

the Weekly Journal

Altifest 2018 special edition Malta

ALTO
FEST
MALTA

INTERNATIONAL
CONTEMPORARY
LIVE ARTS

VALLETTA
EUROPEAN CAPITAL
OF CULTURE
2018

DISPLACEMENT

Drawing - Federica Terracina

Becoming strangers to ourselves

Silvia Mei / Live arts producer and researcher at Bologna University

Have you ever lost your way in a city you didn't know? Have you ever dreamed that you were lost in a place faraway from home? Have you ever felt a sense of displacement or a *déjà-vu* getting through an unknown place?

In his book "Les temps en ruine" the anthropologist Marc Augé talks about the tourist's gaze as a vision which is filtered by advertised images of the destination he desires to reach. The ancient traveller or pilgrim turns into a tourist, indeed, the one that has capitalized the travel before leaving, the one who knows already what to see and switches between comfort and risky – under control – zones. Still he has no chance to get lost, to really discover something new, to see something for the first time.

Everyday it is more difficult to be amazed at something, to live unsettled experiences: we are constantly geo-localised, through our "app" we explore and search information about the surroundings. We rule the future! Comments and advices are provided by the augmented reality, showing us destinations through satellite views and pictures, thus the unknown becomes familiar and the mistake is measured. Neither daily life neither holiday time could be caught by the unforeseen. If you would ever lose your way, somebody will recalculate the itinerary for you. You will always be safe, no worries, you will never be late. A voice will guide you on the route and when you will arrive, you will certainly choose the best way. You are free not to choose – says a telephone company advertisement.

All such condition is extremely comfortable. Not to say, it leaves us out of responsibility.

Technology produces progress, it is indeed a futuristic projection, running in rush. Art

instead generates thoughts, it is a contemplative pause, intensifying the presence. In apparent contradiction one to each other, the first one establishes its action focusing on the result, creating the best possible performance with the less effort ever, on the other hand, the second one - forcing us to stop, even if not physically - widens oneself's horizons. Art surprises us, in the moment it holds the time flow, when it lets you inhabit a space like you have never experienced before, when it frees your movements from the technological control.

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 the re-born 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.

Abandoning the institutional space it was conceived for, the artwork is indeed displaced: it loses his ordinary frame and all technical supports, while the relationship with the inhabited space, his memories and geometries, forces the artist to let it evolve in his essential meanings and forms.

The "space donors" are the crucial elements of the project. Accepting the challenge of integrating their everyday life with the revelation of the artistic creation, they become the first "actors", "initiators" of Altifest's process.

Thus the festival aims to call into question the boundaries between public and private, creating a no-ownership area and to activate an experimental social dynamic between residents and artists, with the intent to change the art's understanding of both parts and to affect the geographical urban and social texture of the city.

Especially theatre is able to generate unpredictable events (as it has always done), to astonish us.

The challenge of Altifest consists of these elements: to surprise the spectator, the artist, the time frame when the performance should take place, finally, to leave the piece itself astonished. Moreover, the festival itself is displaced for this special Maltese edition: from Naples, a city with about 966.000 inhabitants, to Malta, an island with 435.000 residents, in a territory which is the double of the Neapolitan metropolis. Thus Altifest's format is put into question, to verify its strength, its possibility of being exported, while the artistic proposals have to fight between resilience and residence, opposition and integration, installation and site-specific.

The processes triggered by Altifest, in a long-term time frame, are meaningful: the released effects will be present for a long time after the performances took place. They connect human beings, generating relationships, fostering the negotiation of a shared space and time, seeking a debate, producing temporary communities, strengthening the existing network of relations, integrating the unexpected, rebuilding a new sociality, in any case, always leaving a permanent trace.

Altifest enables the city and its inhabitants to become strangers to themselves, to live a inside/out polarity, center/suburbs, allowing a third-person narrative, an external vision, on the edge, suspending the judgement. In one word, Altifest produces "estrangement effect", in a constructive way.

Therefore, Altifest prefers to generate unusual dynamics, similarly to when a visitor looks at an art piece, and only his gaze, indeed, allows the art piece to be alive. The displacement keeps moving the process's actors – the artists, the space-donors, the

staff of the festival – all the people involved become change makers.

It is a matter of sustainable processes, highly ecological. The festival – thus a fest, in the most ancient and original meaning – highlights the relation between the inhabitants and their environment, catching the specificity, displacing it, exposing it. Intervening into a community habitus, breaking the rules, demolishing the milieu, re-writing the places. Finally, we could learn how to be present, responsible, aware of our actions. And what about you, are you aware?

Altifest 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 Altifest. 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 Altifest, 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 Altifest is proudly part of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme.

About “Omertà”

Matteo Marfaglia / Choreographer

“Omertà” is a work which explores the female role within mafia organisations based in Southern Italy. It is a journey towards an unreachable freedom which some of these women look for all of their lives. However how ‘free’ can these women really be?

The Regatta Club in Bormla is a very male dominant space. It is largely inhabited by men and their sense of ownership and pride over the club was very clear to see. It is a workshop space. There is a gym where the guys train before they go rowing. A lot of manual labour happens in this space.

We first met Alex Gatt, who transforms wood into magic and beautiful boats. There was a mutual respect that quickly developed between us. He is always happy to help and assist us within the space as ask if we could use or interact with any of the elements that were part of the space.

The first gender confrontation meeting was when the under 18 team entered the space last week and found three young women owning their space. It is difficult to describe the immediate shift of energy that happened into the space. They seemed surprised, it was new to them.

It was uncomfortable for the three performers, it was a negotiation we had to deal with.

This first meeting meant a lot to us and we still keep talking about it everyday and unconditionally it has influenced the work and played upon this gender topic which it displaced “Omertà” into this new space of the Regatta Club.

To be able to make the work relevant to this new place it was necessary for us to strip down the context of the work. On the topic of “Omertà” there are millions of informations and facts, we had to take them apart and keep the one who resonated the most with the space and the environment in which we were.

Another form of displacement that took place was the use of the elements that live and belong to this particular space and how can they shift to something relevant for us to work with. We discovered the space. We became curious about the space. We explored and investigated with the objects. The investigation slowly transformed into context.

We created a journey between us and the space. Alex has been always part of this journey, we worked simultaneously, one next to each other. We were both crafting.

Throughout Alex was extremely enthusiastic to welcome us in to his world and I think he knew the challenge and confrontation it will bring to have female performers into such a male dominant space. We still challenge that relationship everyday with the guys and I believe by the end of our residency we will leave an important memory and a mark into that space and its people. We will have experienced a sense of sharing knowledge and skills, learn from one another and learn about ourselves, something we will carry on our next journey.

Displacement

V XX Zweetz / Theatre Company

Things are in constant movement. So it happens that when you go back to a place, you won't find it the same way as when you left it. Even if it looks as if nothing happened, behind the window of a house which seems to have been there since the beginning of time, a baby might have been born. And under the tree, which has grown slightly taller, the golden ring which was placed at the bottom of the trunk by two lovers has disappeared, the reason: a mystery.

If you go to Strait Street in Valletta, a whole culture was displaced and only some hints remain painted on the walls above the entrances of the doors and others in the minds of elderly people. During the British colonial period, the street was a vibrant hub where sailors lived their free time enjoying drinks, listening and dancing to wonderful jazz music and falling in love with drag queens and exotic women. The street was known around the world for its secrets and many who carry them are now no longer on this earth.

It is exactly these memories which give life to the stories we decided to take inspiration from, reading the interviews made by George Cini to the inhabitants of the street and published in his books. By placing hidden actors inside the coloured balconies, we tell these stories into wireless headphones to people passing by. The displacement of a lost culture becomes a world into which we plunge into, going back in time for a brief moment and living it in a parallel universe.

A broken mirror still holds the secret answer of a beautiful drag queen to a marriage proposal of a sailor, a piano plays the melody of a small kid who dreamed of becoming a great jazz musician and a walled door hides the voice of a prostitute murdered while others were dancing and forgetting the horrors of the war.

Things are in constant movement, people come and go, hearts are broken and cement is layered on top of stones. It is through the pain of displacement that life continues and if we hold on to the traces this life leaves behind, we will know better who we are and why it is worth living this short period of eternally changing time.

A good space to be

Pawlu Mizzi / Programme Office at the Valletta 2018 Foundation

Between 2003 and 2008 I was lucky enough to spend a few summer days in Naples together with friends of mine, to volunteer in the organisation of summer camps for children living in Marianella area. We supported the Sisters of Charity in reaching out to the community around their quarter, walk into people's homes, get to know them and share their lives for a short time. I was 22 when I first did this experience and my concept of life wasn't the same since then.

Falling in love with Napoli and the Neapolitani is an easy thing, especially for someone like myself who is passionate about community life. Nonetheless, the first impressions of Naples were tough to deal with. The late Luigi, a young 8 year old, greeted us with scepticism and affront. We questioned ourselves whether leaving Malta for a voluntary experience was a good idea after all. Later on we learnt that he was testing us. He wanted to see whether we were really interested in investing in a relationship or if it was just a few youngsters coming to his home to seek some self-gratification. That was indeed a very important life lesson.

Then came 2016. I had been working with the Valletta 2018 Foundation for two years. My director advised that we had received an invite by TeatrInGestAzione, asking for the Foundation to visit Altofest. My colleague Giuliana Barbaro-Sant and myself were asked to take the trip – which we did in July. We were expecting formalities or else, some sort of unfamiliarity.

The first stark impression of Altofest came through meeting TeatrInGestAzione, namely directors Anna and Giovanni and the rest of the team. Assertive and very well organised indeed, yet very welcoming, generous and most of all, humble. Their working strategy was quite revealing as community is seriously at the centre of Altofest's artistic research, practice and outcome.

In my role as a cultural coordinator in Valletta it has always been a challenge coming to terms with arts and culture and the space that connects or separates both. I realise that many of us do find that difficult especially when the establishment fosters a concept in which both are considered mere contributors to a money making spectacle. I have learnt to work towards the coming together of culture and the arts. Both can live independently but they can work magic together. Contrary to some reactions I keep coming across, art practice can be given greater value if it's related to a cultural context that allows for people to raise questions and critical discourse about themselves.

Altofest targets this by bringing artists and community members together in an intimate space. Both come together to give life to an experience that looks into the profound vertical relationships of the soul through poetry – a most intimate universal



Drawing - Federica Terracina

language which humans have learnt to dismiss through constant frivolous alienation.

During our stay in Napoli we came to terms with all this in real terms. We walked into the houses and the community spaces of the Neapolitans. We shared their lived experience through performances. We took part and indeed became protagonists as well.

The walking from one performance to the next unveiled the beauty of these reactions through critical thinking and informal discussions with other members of the audience, the Altofest team or Anna and Giovanni themselves.

The European Capital of Culture aims to bring Europeans closer together by highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures and raising awareness of their common history and values. Altofest gives rise to a community that generates critical thinking and one that is able to recognize culture as a primary good and a daily need. The common factor for both approaches is in my opinion clearly stated by Chris Barker: «Culturalism stresses the “ordinariness” of culture and the active, creative capacity of people to construct shared meaningful practices. Empirical work, which is emphasized within the culturalist tradition, explores the way that active human beings create cultural meanings. There is a focus on lived experience and the adoption of a broadly anthropological definition of culture which describes it as an everyday lived process not confined to “high” art».

Here is where both Valletta 2018 and Altofest identify in a common essence – thus confirming the displacement of the Altofest concept and practice as a key legacy for Valletta 2018. A tangible legacy could be capitalised in a redefined future strategy for the Valletta Cultural Foundation where cultural practices are promoted and supported through a continuous dialogue with the community and the production of relevant interventions through art practice.

The intangible heritage of this approach is a contagious virus and can't be calculated or measured. I'm aware the roots are already spreading and may hopefully lead the Maltese community to rediscover a newfound relevance in plurality of languages, semantic interferences and relations to pursue shared values. I find this to be the space where Altofest can displace us to. This is not a geographical displacement but a fresh eye-opener. It's definitely a nice space to be.

Stratification

Marcia Grima / Regional Coordinator - Valletta 2018

We are coming to the last weekend of Altofest after a month of artist residencies and performances which have streamed through Maltese homes and landscapes. Unfamiliar sounds have come out of houses: music, chants, speeches; interrupting the silence of village streets or adding resonant notes to the cacophony of radios, televisions, car horns and voices from nearby. Passersby sometimes tried to make sense of unusual sightings: people stared at the bald man, with black make-up and a long dress as he swept across a high street in Qormi; and in Zejtun an alarmed neighbor vehemently attempted to exorcise the audience spilling out of the house where they had just experienced a Sardinian rite for the dead.

Altofest is an intense experience for both artists and space donors. Space donors accept to take part in this strange experiment out of a combination of curiosity, openness, trust and friendliness. The artists, in turn, are displaced from their countries and the comfort of theatres and black boxes. Their chemistry with their hosts, as well as their material surroundings, plays a vital part in the direction the performance takes and the feelings generated by the experience. Artists and hosts have spoken about “letting go”; hosts trust their artists' instincts while artists adjust to their hosts' rhythms and space limitations. If either artist or host imposed one's will and was not open to some degree of displacement then relations became strained. More often than not these were resolved. I would suggest that this can only happen when displacement is accompanied by intimacy. Displacement without intimacy betrays community projects. If the host is too inflexible, the performance will be sterile, and if the artist treads upon one's host's thoughts and feelings then it becomes an act of colonization.

It is worth taking a closer look at how displacement and intimacy have been played out during Altofest Malta. I'll just give two examples which struck me from last week's performances where not only were spaces reimaged but hosts also had the opportunity to explore their identities.

Eirini Alexiou recalled the shift from her entering Katie's home as an «intruder», to her and Katie [her host] becoming «collaborators». Eirini invited her hostess to take part in the performance: «I wanted Katie to adopt a role in the performance... that she doesn't remain herself», and Katie accepted straight away. She played a queen. During Ushakova, Eirini danced with her back to the audience and to Katie, but the movement of her body and of Katie's hands as she spun thread synchronized throughout the performance.

For “Back Pink Poem: ‘for a cup of tea’”, the artists, Chiara Orefice and Renato Grieco spent a lot of time learning about the house and speaking to their hosts about their memories. As outsiders and as artists they feel that they could offer «virgin eyes» to help «unlock what is already there» but hidden to their hosts through over-familiarity with their everyday spaces. Art offers the chance to change one's point of view, so that one's story becomes «like an object outside yourself» which you can “touch” and “play” with. Joe (one of the hosts) played the part of driver of his car at the beginning of the performance, but got to fly a plane in a later scene. This scene was inspired by a conversation with the artists where Joe had expressed his excitement for planes by a gesture showing the perturbations of the movement of the plane. «This touched me, this connection to when you feel more alive, of danger», so the artists enabled him to fly during the performance.

The hosts were welcomed as superheroes to Altofest, and in the process of the past weeks, for a number of hosts, this fantasy has become part of their reality.

Sky, a strange distractor

Dis-trahere, drag one somewhere else, bring one far away from reality. This calamity, the lie imposed by seduction go far beyond the consequences of a trivial belief. It maintains spirit into dependency. It allows manipulation. In a civilization invaded by entertainment and mass – without presuming which of those distracts the most - the power makes sure to keep at his lowest the level of knowledge and initiative. Leisure and God. God and war. But the complexity of the living – the dance of particles – saves the individual from the traps of the system. After mass or after watching a movie, it knows without necessarily expressing it, that its body is submitted to the laws of gravity, to the unforeseen, to the potential necessity of modifying its path, towards the unknown. It's reassuring.

When it comes to physics, the complex – and supposedly dynamic – systems have the tendency to evolve towards points of equilibrium called attractors. A ball in a bowl ultimately stops moving at the bottom. The fractal objects – constantly presents into the nature – have some properties similar to those of chaotic attractors that are called, for this specific reason, strange attractors. One of those surprising characteristics is to inhabit a space of infinite dimension while remaining finite. [...]

Sky, system gifted with possibilities of exalting physical realities while incorporating them.

Strange distractor – the clouds are its stage. Clouds, fractal objects, subjects to climate, strange attractor.

In this system, the unique distractor includes many attractors. It becomes unfathomable. Everything that comes from the sky - ordinary meteors, meteorites, cosmic dusts, parachute - draws attention and stimulates simultaneously dreams and desire for science. [...]

Sky, distractor of infinite possibilities, territory of Gods, stage for meteors and unexpected objects, is blending into Paradise.

Meaning, the garden.

All clouds, majestic intercessors, belong between earth and sky. Garden from below, Garden from above.

The few knowledge we gain about one of them arouses our desire to know more about the other. Something unsolved and stupefying that forces us to play with this mirror as if was a necessity to go through it with all our strength.

From Gilles Clément, “Nuages” (2005).

The City and Its Negation. An Outline of Negative Political Theory

The Idea we are proposing here that European urban cultures were founded on the game of negotiations of the city by typical city dwellers – for the zeitgeist is plagued by political correctness. It will not hear anything about the city except ideas modelled on clichés of positive urbanity [...]. I will defend the thesis that the paradigmatic European city is not the sum of its positive citizens but the sum of those who are sustaining the city and those who are escaping from it. The city that gives us something to think about, as an object of nostalgia and as a chance in the present, has always been more than merely the totality of its active inhabitants. Cities become interesting through the people who are in the city as though they were somewhere else. It is not simply the assembly of inhabitants that characterizes what fascinates Europeans about their most important cities, but the dual assembly of citizens and deserters. Only cities have what we can call inhabitants in the higher sense – citizens whose

existence is deeply bound to their city; but the only places that ancient Europe would have accepted as worthy to be called ‘cities’ are those where alongside the inhabitants, people who live differently are clearly noticeable. Fans of dialectical formulas could put it like this: the classical city is the assembly of the assembled and the non assembled. [...] The heady feeling of the metropolis and the excited collective buzz in the symphony of the big city, sealed the downfall of the early trading city in a mystical practice of irresponsibility. At the peak of urban joys, in the orgy of impressions, in the aesthetic affirmation of circulation, the political city dissolved forever into the aesthetic phenomenon.

From Peter Sloterdijk, “The Aesthetic Imperative: Writings on Art” [2014], translated by Karen Margolis (2017).