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On the Dust Island

A documentary film crossing by Altofest Malta 2018

filmed by Giuseppe Valentino

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DISPLACE ALTOFEST

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# Preface

## This is not a festival

First of all, this is not a catalogue. Not one of those 'official' catalogues which are produced on the occasion of exhibitions, expositions, or other similar events, before they take place. This does not even reflect a will to report on an episode which has inspired the production of the pages you are reading. What this work may be considered is a *map* representing not the reality, but the experience of it. This book is the 'precipitate' of an experience: that of the special edition of Altifest, held in Malta in April and May 2018.

Since 2011, Altifest has always taken place in Naples. It is a unique event both in Italy and especially in the city. It is hard to define or label it. Altifest has not the characteristics of a given type or genre: it is not public art, it is not street theatre, and it is not urban dance; it is not land art and it is not apartment theatre or "teatro dei luoghi" (theatre of places). You can only try Altifest. If you think you are going to assist shows for a few spectators in someone's house, you are mistaking the meaning of the *extra-communitarian* festival ideated and managed by TeatrInGestAzione, the company led by Anna Gesualdi and Giovanni Trono, directors of Altifest.

We do not want to avoid telling you what it is, though the temptation is that of telling you what it is by telling you what it is not. However, we understand that the 'sediments' in this book are more explicit than a description or a caption. Authors have told their experience of the events during the whole festival, they have lived it wholly. Because there are no behind-the-scenes; everything is visible, uncovered, as the laundry drying on clothes lines across the streets of the city centre of Naples. Altifest is part of the game; it is at stakes, without fiction. It directly faces all difficulties of human relations. Crises often arise from such difficulties, thus reproducing the problems deriving from living together, welcoming, opening, generosity, hospitality, dialogue, otherness, comprehension, integration. These are hot topics, difficult to manage for the EU, and hard to live in the Mediterranean, which feels threatened by the many migrations and by the Other, who comes, settles, and bastardises the purity of national identity and the 'inviolability' of those who have right.

Because of this, and despite it is about live arts, a minor segment of the contemporary cultural system, Altifest has important repercussions in the social field. And not because it is charitable. Its spirit is clearly civil, and above all humanitarian. This does not mean that Altifest is theatre with the others: migrants, people with disabilities, prisoners, mentally sick, etc. We do not want to go that direction. It is a far slower, latent, gradual work.

Altifest does not colonise; like a virus, it attacks immune system, it demolishes protections and walls which fence and enclose, which deprive and deprive themselves of the community, meaning *con-doning*, meaning 'donating together', as Roberto Esposito has well illustrated in his genealogy of the Latin word *communitas*, which has been quoted several times in this book.

That is why Altifest first movement is addressed to donation: both artistic and spatial. Artists and space donors (private houses, shops, public spaces, open spaces, etc.) mutually host themselves and open, together, the doors to the umpteenth guest, the spectator. Hence, the 'spectacular' relation is no longer a relation between two parties, but between three parties. Space donors participate in the artistic process; contribute to its expression; make the meeting with the Other possible; open their houses to people they do not know; and above all they become foreigners in their home, in an 'estrangement process'. Artists live together with their work and the process generating it in the donors' house, and they change it, so to say, because they will have left traces. While rethinking the artist residence – this expression is abused today by bureaucrats in ministerial projects – Altifest promotes new practices of regeneration of the relationship between the work, its addresses, and creation processes. Normally spectators buy a ticket, participate in a show for a couple of hours and then go home. Here donors experience the whole production chain and contributes to organising the meeting. As for artists, they are bound by the house and its inhabitants; find compromises; turn boundaries into strengths. Their works 'settle' in a space which is intimate more than private. An intimate space which is suddenly open. Space donations are both the starting point and the ending point of Altifest. But what does this expression means, concretely? Finding new spaces? Clearly not! It has to do with the idea of property, and above all of the idea of possession, so well rooted in western patriarchal societies. Space donations have to do with the Heidegger's notion of inhabiting, being there, *Dasein*. When a space becomes time: of relation, presence, meeting. According to Altifest space has to be re-written. This is another key issue of this work. *Re-writing spaces* was the subtitle of one of the first editions of Altifest, whose sense is more and more clear today: re-writing means finding a new function, subverting, inverting the normal use of something, disorienting. The notion of *map* comes suddenly back during such peregrinations, because rewriting spaces means refashioning our mental representations, our view of what is real. If we get disoriented, we no longer belong to ourselves; we lose the capacity to interpret what happens around us; we are no longer the masters of our domestic microcosm.

Now, our hope is that through this path made of words, images, and graphic signs, those who have participated in Altifest Malta could get disoriented in a new and different way, so as to see themselves in a new way. We also hope that those who were not there will be curious and come to find a new way of looking at the world and their daily life. More often than not, what is important is not what is around us, but the way we look at it. So, let's try to be strangers in our world, in this world of ours... we are just passing by; we are just temporary guests of something which does not really belong to us, except for the time we dedicate to it.

## Thinking: Displace

*In the long run this could turn into a saving force. When theatre or architecture are not where we expect them to be, [...] when they surprisingly move [...]. It is not just a historical fact; it is also an unexpected and unpredictable change of behaviour, a change of understanding and self-understanding, and even a sudden loss of understanding.<sup>1</sup>*

Daniel Libeskind

A foreign word, even more than a word in your native language, reach you as an impalpable cloud of nebulous meanings. Some of them are more defined; others escape, wrapped into a muffled aura. You should repeatedly attend the different contexts where the word recurs to gain a clearer feeling. The impression of having understood some meanings never turns into certainty of knowing all its possible uses. The foreign word remains 'unframed', so to say, because it can always reveal a further meaning, a recurrent but still un-experienced use. It is a thought that should not be entirely new to the Maltese reader, accustomed to the transformative ferment of a trilingual multifaceted, ever-changing habitat. In Malta, a multitude of ancient and sedimented or brand new linguistic codes, intersect and go hand in hand, sometimes in the same sentence, always giving rise to an unprecedented creation.

In our daily life and in our work – Loretta as a writer and dramaturg, Silvia as a critic and researcher – we are often confronted with the experience of translation. We approach translation as a poetic laboratory, which offers continuous opportunities for discovery. The disclosure of new possible uses of a given word, revealing new semantic affinities and metaphorical constructions, not only stimulates the process of literary creation, but also indicates new possible thinking paths.

Eight years after the first edition of *Altofest*, we had now, for the first time, the opportunity to collect the thoughts arising from the festival in a book and we decided to assign the task of defining our horizon of investigation to a foreign word, the verb (*to*) *displace*, which has no equivalent in Italian, our mother tongue.

The idea which let us consider this word as a possible thematic guide came from the first and neutral meaning of the verb, which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes as: "the action of moving something from its place or position, put out of an usual or proper place or into the place of another". *Altofest* invites the selected artists to *reposition* their work, from a conventional space to a private one, donated by the citizens participating in the project.

After seven editions, held in different areas and districts of Naples, our city, the Maltese Special Edition was the first attempt to *en-graft* *Altofest* into a new social and human fabric. By accepting this challenge of inaugurating *Altofest*'s in Malta, the festival passes through the same path, usually crossed by the participating artists: the extraction/abstraction of the work from 'its own' place and the exposition in someone else's space. Therefore, we decided to investigate these dynamics of 'displacement', looking on the

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1 My translation from Italian.

one hand at the works and processes of artistic creation in the context of Altifest and, on the other, to the festival itself in Malta. Thus we took the chance to think about the continuity and at the same time the novelties which would have characterized the Maltese Edition.

Considering the questions arisen from Altifest on a more theoretical and existential level, an interesting research path has been offered by an etymological analysis of the term *displace*, which brings together the suffix *dis* – which means ‘far away’, ‘apart’, ‘separated’, but also ‘having a privative, negative, or reversing force’– and the verb ‘place’, meaning ‘collocating, situating, putting in a given place’. In fact, this word seems to evoke a self-contradictory movement, which is difficult to conceive: a movement which seems to go in the direction of a given place, with the aim of causing its loss, a gesture which puts something in relation with a space and at the same time separates it from the space itself. In this perspective, the term ‘displace’ evokes also numerous situations which reveal how the contemporary relation with the space becomes confused, contradictory, complex. “Space becomes a question to us” as Georges Perec wrote.

Starting from this meaning of the verb *displace*, we have looked at Altifest and the processes it generates as a field of experiences, where to comprehend how the relationship with spaces becomes problematic nowadays.

We have speculated on the poetic gesture in its *displacing* force; we have analyzed this poetic gesture and realised it is capable of engaging a redefinition of our relationship with spaces and of subverting the hierarchy between the different spaces and the position we consequently attribute to them : home *versus* city, intimate spaces *versus* political spaces. Shared Spaces *versus* Public Spaces. In other words: by processing Altifest’s experience and recurring dynamics, our aim was to challenge our perception of spaces, as well as the established positions assigned to people, things, relationships, which appear as unalterable facts in our daily life.

However, as we said, *to displace* remains to us a foreign word, which carries a multiplicity of further, expected and unexpected, guessed or sometimes unknown meanings.

How can this word – which can also refer to movements of *detritorialisation* and *dispossession*, to migration paths and traumatic conditions, producing broken identities or the loss of points of reference – offer new perspectives to interpret Altifest?

And how can the experience of Altifest offer new elements to rethink those dynamics and contexts, which the verb *to displace* evokes?

The contributions collected in this book elaborate these questions, in order to re-examine Altifest’s experience, by considering the dynamics of displacement which the festival triggers; and in order to provide a new meaning to the word *displacement* in the light of the reflections inspired by the festival.

## The research community

We have entrusted the writing of this book to a research community, created *ad hoc* and made up of Italian and Maltese researchers, coming from different disciplinary fields, and in dialogue with the Valletta 2018 Research Department and with a group of artists, who participated in several editions of Altifest. Involved artists and researchers gathered in a Critique Panel which accompanied the development of the festival in Malta step-

by-step. The Critique Panel is a collective *dispositif*<sup>2</sup> of discussion and reflection, that has been integrated in the Neapolitan editions, since 2012. It offered the future authors of the book a platform allowing them to discuss their views and analytical perspectives and to share some of them with the festival's community – made of public, artists, and donors – through The Weekly Journal<sup>3</sup> and Public Talks. Competencies were not homogeneous among the members of the Maltese Critique Panel. The Italian researchers had more in-depth knowledge of the festival, since they have been following its dynamics for several years in Naples, while Maltese researchers could share expertise about the territory and its communities. This book has come to life also thanks to the flow of knowledge activated by this dissymmetry. In order to develop this reflection, each of us – as an artist, as a sociologist, as a critic, as a historian, visual artist, photographer, anthropologist, dramaturg – had to challenge his or her consolidated points of view and the disciplinary perspective to approach the artistic phenomenon. Across the process which led to writing this book, knowledge, thinking, and creation have also been 'displaced', putted 'out of place', out of context.

We have tried to adopt an "extra-disciplinary" perspective (Brian Holmes), by asking ourselves what kind of interaction between thought, knowledge, and creation could be imagined to conceive a complex phenomenon like Altifest. Questions about the destination of this reflection have also emerged: whom do we address our book to? Why? How could such a book complete the experience of the festival, collect its traces, and allow the people involved to rethink this experience?

How to re-open that dialogic space between thought and creation, initiated in the festival, in order to record those radical questions which exceed single experiences, and can only be read once the act is accomplished?

These questions have remained unanswered, but they have paved the way to research, inspiring the stylistic, literary, editorial, and curatorial solutions adopted here.

## Structure and contents

The structure of the book in four thematic *sections* – Geography, Community, Intimacy, Displacement – reflects the dramaturgical architecture of the festival in Malta, developed over four weeks, each dedicated to one of these keywords.

The theoretical sections alternate with three visual *intersections*. The juxtaposition of these distinct levels opens various possible reading paths, and indicates several options for crossing and recomposing the different layers of thought.

In the section **Geography**, **JosAnn Cutajar**, analyzes the interaction between Altifest's performances - intended as cultural and social events - and the construction of places in their symbolic dimension, focusing on site-oriented cultural practices and 'connectivity' which the festival facilitates. In dialogue with Altifest's artistic directors Anna Gesualdi and Giovanni Trono, **Salvatore Margiotta** reflects on the festival's spatial dramaturgy, questioning the concept of urban regeneration.

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2 Following the same direction of Foucault's translators and scholars the word *dispositif* is always left in french in this book (see J. Bussolini, "What is a *dispositif*", *Foucault Studies*, 10, November 2010, pp. 85-107).

3 See <http://www.teatringestazione.com/altifest/critique-panel/>; see also <http://www.teatringestazione.com/altifest/malta/ocrmalta/>.

At the **Intersection #1**, **Valentina Quintano**'s photo-project *Superhero Yourself* portrays the community of Altofest Malta's space donors through a collaborative practice which brings the self-representation of each person out within an imaginatively constructed geography.

In the section **Community**: **Mimma Valentino** describes how an unprecedented, transversal community derives from the weave of new relationships activated by Altofest, against the background of different theatre traditions of the twentieth century.

**Marcia Grima** explores communitarian dynamics within Altofest through the lenses of liminality and ritual.

At the **Intersection #2**, the pictorial series by **Federica Terracina** outlines *Thresholds* in Altofest's creation processes – elaborating a visual trace of the experiences she collected as an artist in several Neapolitan editions of Altofest.

In the section **Intimacy**: **Loretta Mesiti** examines the role of constraints and resistance in artistic creation processes, describing its variations in Altofest's *dispositif*. **Gisella Orsini** develops a phenomenological analysis of the spectator's and performer's perception of their own and the other's body, in the frame of Altofest's displacement of performances to domestic interiors.

At the **Intersection #3**, **Valentina Quintano**'s photo-essay *Sun - Scorched Land* investigates the row and intimate character of the relationships between artists and space donors, focusing on unresolved, undecided moments: when the performance could just be started, or just be finished; when two persons have just caught seized or missed the opportunity to encounter each other.

In the section **Displacement**: **Silvia Mei** meditates on a series of conceptual pairs: Losing/finding oneself, Art/life, Residence /Mobility, Hospitality/Hostility, to deepen the displacing dynamics activated by artistic phenomena. **Valletta 2018 Research Department** considers *Displacement* as Altofest's *Modus Operandi* and analyzes the changes in understanding spaces and their perceived value produced by Altofest.

*Silvia Mei and Loretta Mesiti*

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