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Giulia Palladini & Agnes Brekke

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A Text is a Pure Image. Correspondence Around Mapa Teatro

Giulia Palladini and Agnes Brekke

Abstract

This document is constructed as an exchange of letters between actor Agnes Brekke and writer and theatre scholar Giulia Palladini, reflecting on their common long-term engagement with the Colombian artistic laboratory Mapa Teatro. The exchange took place in summer 2022 and a shorter version was published in Spanish in the catalogue of the exhibition Mapa Teatro: Laboratory of Social Imagination, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the company's work in the expanded field of artes vivas. The text proposes a meditation on Mapa Teatro's work discussing examples from specific pieces, and a reflection on ways to think and write with/alongside/through theatre. It also explores questions of collective work, authorship, thinking through creation, and the relation between images and texts on stage.

A performer and a writer speak to each other: not in an interview, neither in a commentary parachuting ideas onto praxis, or the other way around, but in an exchange of letters. In this correspondence, the performer and the writer both write and both perform: they describe, narrate, and report. They hear tell a story to which they both belong.

The origin of this dialogue is the exhibition *Mapa Teatro: Laboratory of Social Imagination*, celebrating the 40th anniversary of Colombian artistic laboratory Mapa Teatro's common work in the expanded field

of *artes vivas*: not a genre but an 'ethical and aesthetical posture' (resonating with, but not translating, the category of 'live art')¹ approaching art-making as a technology to reconfigure the texture of reality through poetic experience, and questioning the canons that organise both representation and social life. Mapa's work – in theatre, sound, opera, installations, video – constantly inhabits a dynamic tension between presence and documentation, so much so that a prominent description of their work is that of 'living archive'.² Not only do their projects interrogate the workings of history (in its materiality, and fictional potential), but they hand themselves over to the future as archives-in-the-making: archiving what, in principle, appears as unarchivable (the hopes and sorrows of a fifty-year-long failed revolution), or what is denied a place in public memory. An outstanding example is the project *Witness to the Ruins* (2012), involving the inhabitants of the neighbourhood El Cartucho in Bogotá in a theatrical performance that documented, accompanied, and mourned the progressive destruction of their habitat.

The exhibition, curated by Carolina Ponce de León at Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia in Bogotá (October 2022 - May 2023), radically challenged the idea of a retrospective: rather than displaying the

1. Rolf Adberhalden, '¿Artes Vivas?', *El Heraldo*, October 19, 2014, <https://revistas.elheraldo.co/latitud/artes-vivas-132326> (accessed April 20, 2023).

2. Rolf and Heidi Adberhalden, 'Testigos/Witnesses', in *Lexicon for an Affective Archive*, eds. Giulia Palladini and Marco Pustianaz (Bristol: Intellect), 137–142.

remains of a liveness that once was, or a progressive narrative of Mapa's artistic development, it was a phantasmagoric celebration of infinite variations in a live creative process. In the museum, therefore, visitors were invited to touch and activate materials that once had belonged to individual projects, but already back then were overflowing from one to the next, in a continuum. The central installation in the first floor of the museum was a room full of festoons, which a returning spectator might recognize as the scenario of the show *The Unaccounted: a triptych* (2014), on its part already featuring costumes, objects, sounds, videos of previous pieces (*The Holy Innocents* (2010) and *Discourse of a Decent Man*, 2012), while also prefiguring the next one, *The Leaving Party* (2017). In this crossroad of traces from the corpus of *Anatomy of Violence in Colombia* (2010–2017), visitors were invited to intervene upon and remount the materials through a wandering that implicated a bodily engagement, rather than a merely intellectual apprehension. Mapa's oeuvre was also brought to life by means of weekly 'activations', stemming from past performances and happening in a space/installation called *Hotel Atlanta* (2022): an empty room solely occupied by a purposefully realised filmic backdrop comprising slow pans of the 19th century building which is Mapa's venue in Bogotá.

In line with the same experimental approach, the catalogue also disavowed an illustrative description of the installations in the museum and complicated the notion of authorship, usually underwriting the story of a long-term collective project, implicitly assuming that the founders – in this case, the siblings Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden – are by default the narrating voices. Instead, Ponce de León invited all members of Mapa Teatro – Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden, Agnes Brekke, Andrés Castañeda, Julián Díaz, Santiago Sepúlveda, Juan Ernesto Díaz, Pierre-Henri Magnin, Adriana Urrea, José Ignacio Rincón and Ximena Vargas – to deposit in the catalogue 'a reflection on life, an anecdote, a pinch of philosophy, a poetic sensation, a word that leaves trace, a sparkle that enlightens'.³ For their part, Mapa responded by calling upon the people they considered part of their poetic cartography, to create dialogues, each taking a distinct form, according to each member's desire. Hence, in the catalogue the

artists' voices speak in tune with a number of others: those of musician Miche Molina, of visual artist José Alejandro Restrepo, of writer Isabel de Naveran, and of three theorists who have engaged in a long-term relation of thinking with Mapa's work: Suely Rolnik, José Antonio Sánchez, and myself.

This conversation originates from such an invitation: it started on the night in which I received a letter by actor Agnes Brekke to undertake an exchange with her about her own, and my own, relation with Mapa Teatro. Incidentally, this relation had commenced exactly at the same time: a decade ago, when Agnes returned to Colombia from the UK and performed in *Anatomy of Violence in Colombia* (a project investigating the relation between violence and celebration in Colombian history) and when I, sitting in a theatre at the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz, first witnessed a Mapa's show (*Witness to the Ruins*) as a spectator. The day after, I gave a talk, speaking about time, labour, pleasure, and archives, and although my plan was to discuss something completely different, I drifted toward the images I had seen on stage the night before, dwelled on Mapa's ethical and political gesture, in which poetry would not step back one centimetre in the face of a story of brutal dispossession, in which theatre reclaimed its possibility to be a radical technology for remaking, extending time itself. That afternoon, Rolf and Ximena introduced themselves to me. We sat down to drink a coffee that lasted an entire afternoon. We never stopped talking, since then. Conversations multiplied, they became plural, constructing a space in which others joined in. They continued across the media, continents, and circumstances. They punctuated periods of enthusiasm, of mourning, of exhaustion, of illness, of political hope and rage, they took on particular flavours, they crafted new forms to speak and to look at things. By now, the borders of what started to be 'passed on' between us on that day have blurred to the point of indistinction, as it happens when a common grammar is constructed for a conversation that has the character of foreverness.

The gist of the profound, reciprocal recognition that bonds us to each other is a shared understanding that 'authorship' only makes sense if thought in relation to its hidden, and yet vital, etymological relation with the verb *augere*, which means to augment, to increase. Far from authority, authorship is, in this sense, a commitment to enhance, to augment the world: not in terms of quantity nor proportions, but rather in terms of intensity, capacity to look at the world and make space for its own plural imagination of itself. Authorship, then, makes sense if it happens in the plural: as a place where one can be

3. Carolina Ponce de León, 'Nota de la editora', in *Mapa Teatro: Laboratorio de la imaginación social 40 años*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Carolina Ponce de León (Bogotá: Banco de la Republica, 2022), 10. The sentence echoes words by playwright August Strindberg.

singular, and yet in relation. It is also in this sense that when, after many years, I happened to contribute to the dramaturgy of Mapa Teatro's *The Leaving Party*, this event radically reconfigured my own notion of writing, its relation to reading, its relation to theatre.

In January 2022, at the ICA in London, I watched the film *Memoria* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, in which Agnes starred as an actor. At some point, a scene unfolded, in which Agnes sits at a restaurant table with her sister (Tilda Swinton) and begins telling the story which will constitute the core of Mapa's last show, *The Moon is in the Amazon* (2021). It is the story of a group of people imagining the existence of an isolated Indigenous community who, since the 19th century and in the wake of violent colonial ethnographic surveys of the Amazon, voluntarily isolated themselves from the world until today, a time in which ecological and neocolonial violence keep perpetrating their action onto all of our lives, making disappearance one of the few last viable options of resistance. During the show's creation, the world experienced a global health crisis, which based the planet's own survival on strict measures of isolation, asking the world itself – and theatre, within it – to disappear. How to imagine, then, someone else's isolation from a position of isolation? How to describe, report, narrate disappearance? How is it to remain alone in one's theatre? This question became central to both the film *Memoria*, and the show *The Moon is in the Amazon*, in which Agnes' experience as an actor in that movie opened up a vital dramaturgical dimension. That scene appears to me today as a distinct form of authorship, as reconfigured by Agnes as an actor: bringing a life interference into a craft – that of acting – which is paradoxically predicated upon leaving life outside of 'liveness', augmenting both the film and the show with a presence which knotted them to each other into a silent, and yet inextricable bond.

One year on, this scene comes back to me as yet another way to think about authoring together something which is alive, and keeps breathing, changing its form, just like theatre. Similarly, in this new version, our text also kept expanding, augmenting the future in which Mapa's story continues narrating, describing, reporting, but most of all celebrating itself in the plural.

7 July 2022

Dearest Giulia,

I am very excited to have these conversations with you, as a friend, a woman, an academic, a collaborator, and a constant and most generous spectator of Mapa's work. I very much admire and

care for you, so I know that these conversations will be filled with affection and affects.⁴

This year, it is my 11th anniversary of moving back to Colombia and of joining Mapa Teatro, and a wonderful moment to stop and reflect upon my place as a performer over this time, and why I am so certain that Mapa Teatro is my home as an artist, and a human being.

What I found exciting about Mapa, when I joined, was that they are inter/transdisciplinary by nature. There are no walls between the different disciplines: they all meet in one space, like a constellation of stars, or an eclipse, where all the different elements, have to align together, for the eclipse to take place. My interest as an artist and as a performer has always leaned towards trans-disciplinary performance. It is a space I can inhabit. I become a part of it, and in doing so, its potential expands, but it exists beyond and despite my own presence. When I was asked to be part of *Discourse of a Decent Man* in 2012 (a piece focusing on the complicated figure of Pablo Escobar)⁵ as Virginia Vallejo, Escobar's lover in the early 1980s, I was completely overwhelmed. Although it was hard for me initially to understand how to be part of a universe that exists in so many different levels, it very quickly became clear that what was asked from me was far from a psychological engagement with a specific character that inhabited a realistic universe. It was an opening up of my body and the abilities/possibilities I had to offer, and putting them at service, as a medium through which what was missing from that specific constellation could take shape, in relation to all the other elements.

With each and every new stage production that we have created since I joined Mapa, the most exciting, difficult and challenging part of the creative process for me has been discovering and understanding that specific place and tone I have to tune myself into, to complete the alignment of all the elements that make the piece come to life.

In each piece, I feel there are very specific moments where I can test whether I am rightly

4. In using the words 'affects' and 'affections', I wish to echo Suely Rolnik deployment of these terms, based on a profound distinction between affect and emotions. Affect, in Suely's terms, is not a psychological state, but a vital emotion, pointing at a bodily experience. See Suely Rolnik, 'A la escucha de los afectos: notas para combatir el inconsciente colonial-capitalístico', lecture presented in the MA in Artes Vivas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 2014: <http://artes.bogota.unal.edu.co/assets/programas-academicos/docs/posgrado/maestria/teatro-artes-vivas/produccion/suely-rolnik.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2023)

5. For a description of the show, see Mapa Teatro's website: <https://www.mapateatro.org/en/cartography/discourse-decent-man> (accessed May 18, 2023).

tuned, or if I am in fact out of tune, out of rhythm, or not part of a whole composition. In the latest piece: *The Moon is in the Amazon*,⁶ there is one particular part of the performance where, onstage, I can really feel if I have made the right connection. I can feel if I have become that medium. Behind me, a universe of Amazonian walking palm trees (*zanconas*) emerges. My fellow actors are both actors and palm trees. The sound and the lights are the sound and the lights of those walking palm trees. The unsettling questions, sensations, affections that we, as Mapa Teatro, have on what this piece is about, are all present at that very moment, and I must become *zancona*, troubled actor, image, voice, sound, body, Mapa's feelings as a company . . . I am the voice of that moment, I am that particular universe, in that particular fraction of time/space. My voice, my presence, my emotional connection with that moment cannot be permeated by a psychological, individual, egotistical connection. It has to be in tune with the rest of the universe, for it to be able to speak through me. Rolf says that as he watches me walk forward towards the audience, and he sees me place my hand on the moving palm tree on stage, he can see, with that touch, with that action, how I am tuned in for that performance. That gesture is, for him, the sign of my tuning into the performance.

The same happens with our previous piece, *The Leaving Party*,⁷ which you also know quite well. During the final scene, I have a monologue that intends to round up the realm that we present in the piece, our position regarding Colombia's failed revolution, and our feeling about those who have given up their lives for changes to take place, even if they walk, directly and consciously, towards the abyss. You were with us at the time when we were deep in search for the right text for that specific moment, and it was your suggestion for us to use Roberto Bolaño's text: *Amulet*.

That text was perfect for the scene and once again what I had to inhabit in that moment was the content, feeling, mood, which was already placed in the text, in the image, in the sound. I was part of, and completed the threads for the whole image to exist, for the magic of that very moment to happen. This could not come from a psychological connection with neither a character, or a moment, or a text, or the story.

I do not really have a specific question to ask you about these thoughts that go through my head. I would just like to hear your voice, to know what images, thoughts, words come into your mind when you read me, and how you see these constant connecting moments that can only exist if every single element is placed exactly where it is meant to . . . What is this experience like for you, both as a collaborator and as a spectator, and also as a friend.

I look forward to reading you.

Lots of love,

Agnes

2 August 2022

Dear Agnes,

Thanks for your invitation, for taking me by the hand into a conversation that, I feel, began long ago and will certainly not end with this exchange. What I just said also describes the gist of Mapa Teatro's work, and my own relation to you all: a continuing conversation, which needs all the time in the world, disregarding any measure of singularity, overflowing from one encounter to the next, through images germinating into other images, words that recur and return, building their own tempo, as the dwelling on a thought long enough for it to become something else.

I remember the first time you spoke to me about entering Mapa's work, in a way that I now think of as a sheer form of 'tuning in'. You had started to partake in rehearsals of *Discourse of a Decent Man* but had not yet 'become' Virginia Vallejo. Until then you were trying things out. It was clear that you would be on the show but no one was yet sure what form your presence would take. Then, one day you put on the make-up, closed your eyes and opened them again to the appearance that will later become a familiar one to you, and to many spectators, and that you have embodied in the following decade a number of times. Of course, that image was created collectively, but your body handed itself to it, and wore it extraordinarily.

You put on the lipstick, the eyelashes, the hair, the costume, and suddenly you 'saw' her. You saw yourself perfectly in tune. Everyone else saw it too and had to acknowledge that there she was. Not a 'character'. I understood very clearly when you were describing your transformation, no one actually saw just Virginia Vallejo. Rather, you were in tune with a process of creation in which Virginia was rather a particular flavour, a rhythm, a distinctive shade of colour, perhaps

6. For a description of the show *The Moon is in the Amazon*, see Mapa Teatro's website: <https://www.mapateatro.org/en/cartography/moon-amazon> (accessed May 18, 2023).

7. For a description of the show *The Leaving Party*, see Mapa Teatro's website: <https://www.mapateatro.org/en/cartography/leaving-party> (accessed May 18, 2023).

a strobe light. Somehow, she was there even before appearing on/through your body. She had been passing on other bodies, temporarily inhabiting other images, before seeding into you, before becoming your own tune into Mapa's galaxy, and finding a home there. Virginia was at the centre of the mood of *Discourse of a Decent Man*. It was not 'its voice' but rather its ritornello, its refrain, its latent explosion into madness: the frenzy, the stars, the horoscope, the sensuality of cocaine, and so much more. Virginia – you – was a chamber of reverberation for the contemporary hip hop re-phrasing of Escobar's delirious presidential note. She was the figure manically dancing and destroying the festoons in the party inherited from *The Holy Innocents*,⁸ and later in *The Unaccounted*.⁹ By virtue of your tuning in, 'she' made it possible for certain constellations to happen, on stage, overlapping and amplifying, projecting themselves beyond the individual show, echoing into the next, starting to build other constellations. That persona transmogrified into kindred creatures, such as Miss Colombia, or her ghost, incongruously finding herself pronouncing the final monologue of *The Leaving Party*, with the text from Bolaño's *Amulet* I had happened to 'find', and that, on its part, tuned into the show.

Indeed, thinking about that scene, in light of your words, I consider it my own 'tuning into' Mapa's work as an 'author', and at the same time, the absolute, delightful surrender of any notion of 'authority' or 'authoriality', of any relation with text as individual engagement of a writing subject. It was the unprecedented and yet exciting awareness of having one's particular gaze, one's capacity as a reader – and therefore, as a writer – becoming itself a chamber of resonance. Before *The Leaving Party*, I had been in proximity to Mapa's work for a few years, presented my own research in a number of art and educational contexts in Colombia, witnessed rehearsals and most of all, spent long hours discussing with you all. I have grown fond of Mapa's work in a way that can only be described as a 'falling in love': this is how I have described my constant returns to Colombia and to thinking about Mapa's work in my own writing.

Yet, when I encountered Bolaño's text I was alone in my room, in Berlin, seemingly half a world away and yet, unknowingly, in the

rehearsal room with you all, a room which, at the time, had not yet taken the shape of the forest it later became, in *The Leaving Party*. As I was reading the final pages of *Amulet*, all of a sudden, I started 'hearing' the words being spoken, as if they were read out loud to me by a familiar voice.

The Leaving Party mourned, celebrated and critically addressed the coming to end of the fifty-two years old armed conflict in Colombia, as the peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Arms Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) in 2016 was promising to do. In kissing goodbye the oldest guerrilla in the American continent, a lot of conflicting affects arose, which Mapa incorporated in the fabric of the show, imagining a party in the middle of the jungle, where the ghosts of revolutionary prophets who had initially inspired the guerrilla (such as Simon Bolivar, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara) and of local revolutionary heroes appear, amidst the ruins of a guerrilla camp (already displayed in contemporary Colombia as tourist attraction, as an open-air-museum). In a sense, the whole show prefigured the difficulty to think of an 'end' in a political project which not only never came to be fully realised but also left behind indelible stains of blood.

Bolaño's *Amulet* is a story told in the first person by Auxilio Lacouture, a Uruguayan woman living in Mexico during the intense political season of the late 1960s, and fortuitously finding herself stuck in a toilet on the infamous day of September 1968 in which the Mexican army took over the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), perpetrating the violent Tlatelolco massacre. This predicament, paradoxically allowing her to survive, is one of untimeliness: the narrative happens, while a massacre is taking place outside, and time itself acquires a phantasmatic quality. *Amulet*'s last pages appeared to me as inhabiting a somewhat kindred predicament to *The Leaving Party*: narrating political struggle on the threshold of a future where ghosts appear, violence is still being perpetrated, and the revolutionary force is still walking steadily toward an abyss.

Encountering that text was for me an experience of recognition: I recognized that writing as already belonging to Mapa's work, as if, in a sense, it had always already belonged there, and was only waiting to be invited onto the stage. I became the medium through which this happened. When I sent the text to Rolf and Heidi, the scene itself did not yet exist: it was months before that afternoon in which you, half-dressed as the ghost of Miss Colombia, wearing

8. For a description of the show *The Holy Innocents*, see Mapa Teatro's website: <https://www.mapateatro.org/en/cartografa/holy-innocents> (accessed on May 18, 2023)

9. For a description of the show *The Unaccounted: a Triptych*, see Mapa Teatro's website: <https://www.mapateatro.org/en/cartography/unaccounted-triptych>

a red sweater and just the plastic tiara and a silver gown, started pronouncing those words into the mic, and we, sitting in the darkness, saw the constellation start to take place. That text, all of a sudden, started to tell that story, and also another: the story of the Colombian revolution that the show had interwoven in the whole hour anticipating that moment. I could never have authored that scene, I could never script it: yet, my recognition had somehow tuned in with a future scene that produced that text once again. This was possible because I had been welcomed into a certain grammar of recognition, because I had been affected, over the years, by Mapa's artistic production.

Sometimes, when I explain to my students what I mean when I encourage them to reclaim the word 'production' outside of the way this word has been codified in capitalism, I refer to Bertolt Brecht,¹⁰ who considered love a pure example of 'production', understood simply as transformation of creative matter. Love is a form of production because it is the encounter between individual and collective energies, it is the transformation of something that individuals recognize and put in common, it is collective but also made of singular affects, and by virtue of this encounter, something new, something unforeseen, can be brought into the world. Production, in this sense, is something that transforms not only what is made but also those who make it.

I will stop here, for now, and leave you with this thought, which brings the both of us together, again, in the space that produced our encounter.

With continuing, returning love,
Giulia

12 August 2022

Darling Giulia,

I write with difficulty, trying to put what I feel into words. I come back to reading you, and realise that what I write, you have already said, only much more eloquently than I ever could.

I want to tell you that I can see you in your room in Berlin (even though I never went there), that I visualise the moment *Amulet* found you, and used you, as a chamber of resonance, took advantage of your being in love, of being open to a transformation of creative matter, for that text was itself looking to be transformed. I can see you seeing those 'creatures of flesh and blood or ghosts', walking towards the abyss,

and sensing, as you tuned yourself into that grammar of recognition, that text as a shooting star, a satellite waiting to be launched into orbit.

A text is a pure image. It is not enough to understand what is written on paper or to reduce it to a psychological thought or opinion. The images transcend the paper. They take their own shape. They are colour, texture, mood, whisper, secret. A text is poetry, it has a voice, it needs to exist, and it exists beautifully if its surroundings are tuned in to what is essential to it. Similarly, the creative process for each of Mapa's piece tunes into potential texts that can deepen, stretch, give more complexity and tension to what is being created. Mapa has not worked on existing dramatic texts for a long time now, and usually finds the essential texts of its dramaturgies in literature, poetry, documents, news, the group's own writings. It is the encounter between the written text and the voice of the actor that coexists and potentiates Mapa's universe on stage.

When I am on stage with the *Amulet* text, and I can feel in every bone in my body that I am finely tuned, I feel I am in many different places at the same time, a body of atoms, but not the atoms that make me Agnes, but atoms that have also travelled from many places and dimensions to stick to me at that particular moment. Atoms of previous performances, of love, of the future, of generations frustrated by murky waters, of hope.

Then, I also feel like a chamber of resonance; I feel like a ritornello, and I understand that tuning in is part of falling in love and staying in love. I feel butterflies in my stomach and my senses are on fire, and, just as we do when we are in love, I am transported with every touch of light, every sound, every gaze, every encounter.

*I lost something that was essential to me,
and that no longer is.*

As if I'd lost a third leg.

*It made impossible for me to walk
but it turned me into a stable tripod.*

I lost that third leg

*I became a person I never was,
having just two legs.*

I can walk with two legs.

But the absence of that third leg scares me.

A new cowardice happens to me.

*Like waking up in a foreigner's house in the jungle,
surrounded by leg looking roots,*

Not knowing if I'll have the courage just to go.¹¹

10. Bertolt Brecht, *Me-ti. The Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things*, trans. Anthony Tatlow (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

11. Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Idrá Novoy (London: Penguin, 2012), 3–4.

*The world has just sunk,
and we've been left all alone in our theatre.*

This is the second text I mentioned, where I become a zancona, an unaccounted, a person in voluntary isolation, an actor in despair, an echo of Virginia, the jungle. Another ritornello. Another text awaiting to be transformed, transmogrified. Again, arriving at this text and understanding what its place was in our production (a Brechtian sense of 'production'), was hugely challenging. Heidi, as it is often the case, was the chamber of resonance that attracted this text and quickly tuned in to its spirit.

'It is said that the shamans in the amazon, sit in their malocas at night to think, and through thinking they prevent others from entering their world, through rivers, water streams and paths ... and this way they protect their world'.

This text from *The Moon is in the Amazon*, written by Rolf, best translates my thoughts: I believe that it was the shamans who opened up their thoughts in order for Clarice's text, this new satellite in orbit, to arrive at our house, at a moment when the whole world was in chaos, fragile, scared, unsure about the future: *The world has just sunk, and we'd been left all alone in our theatre.*

This text, by Clarice Lispector, has a huge resonance in me. Her despair, how she allows herself to become something beyond her human self, without it turning into something beneath her human existence, was powerfully in tune with *The Moon is in the Amazon*. Walking backwards as I whisper that text, the whole *production* vibrantly alive around me, reverberates in every pore, in every breath. I let myself ride the wave, I let myself be swept away by the words, by 'a rhythm, a distinctive shade of colour, perhaps a strobe light' (echoing your own words) by this magic galaxy I inhabit inside and out.

And although the song that I heard was about war, about the heroic deeds of a whole generation of young Latin Americans led to sacrifice, I knew that above and beyond all, it was about courage and mirrors, desire and pleasure. And that song is our amulet.¹²

I look forward to seeing you in your words, once again.

All my love, always.
Agnes

Dear Agnes,

I drift again, following the route traced by something that, like a comet, has reached me with its halo as I was reading your letter: Clarice Lispector.

She is the author of the text that, in *The Moon*, allowed you to figure so perfectly a phantasmagoria of isolation: to embody and amplify the solitude of a subject suddenly deprived of the entire human world – during the time in which the world was sinking. Through this text, on stage you became the figure of a solitude each of us experienced at least for a moment, each creature standing alone and yet in relation on this ageing planet. Almost as if we too, we humans, during the pandemic, suddenly found ourselves impossibly 'freed' of the outside world, and yet hardly capable to function on our own. During the pandemic, in the middle of the jungle, feeling terrified because lacking what perhaps used to be a hindrance, after all, the world itself in its movement, mourning the loss of an impossible, irretrievable, perhaps undesirable status, a prosthesis of sociality suddenly taken away, pushing one into solitude, aloneness, in a sense absolute autonomy, absolute freedom, absolute terror, absolute stillness.

It occurs to me that during lockdown I too found myself reading Clarice Lispector and went to look for a particular quote I had written down in my diary, on 14 March 2021: love can be thought of as the four walls inside which a space can be inhabited. I remember hearing this quote referred to on the radio, while having breakfast one morning, and I liked this idea. But when I followed up reading *Near to the wild heart*, I realised that Lispector meant something quite different from what I initially understood: she described a love relationship 'as the space by four walls' that 'has a specific value, provoked not so much because it is a space but because it is surrounded by walls'.¹³ With this she hinted, there and elsewhere, at the difficulty, the cruel beauty, the inevitable feeling of constraint, of sustaining a relationship in time, to sustain love, being 'more than one' over time. She looks at walls as the somewhat terrifying borders of any relationship. This applies to a love relationship, but the same can be said of a collective: love understood as a common artistic production. What 'holds' us together over time, how to sustain its duration without turning it into a burden?

I think of two possible interpretations of Lispector's text: one relates to the ease of being in a relation as if

12. Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2008), 153.

13. Clarice Lispector, *Near to the Wild Heart*, trans. Alison Entrekin (New York: New Directions, 2012), 23.

imaginary walls of affection circumscribed something which is not a space but a shelter, creating a temporary housing for what happens inside: like the house of the tortoise, the hermitage of the crab, a light structure of affective recognition. A space to keep the forces of chaos at bay – to say it with Deleuze and Guattari –¹⁴ where to convey creative matter and transform it.¹⁵ This space could be a space of protection, like the malocas in which the shamans ‘sit at night to think, and through thinking [...] they protect their world’. The imaginary walls here, delimit the shelter for a world of thinking and making, for returning there undisturbed, unhindered, over time.

At the same time, I reflect the other sense in which Lispector used this metaphor: how light this sort of house should be on one’s shoulders, in order to endure? Only an unbearable lightness can sustain love in relation, conveying an ease in the duration, and challenge the heaviness of endurance. Lispector’s terror towards the sustenance of love is, in a sense, the terror each of us has before love: the huge desire to feel encircled but not confined.

I think now about Mapa Teatro, celebrating 40 years of togetherness, of a continuing love relation. I think about the walls, real and imaginary, built over this time – and yet I do not see them as containing, reducing, imprisoning, bordering, or immunising against an outside. I see these walls as light, embracing, like the portico inside Mapa Teatro, in Bogotá: the doors are simply pillars sustaining an open space, which is a portal, which is many portals. Mapa’s continuing work over the last 40 years can be seen as a continuous opening of portals for each of us, and our grammar of recognition has been the sustaining structure for this to happen. I suppose that the sense of lightness, alongside that of belonging to Mapa Teatro’s artistic production, lies in the capacity to sustain one’s own autonomous meanings, within a continuing common horizon of imagination.

This is what I felt, for instance, when I saw your piece *Tusen takk for Hjelpen* (2015): so distinctively yours and yet embedded in transmogrified familiar tropes, splinters from an imagination developed in dialogue with Mapa: Heidi’s fulminating intuitions, Rolf’s gentle gaze on objects and words, the care and generosity of the actors –

Santiago, Ximena, Andres – alongside you on stage. When you say that Mapa is your home, I think this also speaks of a certain ease to recognise your own creative research within it, while sustained and nourished by a common imaginary. Tuning in is ‘not only the falling, but also the staying in love’.

Hélène Cixous was profoundly in love with Clarice Lispector. She allegedly declared that encountering her work was, for her, a sort of re-birth as an author, writing on/with/through Clarice Lispector gave her renewed inspiration for accessing anew a certain authorship within herself. The text of Clarice Lispector is credited by Cixous with the power to speak for itself within the discursive space engendered by the loving subject (Cixous’s text). ‘For according to Cixous, successful loving as well as reading demands a faithful recognition of the Other’s autonomous meanings’.¹⁶

Similarly, Roland Barthes posits certain encounters with authors he loved to read as texts having the distinctive power to make one wish to write, during the very act of reading, as if captured by a feeling of love. This feeling is not a prompt to write ‘about’ the texts written by certain authors (Cixous on Lispector, for instance) but an urge to produce writing, to find pleasure in writing where it was nowhere to be found, within oneself as an author, in dialogue with, and yet completely autonomous from, the loved object:

The point of departure is the pleasure, the feeling of joy, of jubilation, of fulfilment that reading certain texts written by others produces in me – I write because I have read,¹⁷ Barthes says.

I turn to my own relation to Mapa as a spectator, and as a writer: to my own encounter with Mapa’s work as a spur for my own writing, for a distinctive way for myself to be an author. I am writing not just ‘about’ Mapa, but rather with/through Mapa, in dialogue, in parallel, in solidarity with Mapa’s work, in tune with a common political imagination. Indeed, when I encountered *Witness to the Ruins*, in 2012, I turned to think again about my desire to write about theatre. I remembered what images and words appearing on stage may conjure, activate, amplify. I remembered what I felt the first

14. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 320.

15. See my idea of ‘domestics’ in Giulia Palladini, ‘On Coexisting, Mending and Imagining: Notes on the Domestic of Performance’, in *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe*, eds. Ana Vujanovic, Livia Andrea Piazza (Berlin: b_books, 2019), 106–130.

16. Anna Klobucka, ‘Hélène Cixous and the Hour of Clarice Lispector’, *SubStance* 23, No. 1, Issue 73 (1994): 41–62.

17. Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)* trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

time I chose to entertain a lifelong relation with theatre as a spectator. I remembered once again why, after all (and after all the ‘bad theatre’ I saw!) I still care to think and write about theatre.

Since then, I have returned to thinking of Mapa’s work while developing ideas about politics, domestics, imagination, history, even in texts in which I was writing about something completely other than Mapa’s work. Like Lispector for Cixous, this work has been for me a portal for accessing new pastures of authorship within myself. The joy of encountering it, of spending time thinking about particular images, returning tropes, has touched particular spots of my thinking, it has activated languages in particular ways. Writing with/through/about Mapa Teatro’s work, I feel, is to continue seeding the discursive and affective space in which we keep encountering. It is an enduring tuning in, and a coming home.

I leave you with this thought, surrounding you in a light embrace, with no confinement, across the ocean.

Giulia

31 August 2022

Darling Giulia,

AGNES:

What is left of a being when its mode of existence is questioned?

HEIDI:

Perhaps existences must pass through other existences to consolidate, and vice versa.

AGNES:

How can an existence conquer its legitimacy by itself, if it is deprived of any right to exist?

HEIDI:

Perhaps, I only exist when I make the other exist.

AGNES:

A being cannot exist without the help of another, which they make exist.

HEIDI:

*Perhaps, all existence has a need for someone else’s dream to intensify its reality.*¹⁸

I find myself circulating around these questions that strangely sit with me differently today than a year ago, when we were performing *The Moon is in the Amazon* in Europe, and I spoke those lines onstage. These questions come moments after, on stage, we speak about the existence of isolated communities in the Colombian Amazon, trying to understand the reason behind their choice of avoiding contact: we are also talking about borders and what they represent.

When I read your thoughts about love being a space, surrounded and supported by porous walls, inside which one, as an individual, can be freely contained, and therefore exist both as individual and as a collective, I am surrounded by the sensation that outside these walls, one feels (or at least I do) somewhat empty. In that emptiness, I find myself questioning my own existence, and thinking about those other modes of existence that isolated communities choose to embrace.

Outside of my contained space, my soft crab shell, I can see the frontier/the walls quite clearly behind me. Outside, I feel strangely restrained, rather lost, lacking that third leg that made me a stable tripod, *not knowing if I’ll have the courage just to go . . .* I wonder if those isolated communities also choose to stay within the walls/frontiers of their own communities, their spaces of sustained love, because outside of them they ARE not, cannot BE sustained. In that ‘intangible’ (for us westerners) existence they choose, as an act of resistance, they thrive beautifully, within the power that their own ‘invisibility’ grants them. So, these unbearably light walls serve also as a protective layer, inside which, as you say, lies the capacity to sustain their own, autonomous meanings, as individuals, within a community, and it also ensures their survival. Because outside of those walls, they cannot *conquer their legitimacy by themselves*, as they are *deprived of any right to exist*.

In that sense, our fiction and perhaps our desire with *The Moon is in the Amazon* was to open up a portal in/through/with/on which these isolated persons might find *the courage to just go* into ‘unprotected territories’, without losing recognition of their own autonomous meanings, that they could feel tempted to venture into our own existences, through our dreams. A safe space – the walls: the border between consciousness and unconsciousness. The dreams being a dimension in which they can feel themselves contained but not restrained. And so, again . . .

18. This is a fragment from *The Moon is in the Amazon*, spoken by Agnes Brekke and Heidi Abderhalden. The questions are liberally elaborated from quotes from the book: David Lapoujade, *The Lesser Existences* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

*Perhaps all existence has a need for someone else's dream to intensify its reality.*¹⁹

Today, when I came to Mapa Teatro for a rehearsal, I felt the light embrace of the house's walls, and when I spoke those questions once again, I felt that: *Perhaps my own existence must pass through other existences to consolidate, and vice versa.*²⁰

... those other existences that my own must pass through as an actor in order to exist, are not only found in that powerful Brechtian 'being in love', or in being in sync as a creative laboratory of artists, but also in the work itself. The work holds me, guides me, propels me, and in that vertiginous safety I feel free, and I exist. As the indigenous isolated communities might have ventured into our dreams, perhaps the spirit of each work finds its voice and presence on stage.

*I wasn't certain they existed, until they came.*²¹ The others: The magic, the spell, the image, the poetry. And suddenly, accompanied and exalted, aligned in the exact place, connected with the others, with the image and above all with the sound universe we create, I allow myself to be seduced and I seduce, to be enchanted and I enchant. That universe is like a catapult from which I launch myself and tempt magic inside an abyss, supported by the constellation that we are, made up of northern lights. A machine: a clock with many parts that when put together allow time to be retained, making the intangible tangible. Machine of flesh and blood, machine of spirit, of magic.

... She asked herself many questions, but she could never answer herself: she'd stop in order to feel. How was a triangle born? As an idea first? Or did it come after the shape had been executed? Would a triangle be born fatally? Things were rich. – She would want to spend time on the question. But love invaded her. Triangle, circle, straight lines ... As harmonious and mysterious as an arpeggio. Where does music

go when it's not playing? -She asked herself. And disarmed she would answer: may they make a harp out of my nerves when I die.²²

Here is to: continuing seeding the discursive and affective space in which we encounter. In our conversations I feel embraced, listened, sustained, and clear.

Here is to Mapa Teatro, to tuning in, to falling in love, and to staying in love.

Love always,
Agnes xx

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Notes on contributors

Giulia Palladini is a writer and critical theorist. Her work moves between different languages, and fields of knowledge, exploring practices of production and reproduction in art and social life. She writes about pleasure and labor, domestics and politics, archives and political resistance. She is an Alexander von Humboldt alumna, worked as Senior Lecturer at the University of Roehampton in London (where she is currently Honorary Research Fellow) and at the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee in Germany. She has collaborated in critical and artistic projects, and presented her work in various international contexts. She was Visiting Professor in various institutions, such as the National University of Colombia, the University of Cuenca, Bern University of the Arts. She is the author of *The Scene of Foreplay: Theater, Labor and Leisure in 1960s New York* (2017) and co-editor (with Marco Pustianaz) of *Lexicon for an Affective Archive* (2017). In 2021, she led the research cluster 'Feminismos Antipatriarcales and Poetic Disobedience' (UK/MX/Ecuador/Brazil). In 2024, she is curating two art projects: 'Antidotes: encounters to think live arts in the political landscape' (Centro de Cultura Digital, Ciudad de México) and 'Rumbos de vida', within 'Stills of Peace' (Fondazione Aria, Atri, Italy).

Agnes Brekke is a Colombo-Norwegian actress, born in England and brought up in Colombia. She has an MA in Theatre and Performance Arts from

19. From the show *The Moon is in the Amazon*, spoken by Agnes Brekke and Heidi Abderhalden. The questions are liberally elaborated from quotes from Lapoujade, *The Lesser Existences*.

20. from the show *The Moon is in the Amazon*, spoken by Agnes Brekke and Heidi Abderhalden. The questions are liberally elaborated from quotes from Lapoujade, *The Lesser Existences*.

21. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'On the Frontier', in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boulder, Shambala Publications, 2004), 28–30.

22. Lispector, *Near to the Wild Heart*, 288.

Colombia's National University (2015) and a BA degree in European Theatre Arts from Rose Bruford College (2003). She won the 'actress of the year' prize at the Oval House Theatre in London in 2007, and has played leading roles for the BBC Worldwide Service and Channel 4 Radio. Agnes was a member of the Bottlefed Ensemble in the UK until moving back to Colombia in 2012, where she has since joined Mapa Teatro as lead actress together with Heidi Abderhalden. With Mapa Teatro, she performed in: "Discourse of a Decent Man", "The Holy Innocent", "The Unaccounted", "The Farewell" and "The Moon in the Amazon". Agnes also works as a

teacher: for the past 9 years she has been a core teacher and coordinator in the Drama Program at the El Bosque University, from 2013 to 2015 she taught acting to opera students, directed operas and plays, and worked as a leader and facilitator in a project between the Ministry of Culture and the ICBF (Colombian Family Welfare Institute) in juvenile detention centres across Colombia 2015/2016. In 2023, Agnes was awarded the Scholar in Residence Fulbright scholarship, with which she spent the second half of 2023 teaching theatre at the Metropolitan Community College in Lee's Summit, Missouri.