

(T)HERE

Danae Theodoridou on THIS PLACE by Sara Manente and Marcos Simoes

The world functions only through misunderstanding.
It is through universal misunderstanding that everyone agrees.
For if by misfortune people understood one another, they could never agree.
Baudelaire, 'My Heart Laid Bare'.

Sara Manente and Marcos Simoes invite two people, another artistic couple, to work with them for two weeks in a specific space. Main notion of interest in this process is that of 'displacement'. Starting point is a tool kit they offer to their guests; a series of videos where the two artists practice different forms of displacement and telepathic communication. At the end of the two weeks and in that same space, they open their work to the audience.

They then invite two other people, an artistic couple, to work with them in another specific space. Main notion of interest in this process is that of 'displacement'. Starting point is a tool kit they offer to their guests; a series of videos where the two artists practice different forms of displacement and telepathic communication. At the end of these two weeks and in the same space, they open their work to the audience.

Later, they invite two more people, another artistic couple, to work with them in a third specific space for two weeks. Their main notion of interest is that of 'displacement'. Starting point is a tool kit they offer to their guests; a series of videos where the two artists practice different forms of displacement and telepathic communication. At the end, in the same space they work in, they present their work to the audience.

This takes place seven times within the course of one year (June'13-June'14) in various locations in Belgium, Spain, France, Korea. And this is *This Place*: A displacement that displaces itself wandering around in different countries, spaces, bodies, performances, audiences. The clear artistic decisions involved in the work are obvious even from its simplest description: a strict time-frame that fits more what the two artists call 'guerilla action' than the usual duration of the making of a performance work presented to the audience as a 'final product'; a great focus on collaborative processes and duet dynamics; a strong interest in the way we understand and practice communication; and a very particular suggestion in terms of the relational aesthetics involved in such kind of work and the way it communicates with its audience. Drawing on these characteristics, thus, I attempt in this place (the space of these pages) a reflection on *This Place* through the writing of four fragments. Their titles are taken from different presentations of the work, which I use as starting points in order to delve deeper into its constitutive elements. Here it goes:

'Let it start with a sunrise and let it finish with a sunset.'¹

This Place involves a special temporality of artistic creation. The time period of two weeks constitutes, for Manente and Simoes, a time frame not short enough to impose on them a perception of the work as an improvisational task and, at the same time, not long enough to make them deal with it as a well-polished 'final product'. Their working period could then be seen as a suggestion for another type of natural circle: if normally one day starts with a sunrise and ends with a sunset, marking the complete rotation of Earth around itself, Manente and Simoes suggest another way of counting time in performance. Their encounters in the frame of *This Place* start with the sunrise of the first day of their first week of work with their invited guests and end with the sunset of the last day of the second week, when the audience

¹Title taken from *This Place (a documentary performance)* – a film made by Marcos Simoes and Sara Manente with the invited artistic couple Guillem Mont de Palol and Jorge Dutor.

also joins. This is the full circle used in *This Place*; that of a 'day' that consists of 360 hours (i.e. 24 hours x 15 days that each encounter of the work lasts) instead of 24; and what a nice coincidence (or is it one?) that a full circle has 360 degrees too. In the course of this 'day', thus, Manente and Simoes create what they call 'guerilla actions', a term used to describe strategies organized by small, mobile forces that compete against a larger enemy. Tactically, these forces avoid any confrontation with large units of enemy troops, but instead organize attacks in smaller scale in order to exhaust the opposing force. And what is the enemy that the two artists compete in this case? Time itself and our normalized ways of understanding and experiencing it. Bojana Kunst describes specifically the relation of time and artistic production in what she calls 'projected temporality'. Artists, she argues, work constantly on 'projects', i.e. projections to the future, which they have to excellently schedule and organize in advance in proposals that imagine in an exhaustively descriptive way that which has yet to come.² In these terms, an artistic encounter that still has to come is already predefined and prescheduled in the form of a 'final product' which artists later simply execute. For 'projected temporality' gives us the belief that it is possible to schedule and foresee what is actually unforeseen, and therefore it is never related to the time out of joint, to the now without a future, to the unknown and the unpredictable, to the different. But we can never pre-schedule the modes of being in time together, we can never pre-articulate human imagination and creativeness, Kunst posits. The question then seems to be how to resist such temporalities? How to create working modes with which to support the present, how to give it back its temporal value, its complexity and complicity with others instead of losing it by continuously anticipating for a future to come? What could be the structures that would open this perceptual complexity of the present?

In order to change capitalistic tendencies that strive to strategically control the future and stay in the realm of the known neglecting the present tense, we have to move towards the unknown, Valentina Desideri and Stefano Harney suggest.³ In order to do that we have to develop practices that involve tools and specific ways of using them that are never prescriptive, they never guarantee any result and that they ultimately let any work emerge from the actual doing of it. This means that we can just experiment with our practices but with no claim of truth or attachment to their results, visible and invisible ones. The 'project' could then be renamed as 'intention' and be understood as the setting up of intentions that open up space for practices that can be generative of different and multiple futures in the present. To create intentions together, instead of projects, means that what is common is what is now, not what will be in the future, Desideri and Harney continue. This, for them, also opens up to vulnerability. Vulnerability here though does not imply a state or some sort of condition associated with weakness. To be vulnerable instead means to be open to the capacity to be affected by others, people and things, to be possessed by the many futures already present in others; an opening of vulnerability that allows us to invest ourselves in impossible tasks so that we find out what they really mean or can mean, without knowing it in advance; an opening that allows us to sense the present differently, to perform multiple readings. This constitutes a very accurate description of Manente's and Simoes' intention too. *This Place* resists dominant temporalities in contemporary artistic production by refusing to execute yet another 'project'; instead it constructs a 'vulnerable' space insistently devoted to what is now, open to the capacity to be affected by others, invested in unknown and different each time tasks through performing multiple readings of the same tool kit offered to the various collaborators... In a beach in Barcelona, in Kaaistudios or Zsenne gallery in Brussels, in Wp Zimmer in Antwerp; in BUDA in Kortrijk, in *This Place* always now: it starts with a sunrise and finishes with a sunset.

² Kunst, Bojana (2012), 'The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making', *Maska*, No. 149–150 (autumn 2012): 64–71.

³ Harney, Stefano and Desideri, Valentina. 'Fate Work: A Conversation', <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/fate-work-conversation>, accessed 13 May 2014.

- ‘- Don’t leave me.
- No, I’m not going to leave you.’⁴

In his book *Together*, sociologist Richard Sennett talks about a modern society that de-skills people in practicing cooperation.⁵ Instead, it is producing a new character type. This is the sort of person bent on reducing the anxieties that differences can inspire, whether these are political, racial, religious, ethnic or erotic in character. The goal of people in Western societies is thus to avoid arousal, to feel as little stimulated by deep differences as possible. Subsequently, Sennett continues, we are driven to the homogenization of taste that we witness taking place today. From modern architecture to clothing, eating, music, everybody is basically the same in a process of cultural homogenization that seeks for a neutral view of the world. This desire to neutralize difference, to domesticate it, which of course perfectly intersects with the economics of global consumer culture, weakens the impulse to cooperate with those who remain ‘other’. Therefore, as material inequality isolates us, we are losing the skills to deal with intractable differences while our neutralized social contacts become even more superficial. We are thus losing the skills of cooperation needed to make a complex society work.

What could be though a good way to resist such process of de-skilling and offer tools that would re-skill people towards an actual interaction with each other, creating strong bonds in a complex society made from all our differences? And which could be a good place to look for such skills? The rehearsal space, Sennett replies. The creative process of art forms that involve group rehearsals (such as music and the performing arts) constitute one of the very few places today where real cooperation is still practiced and valued as the undisputable ground of the work that takes place there. As artists need to exchange for mutual benefit and totally depend on each other in order to create their work, rehearsals are able to provide models for a sustainable and improvable cooperation, built from the ground up. Therefore it is in their space where we should turn our gaze in order to find structures that could highly benefit us on a social and political level too, Sennett concludes.

Manente and Simoes seem to be highly aware of this fact. And it is exactly this kind of complex cooperation that they attempt to practice again and again through a series of processes that involve more and more different collaborators and dynamics. In the frame of the encounters they create, the same and the different, the intimate, the close, the strange and the unknown are coming together in couples that work and/or live close to each other (that of the two artists and that of their invited guests) and in couples that may work together for the first time (the couple of Manente and Simoes and the couple of their invited guests). In this frame all those involved in *This Place* become highly sensitized to the complex process of decision making, to the way starting points are elaborated, to the duet dynamics in operation (between the couples, in the couples etc), to what is put on stage (usually the invited couple re(dis)places that of Manente and Simoes, whereas other times two simultaneous performances are taking place at the same time on stage), to the methods devised for another kind of cooperation (sometimes a mediator is also present in the work in cases where the invited guests are three instead of two). Departing from a specific tool kit, which is offered as a common starting point, Manente and Simoes design the frame for a cooperation that indeed re-skills us (all those involved in the two week process but also the audience that witnesses this work) on being together and depending on each other not in a neutralized way but through our differences, through our separate ideas and operating modes that can be put together in yet more different ways sustaining their uniqueness without letting

⁴ Title taken from *This Place (a documentary performance)* – a film made by Marcos Simoes and Sara Manente with the invited artistic couple Guillem Mont de Palol and Jorge Dutor.

⁵ Sennett, Richard (2013), *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, London: Penguin Books.

go of those close to them; cooperating with them and attempting to approach them in the most attentive way.

'Please check the communication. For assistance...'⁶

In his 'Metaphysics of Life' Henri Bergson wonders 'whether the reality corresponds to the appearance'.⁷ What do we actually know about what takes place inside the body? Bergson asks. If you take two bars of copper of the same length, the same change in temperature will always cause them to expand or contract by the same amount. In different beings though, the same change in temperature would produce different effects. This proves that science's argument that we are at the mercy of physical and chemical forces, and always bend to their requirements, is not totally correct since science cannot prove that the influence of physico-chemical forces on organisms is a determining influence whose result can be calculated mathematically. Up to the point, Bergson continues, that there are indeterminate phenomena that do not depend on us and elude our will and consciousness, nothing proves that physical and chemical forces alone can ever explain life and organization.

Manente and Simoes playfully work with such ideas. They decide to depart from a metaphysical understanding of the human condition in order to delve deeper into its operational modes and the way we communicate. On the first day of their encounter with their new collaborators they visit a tarot reader asking him/her to offer guidance lines to their work, which they then follow in different ways. Similarly, the tool kit that is used as a starting point for their work consists of a series of videos based on different forms of telepathic communication: the two artists react to each other's writings without seeing them, react to each others words without listening to them, attempt to create verbal portraits of each other's character by looking at each other's movements from afar, etc.⁸ The idea of 'displacement' is always present here. You are placed here, while someone else is placed elsewhere (literally or metaphorically) but nevertheless you are trying to communicate via language, despite the constraints that are placed between you. In this way Manente and Simoes attempt to let go of the known and the scientifically valid and approach another space of communication.

Shoshana Felman talks about the use of language as a primarily performative act.⁹ Departing from the story of Don Juan - probably the most famous liar in the history of literature - she argues that his endless promises for love constitute all the *force* of his discourse, which is opposed to the *meaning* of the discourse represented by the other characters of the story; a discourse that is better summed up by Charlotte's (one of Don Juan's lovers) demand 'We have to know the truth'. The dialogue between Don Juan and the others becomes thus, for Felman, a dialogue between two orders that do not communicate: the order of the act and the order of meaning. When Don Juan replies 'I promise' to the 'we have to know the truth', he essentially creates what Felman calls 'a dialogue for the deaf' wherein people communicate. By juxtaposing force and meaning in language, Don Juan's story suggests an understanding of language as the biggest arena for seduction. Within this arena, instead of exchanging 'universal truths' and understandings we exchange forces, performances, pleasures; we are all seducers that make contact through performative acts that proceed more through misunderstandings than its opposite.

⁶ Title taken from *This Place (a documentary performance)* – a film made by Marcos Simoes and Sara Manente with the invited artistic couple Guillem Mont de Palol and Jorge Dutor.

⁷ Bergson, Henri (2007), 'The Metaphysics of Life - From Leçons de Psychologie et de Métaphysique given at Clermont-Ferrand, 1887-88', translated by Michael Vaughan, *SubStance* #114, 36.3: 25-32.

⁸ For example in one of the videos we see one of the artists (the sender) writing down a message s/he communicates to the other one (receiver). The receiver performs this message without seeing it. On another one we see the two artists in different spaces, seeing but not actually hearing each other, but nevertheless attempting to discuss etc.

⁹ Felman, Shoshana (2003), *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, Stanford California: Stanford University Press.

Through constructing tasks in which such misunderstandings reigns, Manente and Simoes achieve the deepest kind of communication in a game of endless seductions, beside the rationally understood. In another one of their tool kit videos, we see the two artists constantly affirming each other in a wonderful way. No matter what one suggests, the other says 'yes', 'yes', 'yes' and 'yes' again. This is maybe what is more needed in communication: not so much to listen, read, understand words in rational and linear ways but to seduce each other, succumb to each other's seduction and follow each other through our misunderstandings and miscommunications. Any other case, as Baudelaire has argued, would in fact be misfortunate. Yes.

The Lovers¹⁰

When, in the frame of *This Place*, the tarot reader is asked to read one card for the relationship of the work to its audience, the card that is being picked up is the Lovers. Nicolas Bourriaud and Jacques Rancière have already extensively talked about the importance of the role of the audience in an event, and about the fact that spectators constitute equally powerful creators of a work who are asked to complete what is in front of them by re-creating it in their own unique way.¹¹ Manente's and Simoes' 'metaphysical' way approaches similar ideas from another perspective, that of love. At this point I could refer again to the way the different vulnerable presentations of the work communicated with their audience; describe the endless possibilities each of those presentations opened by being offered not as a closed event but as a fragile, temporary piece that you completed yourself. Instead of doing that though I prefer to stick to the metaphysical interpretation of things and talk about passionate loves, faithful ones that continued to be there on the arranged date as a series of meetings with one's lover in various places, proposing different games of seduction each time. This seemed to be the love present in all spaces where *This Place* took place.

In his *Praise of Love*, Alain Badiou argues that love is currently under threat and must be re-invented.¹² We live in an era that understands love either as a 'risk-free' activity, through the numerous websites that guarantee carefully selected partners and relationships that include no risk of failure; or as a finance activity that, similarly to capitalism and its investments, involves 'no commitment'. Under such threat (Badiou aptly calls it 'safety threat'), which aims to avoid any immediate challenge and genuine experience of the otherness from which love is woven, we have to re-invent a love that innovates in an even stronger and decisive way; we have to seek for a love that insists on risk and adventure instead of safety and comfort. If the work and its audience are indeed lovers, then this is exactly the understanding of love that *This Place* suggests too. Through the risky, incomplete actions it offers to its spectators, time and again, it promises them endless, risky love; Not so much in terms of meaning, as in terms of force; in terms of being (t)here and don't leave; in sunrises and sunsets...

¹⁰ Title taken from *This Place* – a performance made by Marcos Simoes and Sara Manente with the invited artistic trio Mette Edvardsen, Philippe Beloul and Heiko Gölzer.

¹¹ I refer here to Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) and Jacques Rancière's keynote lecture in the 5th International Summer Academy (Frankfurt 2004), entitled 'The Emancipated Spectator'.

¹² Badiou, Alain (2012), *In Praise of Love*, Translated by Peter Bush, London: Serpent's Tail.