

Engaging communities by displacing bodies

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Displacement is a disruption from the known, from the familiar, which implies new experiences, perspectives and perceptions towards reality.

One of the most ambitious objectives of Altofest is to raise a horizontal community¹, where art is the medium and the common language among citizens and artists.

The idea of community embodied within the festival relies on the notion of *communitas* as defined by Esposito (1998), where its members are not only bound by a reciprocal commitment "of giving from one to the other", but they also "give up [...] one's individual identity, in a process of gradual opening from self to the other" (2013: 84).

Such a perspective, which is the result of an etymological analysis of the term community (from the latin *cum*, with, and *munus*, obligation, gift), reveals a common lack characterising the relations within a community, which has to be continuously fulfilled by the *munus*, which is not, however, a form of property:

The *munus* (gift) that the *communitas* shares isn't property or a possession. It isn't having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of a community are united by an "obligation" in the sense of that we say "I owe you something", but not "you owe me something." (Esposito, 1998: 6)

¹ A community based on the principle of equality of all its members. See Singelis et al. (1995), Triandis and Gelfand (1998).

The cohabitation of the artists and space donors within the private space of the latter, the loss of ownership resulting from it (the space, in the case of the donor, the artistic performance, in the case of the artist), as well as the establishment of mutual obligations, are just a few of the elements which characterise Altlofest and aim to create such a community.

One of the most striking aspects of participating at Altlofest, as a researcher and as a member of the audience, was the high level of engagement and involvement of the participants: artists, space donors and the audience. As a matter of fact, all of them play a crucial role throughout the entire festival, to the extent that any hierarchy among them seems to disappear.

Through the creative processes, the artists rethink their own works in dialogue with the space donors and adapt them considering the donors' private spaces. In this sense, the community, represented by the space donor, impacts the artistic creations directly, becoming part of them, conceptually and sometimes even physically. Each residency and creative process is unique and has its own specificities and challenges.

As pointed out by the artistic directors, Anna Gesualdi and Giovanni Trono, this phase is the most important for the artists: the artistic performances should be expressions of the dialogue among artists and space donors rather than mere entertainment. Obviously, the extent to which such interaction is reflected in the artistic creations varies from case to case.

Therefore, while Altlofest reconnects artists and citizens, diminishing the distance between them, it also enables the artists to create on the basis of their own needs rather than by following the market.

The interaction and dialogue among the different members of the community does not only occur during the creative processes, it is also evident when considering the artistic performances themselves. The same applies to the high level of engagement and involvement.

As will be discussed further on, the development and consolidation of deeper and more interactive relations among artists, audiences and spaces results from the displacement of bodies happening throughout the entire event, bodies that interact and communicate within the intimate donors' private spaces rather than in conventional theatrical settings. The relevance of focusing on the participants' bodies is based on the idea that "theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized" (Rancière, 2009: 3).

Rancière's perspective clearly relies on the idea that the human body is an essential part of the self (subject) rather than a mere natural and biological object. Social scientists and philosophers have highlighted such an aspect (Lock, 1993; Schepers-Hughes and Lock, 1987; Wolputte, 2004) by adopting the concept of embodiment in opposition to the Cartesian mind-body dualism notion of the self and of the dualistic opposition subject-object (Csordas, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

Such a perspective highlights the fact that the self has to be conceived as an embodied self, since humans act, experience and make sense of the world through their own bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), and it is through their own bodies that they interact and establish social relations (Goffman, 1971). Within the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty has certainly made a major contribution, by highlighting the necessity to consider the body-subject as the key agent in the subjective experiences of the world:

We shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 239)

The displacement of bodies occurring during Altifest certainly facilitates the self-awareness described by Merleau-Ponty.

An understanding of the phenomenological experiences of the artists and the audience therefore appears to be crucial in order to understand how the displacement of bodies affects the subjective experiences of both the artists and the audience, and also the role such displacement plays in the establishment of a horizontal active community, involved and engaged in the creative and productive processes of Altifest.

Bodies and spaces

I met André Chapatte, a Swiss-American artist, a few hours before his first performance of *Sublime Scum* at the house he was staying in². We sat on a bench, at the house's garden, and started to discuss his personal experience and perspective regarding Altifest.

He explained that the theme of the show revolved around rejection, and that the performance would have taken place in that very same garden.

Chapatte confirmed that having the show in such a setting would have enabled a deep interaction with the audience:

I had to adapt and rethink my work for Altifest. There is an open discussion in the show and that is a part that I found quite challenging in the theatre because people tended to be a little bit shy, distant. Notably, the lighting, the fact that it is a big black box, the fact that it's a proper dance floor. It meant that the moment I arrived to create this open discussion, people were quite timid. Whereas here I feel like that part is actually going to be better. So that's what I like about this show here, it's that there is a moment where the discussion will probably bring something, much more interesting perhaps.

After our conversation, I took part to his performance, my first performance during Altifest. The space donor instructed the audience, included myself, to wait at the entrance of the garden. He then introduced himself and welcomed all the participants to his home. As we were all standing together, impatient to see the performance without knowing exactly what to expect, Chapatte started to dance on the balcony overlooking

2 André Chapatte is one of the artists I interviewed while conducting fieldwork. In total, I interviewed nine artists, before or after their artistic performances, throughout the festival. During the interviews, I discussed body displacement and embodiment among other relevant topics. I also had the opportunity to experience and live the festival myself by taking part to nineteen artistic performances.

the garden. He then moved to the garden, where the rest of the performance took place. It was the space donor who instructed the audience to sit around the performer. The physical proximity to the artist, the absence of a marked stage separating the audience from the artist, made me feel like being part of the event rather than just viewing it. As Chapatte had anticipated, the discussion happened naturally amongst the participants and the artist.

The space donor played a crucial role throughout the event not only by guiding the audience, but also by taking part in the performance itself, by playing the guitar while Chapatte was singing.

At the end of the performance, the artists left the garden. Due to the lack of traditional codes, the audience, was uncertain whether the show had ended or not. Once again, it was the space donor who made this clear, by starting to speak to the audience and thanking them for having taken part in the performance.

Some of the elements presented in this brief account, characterise all the performances of *Altofest*, and require further discussion, due to their crucial role in fostering an engaged community with no hierarchies.

First of all, the donors' homes and private spaces are not designed to host artistic performances. Similar to other site-specific performances (Newman, 2012), the physical barriers designed to separate the stage and the audience (therefore, artists and the other members of the community), characterising traditional theatrical settings, are inexistent. This allows the audience to take an active part in the artistic performance instead of just being passive viewers, facilitating also a more direct and stronger interaction between artists and audiences.

In this sense, *Altofest* both challenges and disrupts traditional "codes and conventions which demand passivity" leading to a productive and emancipated spectator (Bennett, 1997: 3-4), with a consequent democratisation of the arts.

The absence of a demarked separation between audience and stage, and therefore the sharing of common space among artists and audience, also leads to a higher degree of uncertainty about the development of the performances. As pointed out by Chapatte, and by the majority of the artists interviewed, each performance is unique, due to the interaction with the audience, which cannot be anticipated and replicated.

The Italian dancer and choreographer, Matteo Marfaglia, clearly pointed this out when discussing his work, *Omertà*, during his interview. His artistic piece, which was performed by the dancers Alexandra Pholien, Natalie Corne, Elena Thomas, and Alex Gatt at the Bormla Regatta Club, aims to raise awareness of the role of women involved in mafia organisations in the South of Italy.

He started his account by stating that, before being presented at *Altofest*, *Omertà* had always been staged in black box theatres. During the residency, both the dancers and Marfaglia himself therefore adapted and rethought the work after considering the allocated space. This, for Marfaglia, was an opportunity, a way to stage an immersive and inclusive dance:

since we have this kind of place, why not create an atmosphere where the public can be involved? However, we cannot know how this will happen and what the result will be, until we do the performance. This is very different than in a theatre. A lot cannot be anticipated, due to the space and the strong interaction among artists and audience, which is something that doesn't happen in a black box.

Secondly, while it can be assumed that two different corporeal entities (the performer(s) and the audience) have always been present in theatres (Krpíč, 2011), the performances at Altifest are characterised by the presence of a third corporeal entity, liminal between performer and audience: the space donor.

Like in the case of Chapatte, many artists, such as Matteo Marfoggia, Chiara Orefice and Eirini Alexiou, have physically included the space donors in their artistic performances. Although this did not always occur, certainly the majority of the space donors had a crucial role in allowing the performances to happen smoothly, despite the absence of traditional conventions.

For instance, they have guided the audience around the houses in order to follow the performance or even used their own body to replace traditional theatrical codes (like in the case of *Lady Shakespeare* by Opera retablO, where the space donor, who was hidden behind the audience, started to clap his hands revealing the end of the performance).

In addition to this, the space donor is present in the performances through his/her own private space. Houses, in fact, cannot be considered as mere physical structures. They are expressions and representations of society at large, as well as symbolic and physical extensions of the person who inhabits them. Scholars have pointed out such aspects (Blier, 1994; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Bourdieu, 1970; Littlejohn, 1960) by highlighting the possibility of comparing and associating houses with the human body:

houses are frequently thought of as bodies, sharing with them a common anatomy and a common life history. If people construct their houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups. [...] If the house is an extension of the person, it is also an extension of the self. (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995:3)

Therefore, the incorporation of the donors' spaces in the artistic performances actually means the inclusion of the space donors in the artistic pieces.

Finally, the high level of intimacy characterising *Sublime Scum* is certainly one of the most interesting aspects of the festival, as well as a key element in the level of connectivity among artists and audiences.

The phenomenology of intimacy

Intimacy in theatres is regarded as a desirable and positive element, so much so that since the end of the XIX century, theatre architecture has been impacted by the aim to facilitate more intimate relations between performers and spectators:

This desire for increased intimacy is the most important influence on theatre architecture in the past fifty years, and has resulted not only in changes in the size and shape of the auditorium but also in many and varied attempts to break out of the boundaries of the nineteenth-century picture-frame proscenium. (Cole, 1955: 16)

Considering such architectural changes, intimacy appears to refer to physical proximity between artists and audience. While this is certainly a crucial element, intimacy is a

much more complex concept. The term derives from the latin word *intimus*, meaning "inner" or "innermost". It is commonly used to indicate a relationship characterised by the expression of the deepest emotions, feelings and thoughts.

As pointed out by Pierce, when considering such concept in relation to the theatre, the term does refer to physical proximity, but it also means (I) intensified audience self-awareness (II) a situation in which an audience can express its response (III) intensity of "spell-binding" or "quasi-religious communal feeling" induced by the drama (IV) introspection (V) a quality of drama in which audience attention is focused on the actor rather than on "spectacle" (VI) the opposite of "aesthetic distance" (1968: 151). All these perspectives certainly apply to *Altofest*.

Cre(a)te, the artistic performance of the Italian choreographer and dancer Lara Russo, is a good example of the deeply intense level of intimacy resulting from the displacement of bodies occurring during the event, and to the crucial role of the private space where the performances take place.

Russo's performance was held in the studio and shop of the ceramic artist Sue Mifsud, a traditional Maltese house. When I have attended the performance, the audience was instructed to switch off their mobile phones and to leave their bags at the entrance. As the home was quite small, no more than ten people were allowed to attend.

This played a crucial role in creating an even more intimate atmosphere for the event.

As a member of the audience, I was then invited to a small room located at the ground floor. The room was furnished with a table and small sofa for three. In the centre there was a sheet on the floor, covered with ceramics. Six members of the audience, including myself, were then asked to remove their shoes and sit on the sofa. This was done so they could fit us all into the limited space available. The remaining spectators were asked to sit on the floor, just next to the couch.

Immediately, I become extremely aware of my own presence, of my own body, as well as the presence of the rest of the audience, due to our physical proximity: I could feel and hear the movements, breathing and whisperings of everyone in the room.

As soon as the performance started, the sheet on floor started to move, making the audience aware of the fact that the artist was hiding beneath it. A child, a member of the audience, could not hold his excitement back and, surprised by seeing the artist moving softly and gracefully, with the fragile ceramics covering her body, screamed happily "she is there!".

The distance from the artist and the audience was so limited that I could easily have direct eye contact with the artist, see her muscles move while dancing, and somehow perceive her feelings.

The space donor assisted the performance with the rest of the audience, and somehow was also included in it. The ceramics used by Russo were in fact her own works. Her recorded voice was also used as a background for a part of the performance.

I was not sitting comfortably in a chair in a dark auditorium. I was visible to everyone present in the room, included the artist. I was not watching the event as viewer: I was part of it. The intimacy which resulted from the artistic performance also blurred the marked distinction between private and public space, public and private relations.

While the audience's self-awareness was certainly intensified due to the intimacy of the performance (Pierce, 1968), the same applied to the artist. As Russo herself stated during her interview:

You can hear everything [from the audience]: the comments, the attention, the level of involvement. I can even understand if someone has a cold or is sick. Compared to when I perform in a theatre, it is much easier to get distracted, but the level of energy is also much higher. It is being present in life at the maximum. To dilate the body in a space/time that is full: you feel it. And it is collective. There is an incredible level of intimacy. It is like making love.

While intimacy is therefore strictly linked with physical proximity, that may not always be the case. The performance enacted by the Swiss theatre company V XX ZWEETZ, *Secret Sound Stories*, is a clear example of this.

The artistic project, which is a one-to-one encounter (spectator-actor), was adapted specifically for Malta, in particular to Strait Street, which is a narrow alley which was, until the first half of the XX century, characterised by its restaurants, bars, music halls, and “associated with sailors and soldiers, barmaids and bar owners, troublemakers, military and civil police, and of course pimps and prostitutes” (Cini, 2013: XI).

Using headphones, the spectators listen to three different stories and memories from this part of the city³, narrated by the Maltese actors, Angele Galea, Bernard Satariano and Diandra Anne Mamo, who are hiding in the surrounding buildings (Grech, 2018).

While the actors see the spectators, and guide them around Strait Street, the spectator is fully immersed in the experience without seeing the performer. Not only do the actors narrate a story, they establish an intimate relation with the spectator, talking directly to them and commenting on, for instance, their moves and physical reactions to the performance.

Moreover, the artist shares a secret with the spectator in each narration. In this sense, the common use of the term intimacy, which is characterised by the sharing of intimate thoughts, feelings and therefore, even secrets, seems the most appropriate way to describe the encounter between spectator and actor.

As pointed out by the director Alan Alpenfelt, the intimate encounter, which characterises his project, allows the spectator to participate in a fully engaged experience:

I really like one-to-one theatre and I think we need stories. For a long time, theatre has lost the key role of narrators. I believe it is exactly this direct and intimate relation with the narrator, the actor, that allows the disclosure of a magic realm. It is possible to enter a new world and go into the past. It is a complete immersive theatre. And you decide to follow this voice, to do whatever the voice is asking you to do, because for a moment you are truly connected with this voice. This allows you to take the distances from the world: other people may look at you, they cannot understand what is going on, but you wouldn't care. This is because, for a moment, you are so deeply connected with another person, a person that wants to tell you a secret about him/herself, his/her inner world, into your ears; my secret, very intimate and personal. Intimacy is certainly the word characterising our artistic project.

3 The stories portrayed during the artistic performances are based on the interviews collected by the writer George Cini, in his book *Strait Street: Secrets and Stories from Behind Closed Doors* (2017).

Conclusions

While the artistic performances are staged, the intimacy characterising the encounter among audience and artists, is authentic. In line with Nibbelink (2012) and the analysis provided by Pierce (1968), intimacy characterising the performances of *Altofest* leads to a high level of audience engagement and self-awareness. Differently from their perspective, however, I argue that through the displacement of bodies occurring throughout *Altofest*, this occurs to the artists as well.

Such an aspect was clearly stated by Marfoglia in his interview:

from my perspective, both the audience and the artists have a more immersive and stronger experience, because if a dancer dances very close to you, you can feel her/his breath, you feel the air moving, and these are feelings and experiences that you cannot get from the stage in a theatre. This is a very positive thing because the focus is no longer on the artists' bodies and its movements. It is rather on the human experience and feelings resulting from taking part to the performance. In addition to this, the audience can move freely choosing therefore its own perspective. In a theatre, the audience watches the entire performance from the same perspective. The dancers and the audience have the same degree of freedom. In this sense, we are all at the same level: we are all human beings, and we are having a human interaction.

While *Altofest* aims therefore to raise a horizontal community, the displacement of bodies and intimacy among participants, characterising the event, result in a high level of engagement and involvement from all those taking part in the event. In this sense, the festival strongly takes the distances from mainstream contemporary theatre that, as pointed out by Brecht, "shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)" (Willett, 1964: 189), offering at the same time a critique to this type of society by enhancing a horizontal community, where all its members are key players with equal value.

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