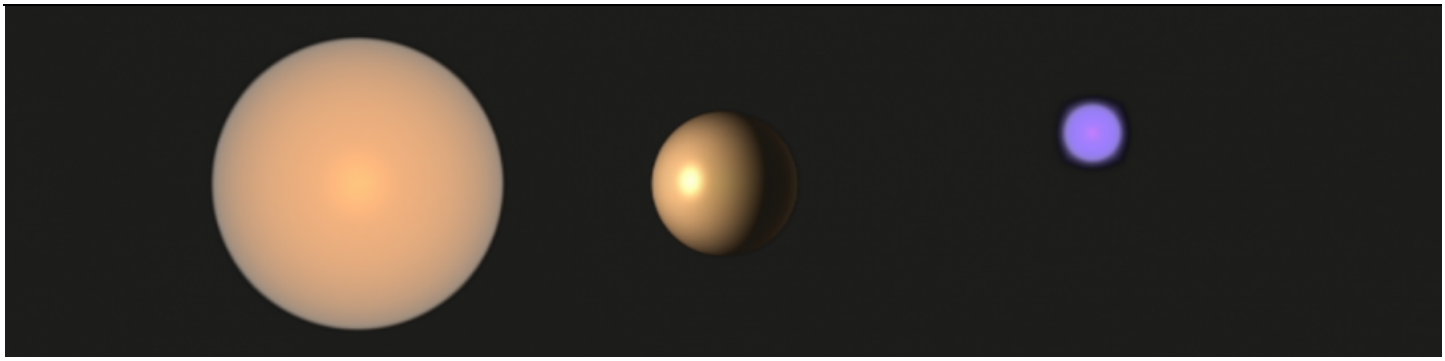
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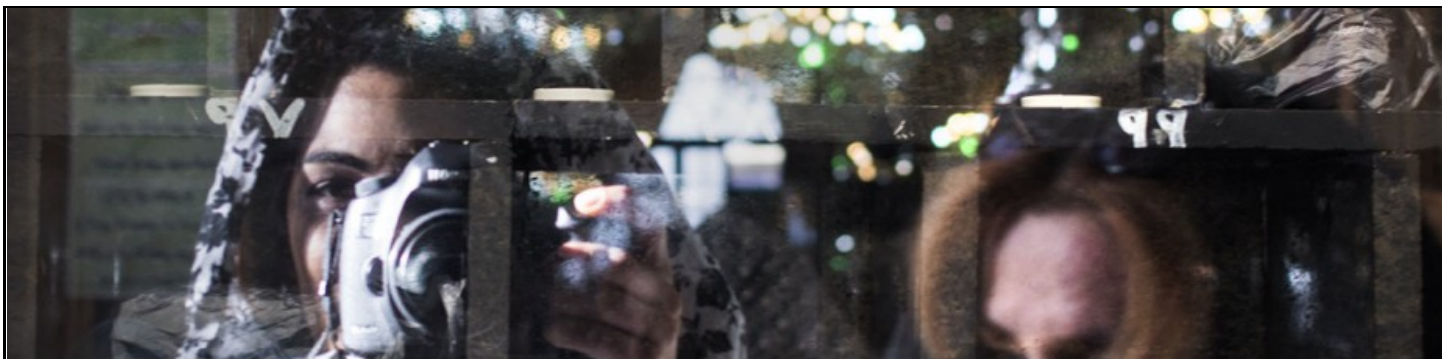
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