



Drawing - Federica Terracina

The position of the spectator. The space of the action

Loretta Mesiti / Dramaturg

What does it mean to be a spectator? What does it mean to be an actor? How do they understand their own roles? What responsibility do they entrust to one another? These are questions that traverse the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century like a golden thread. The tension to re-think and re-formulate the relationship which connects actor and spectator reflects recurring interest in theatrical phenomena: that views theatre as a form of archetype of the political scene, as possessing a key that could possibly disclose the meaning of man's political condition and its dynamics; and on the other hand, theatremakers' interest in politics from which they see the root of their practice. This remote ambition seems to motivate many attempts of the theatre avantgarde during the 20th century to erase the boundary line between the stage and the audience, converting the stage into a renewed, redefined space of political action, where the spectator can rediscover one's faculty to initiate political change. According to this perspective the elements that distinguish the audience from the actor should be weakened and eventually dissolved. In the critical reflection accompanying contemporary theatrical practices of the last decades there emerges the need to restore a form of distinction between theatre and politics, giving new meanings and functions to the gap that separates the position of the spectator from that of the actor. The aim of these analyses is however not to dissociate theatre from politics, but rather to investigate the gap that separates the moment of vision from the time of action. It raises the awareness of the fact that only by starting from this gap, from this hiatus between seeing and acting, the relationship between actor and spectator can acquire its full meaning. Keeping this distinction clear, a

From the 13th April until the 13th May, 20 residents and communities of Rabat, Manikata, Qormi, Hamrun, S.ta Venera, Żejtun, Bormla, Birgu, Sliema, Gzira and Valletta will host international artists in their houses or workplaces, offering them hospitality. Therefore, the intimacy of domestic interiors and the unique landscape of Maltese territories becomes the scene of artistic residencies: during a two-week process each artist re-qualifies one of his/her works engaging a specific dialogue with the offered space. The same spaces will be then opened to the audience, to show (share?) the re-born (regenerated?) works. This proximity exposes both, the resident and artist, to a mutual dispossession: the first renounces to his exclusive rights on the places and objects of his daily life to welcome the artist and his practices, while the artist allows his artwork to be compromised by this encounter.

dynamic between these two different roles is mobilized, not just because the action requires someone to have seen the deed, and to potentially testify to it as a witness, but, perhaps even more so, because the fact of having seen has an impact on the action. It opens the perspective that leads the action to evolve, moving towards a direction that can only arise within the intimate creative factory of the vision which takes place

within the spectator. Theatrical action doesn't make sense without this contemplative gaze, while the spectator's contemplation, can only find fulfilment when it prefigures a further, extra-theatrical, horizon of action.

The invitation by Altofest to appropriate new spaces for action does not aim to heal the boundaries between the space of vision and that of action, but perhaps to remind us that our existence always takes place on the threshold that separates and unites these two spaces. Vision and action cannot come together in the present moment, so we are continuously called to choose our position: actor or spectator?

At each step we are called to choose. Do we take a seat among those who are looking, questioning and searching through the **visible** the texture of a **possible** that we would like to shape and realise? Or even, do we choose to be among those who act, who try to translate possibilities into realities, offering spectators, who hold the alternative position, material for the visions they are seeking. In every moment, it is possible to

change positions, but the fracture between these two conditions cannot be fixed, because it dwells within the innermost, intimate heart of our existential condition.

Nevertheless, vision and action come together in a space that does not take place in the present, but remains a projection of a future place, which both vision and action would like to found.

Altofest and Valletta 2018

Graziella Vella / Research Coordinator, Valletta 2018 Foundation

As a Valletta resident, born and raised in Valletta, and working with Valletta 2018 since the very beginning of this exceptional adventure, I have experienced the city of Valletta embarking on a radical change. The city has become a more accessible space, with open and accessible spaces, and abandoned buildings being given a new lease of life. This, combined with the Valletta 2018 Foundation's extensive Cultural Programme, has ensured the city is once again a cultural hub. Albeit some issues still needing to be tackled after 2018, the city has overcome a strong period of decline and is now at a peak.

The city is now a space for interaction, where the community interacts with its respective members and meets other communities. The concept of human geography is developed further within the city space. The residents themselves experience a

sense of intimacy with the city, an extension of their home. All these changes, have created a sense of displacement, which create new synergies, and sometimes tensions between different groups. The work of the Valletta 2018 Foundation has focussed on making culture more accessible, providing a varied programme of events for active participation by different groups. The Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme extends beyond the walls of Valletta to all the Maltese Islands, and this is also reflected in the programme of Altofest. The Foundation has also embarked on extensive evaluation process which looks at understanding the impact generated by Valletta 2018. As part of this process, we ask questions such as, how is Valletta 2018 changing or re-shaping our identity? How can we evaluate the success of artistic interventions? How can we say artistic

projects have met their objectives? How do we actually measure successful participation rates? On a more personal level, I ask questions like, how has my city really changed? What was the real impact on my city, on my surroundings and for myself, of this Capital of Culture? Will I still be able to live in Valletta after 2018? Is it possible to obtain a balance for residents, businesses and the artistic community? Can we all 'reside' in 'our' city? Can it be our home and playground at the same time? Taking the case of Altofest, one of the objectives is to create the so-called unforeseen. In this case, can we really define success? Should we do so? And if not, how can we evaluate similar projects? Shouldn't we look more at understanding the discoveries, the experiences generated in such contexts, by the artists, donors, communities and participants, rather than understanding whether

similar projects have been 'successful'? Especially for projects where the main objective is to actually 'lose control' over what we have planned on.... In conclusion, the Foundation has focussed the work on its Cultural Programme to ensure that Valletta 2018 is not just about 2018. Once 2018 is over, the real success will be measured by quantitative and qualitative data. But, the real success of Valletta 2018 will be measured by how many people have experienced new cultural events and the new skills gained. Possibly more importantly, the real success of Valletta 2018 will be 'measured' by the experiences and interactions generated. That will be the real success of the European Capital of Culture, and it is with this in mind that Altofest is proudly part of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme.

About Cre(A)te

Lara Russo / Choreographer

I believe that in order to reach the intimacy of a person - and of a place - one needs to be open.

To open up to something means to lower the defenses, let it enter, let it happen, to be wounded, maybe.

Thanks to the Altofest passport, I found myself catapulted into the private space of Sue Mifsud, a ceramist from Rabat. The aim was to create, in two weeks, a performance in Sue's atelier and to share it with an audience, in the same location. Before my arrival in Malta, I had thought to include Sue in my research, but she was very busy due to a huge order she had to deliver and she couldn't spend so much time with me.

Therefore, instead of relating to the fresh clay, as it was in Sue's mind, I decided to start the research from her handcrafts. The situation required an open attitude, the possibility to build a sensitive dialogue, a discourse built through perception and intuition. Somehow, while becoming familiar with Sue's ceramics I was reaching an intimacy with Sue herself, even in her absence, sneaking into her poetic, through the direct contact with her handcrafts.

Her pieces revealed their secrets of rebellion, intensity and sensitivity. I have worked alone all the time, with the physical presence of Sue upstairs, and her spirit in the ceramics, in the furniture, in the fragrances and colors of the space. While she was tirelessly creating potteries, all covered in mud, with a methodic and efficient working schedule, I was downstairs immersing myself into a new research, made of attempts and failures, freely losing myself, even if supported by her perceptible concentration and determination.

I let my body assimilate everything, touching those materials through my skin, our first sensitive layer, to listen to a story, a weight, a consistence. I covered myself with the ceramics, sensing them. I let that spiritual presence expressing through the object created by Sue: the clay becoming something else, through her hands. How could I continue such cycle of transformation?

But, unlike matter, dance is impossible to catch.

This is how the first image of cre(a)te arose.

A process where the body finds a shape, step by step, among the clay artifacts.

About Tal-Ilma

Progetto Brockenhaus / Theatre Company

It's a matter of welcoming life's feral flowing in your hands. To listen, wait, accept it.

James Sghendo guided us to the deepest well of his house, showed us the other three wells in the apartment, together we climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the ramshackle building, where the performance had to take place. We understood how the element of water (Tal-Ilma, in Maltese), and its dynamics, has been essential for our creation.

We sensed the tales of the lives gone by in that place, all the life passing through the house and the totally opposed temporal rhythms: suspension and rapidity, dryness and fertility, the past and the present moment.... In that time we spent together sharing the intimacy of the place, all elements started to dialogue, as if our presence would have let the solid bricks of the castle dissolve; once it has been a passage, like unravelled water, belonging to the history and geography of the place.

In such dryness, we discovered the sound of bells, the dog's barking, the boot walking, the music of the accordion and the importance of those every day gestures that intimately support our existence.



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DISPLACING BODIES

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One of the most fascinating characteristics of Altofest is the fact that all of the artistic performances are site-specific. This means that they have been "conceived on the basis of a place in the real world", such as houses, schools, and public spaces (Pavis, 1998: p.337) where they are also staged.

This entails, among other things, the displacement of bodies: both the performer's and the spectator's body interact through the performances outside an established theatre. The consequences of such a displacement raise new questions on the relation between space, artist and audience, as well as on the role of the audience towards the performance itself.

As Rancière pointed out "there is no theatre without spectator" (2009: 2). In spite of this, the audience has mostly been perceived as a collective of passive viewers, unable to act, and therefore having no impact on the artistic performance (Rancière, 2009).

As a consequence, it should not be a surprise that while a lot of attention has been paid to the bodies of the performers (perceived as active and creative), those of the spectators (perceived as passive) have raised little concern among scholars.

Such an approach denies the fact that we experience the world through our bodies, and that the body is therefore the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Far from being passive, the spectator's body is therefore essential in experiencing, and therefore in giving a meaning, to the artistic experience. As a matter of fact, the spectator, regardless of the site where the performance takes place, is bodily engaged by the performance, and perceives it through her/his bodily senses (Sheperd, 2006).

The phenomenological experiences of the audience are certainly amplified during Altofest. For instance, in "Sentieri", the Azul Teatro engaged its spectators in a unique sensory experience, by incorporating nature into the project. The performance took place in Majjistral Park, where the audience was instructed to remain silent while walking through the site and experiencing the performance. This allowed the audience to completely focus on the bodily perceptions of the performance, nature and the stunning landscape.

By displacing bodies outside traditional theatres, the marked distinction between stage and auditorium disappears: the audience is therefore incorporated into the environment and site of the performance. This leads to a strong interaction between artist and audience, which may not occur in traditional theatres. For example, during the Cre(a)te performance by Lara Russo, the intimate physical proximity of the artist and the audience had an impact on the performance itself. The artist was in fact able to perceive the spectator's feelings and embodied experiences, and therefore, while performing, she was able to incorporate and react to such perceptions.

An analysis on the displacement of bodies occurring during Altofest reminds us that artistic performances should be collective actions, where the spectators play an active role and have ownership of their own consciousness, embodiment and actions. In this sense, Altofest revives the noble, and oftentimes lost and forgotten, scope of artistic performances, which should be that of creating conscious, cohesive and active communities, rather than a collective of passive subjects.

References

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The End of Participation

Genuine participation, argues [Rancière], is something different: the invention of an "unpredictable subject" who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum – rather than a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order.[...]. At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art. The historic avant-garde was always positioned in relation to an existent party politics (primarily communist) which removed the pressure of art ever being required to effectuate change in and of itself. Later, the post-war avant-gardes claimed open-endedness as a radical refusal of organised politics – be this inter-war totalitarianism or the dogma of a party line. There was the potential to discover the highest artistic intensity in the everyday and the banal, which would serve a larger project of equality and anti-elitism. Since the 1990s, participatory art has often asserted a connection between user-generated content and democracy, but the frequent predictability of its results seem to be the consequence of lacking both a social and an artistic target; in other words, participatory art today stands without a relation to an existing political project (only to a loosely defined anti-capitalism) and presents itself as oppositional to visual art by trying to side-step the question of visibility. As a consequence, these artists have internalised a huge amount of pressure to bear the burden of devising new models of social and political organization – a task that they are not always best equipped to undertake. That the 'political' and 'critical' have become shibboleths of advanced art signals a lack of faith both in the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavour (since art today is so intertwined with market systems globally) and in democratic political processes (in whose name so many injustices and barbarities are conducted). Rather than addressing this by collapsing art and ethics together, the task today is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art's inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right.

We need to recognize art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world, whose negativity may lend support towards a political project (without bearing the sole responsibility for devising and implementing it), and – more radically – we need to support the progressive transformation of existing institutions through the transversal encroachment of ideas whose boldness is related to (and at times greater than) that of artistic imagination. In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels – to participants and to spectators – the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary. Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context.

From Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012

Host / Stranger / Thresholds

"What we call hospitality maintains an essential relation with the opening of what is called to come [à venir]. When we say that "We do not yet know what hospitality is," we also imply that we do not yet know who or what will come [...]. Calling the other, calling the one the other, inviting, inviting oneself, ingratiating oneself, having or letting oneself come, coming well, welcoming [se faire ou se laisser venir, bien venir], greeting, greeting one another as a sign of welcome – these are so many experiences which come from the future, which come from seeing come or from allowing to come without seeing come, no less than the "not [pas]," and hence the "not yet," the past "not yet"[pas encore] of the step [pas] that crosses the threshold.[...]

As a reaffirmation of mastery and being oneself in one's own home, from the outset hospitality limits itself at its very beginning, it remains forever on the threshold of

A Utopia of Fine Dust

No one any longer thinks of describing a perfect city, or the hour-by-hour daily lives of the inhabitants. The massive weight and complexity of the world have hardened around us, and they leave no loopholes. [...]. The vision of an universal future has been diverted from political thought and confined to a minor kind of literature, science fiction (though here, too, it is a negative utopia that dominates, a journey into the infernal regions of the future). Thus this way of writing, which aimed to extend its arrangement of signs even to the arrangement of things, has been taken prisoner by another literary strategy, which is more immediately effective emotionally: a story of distant wanderings and adventure that is capable of giving us rapid glimpses of tomorrow but has no power to chase our way of living

Being Attracted

Attraction [...] is the pure, most naked, experience of the outside. It is necessary to be clear about what the word designates: attraction [...] does not depend on any charm. Nor does it break one's solitude, or found any positive communication. To be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the outside; rather, it is to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside, and tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside. Far from

itself [...], it governs the threshold – and hence it forbids in some way even what it seems to allow to cross the threshold to pass across it. It becomes the threshold. This is why we do not know what it is, and why we cannot know. Once we know it, we no longer know it, what it properly is, what the threshold of its identity is. To take up the figure of the door, for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. There is no hospitable house. There is no house without doors and windows. But as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality. There must be a threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no longer hospitality. This is the difference, the gap, between the hospitality of invitation and the hospitality of visitation. In visitation there is no door. Anyone can come at any time and can come in without needing a key from its door. There are no customs checks with a visitation.

here in this world.

Did utopia ever have this power? Certainly for Campanella it did, and maybe also for the outlandish Saint-Simonists of Enfantin. Actually to see a possible different world that is already made and in operation is to be filled with indignation against a world that is unjust and to reject the idea that it is the only possible one. [...] All I am trying to do here is reconstruct a diary of my own relations with utopia, most of which are private and to register both the high points and the low. The autonomous logics-fantastic machine is something I like insofar [...] it serves some real need: the need to enlarge the sphere of what we can imagine, and to introduce into our limited range of choices "absolute

calling on one interiority to draw close to another, attraction makes it imperiously manifest that the outside is there, open, without intimacy, without protection or retention [...] but that one cannot gain access to that opening because the outside never yields its essence. The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence - as something inwardly illuminated [...] but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible. [...] The marvelous simplicity of

But there are customs and police checks with an invitation. Hospitality thus becomes the threshold or the door. [...]

I am saying that this apparently aporetic paralysis on the threshold "is" [...] what must be over-come, it is the impossibility which must be over- come [...]

If there is hospitality, the impossible must be done, this "is" being in order that, beyond hospitality, hospitality may come to pass. Hospitality can only take place beyond hospitality, in deciding to let it come, overcoming the hospitality that paralyzes itself on the threshold which it is. It is perhaps in this sense that "we do not know (not yet, but always not yet) what hospitality is," and that hospitality awaits [attend] its chance.

From Jacques Derrida, *Hospitality translated by B. Stocker with F. Morlock, 2000*

rejection" by means of a world thought out in all its details according to other values and other relationships. In a word, utopia not as a city that can be founded by us but that can found itself in us, build itself brick by brick in our ability to imagine it, to think it out to the ultimate degree; a city that claims to inhabit us, not to be inhabited, thus making us possible inhabitants of a third city, different from utopia and different from all the habitable or uninhabitable cities of today; a city born of the mutual impact of new conditionings, both inner and outer.

From Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature translated by William Weaver, 1982*

opening. [...] a silence too insistent to be resisted and too ambiguous to be deciphered and definitively interpreted - nothing to offer but a woman's gesture in a window, a door left ajar, the smile of a guard before a forbidden threshold, a gaze condemned to death.

From Michel Foucault, *The thought from the Outside translated by Brian Massumi, 1987*