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# Sharing Distance: On the Precarious Assemblage of Singularities and the Art of Collectivity

An interview with Peter Pál Pelbart

Peter Pál Pelbart and Gerko Egert

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**Gerko Egert:** Perhaps we can begin with your work with the theatre collective UEINZZ. You sent me some pictures of one of your latest productions where you were invited to go on a boat trip from Lisbon to Sao Paulo. Can you tell me a bit about the pictures?



**Fig. 1** Kafkamachine on the Boat. Image credit: Ana Goldenstein.

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**Fig. 2** Image credit: Ana Goldenstein.

**Peter Pál Pelbart:** These pictures are from a moment during our boat trip when we lost many things, including our director. Not because we threw him in the sea but we had a tense moment and a fight so we separated from him.

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It's a traumatic moment because we lost the person who for four years was in charge of the artistic direction and with which we had shared movements, ideas and inspirations. What came from this month of rehearsals (after this rupture with the director) were some images of lambs lost in a field. The lambs were asking for a guide and many situations were like that: lost lambs, sick lambs, lambs who thought they would die. So some actors offered themselves as guides. One shepherd came and tried to do something with these lambs, the other one was a religious one, the third a political dictator, so many forms of guidance were offered. This is some of the material [pointing to the red woollen strings] we used to get the atmosphere of the lamb because it was blood, red, death, life. There was a thinker who was being born. In fact it was the birth of a thought. So there was a catastrophe, the lambs asked for a guide, it didn't work, and so some thought came to be born. And one of the thoughts was of this material, it came from the womb of one of the actors.



**Fig. 3** Image credit: João Caldas





**Fig. 4** Image credit: João Caldas

This guy is giving birth to a thought. Nobody knows what is coming and everybody is tired; it is a collective atmosphere, not really of individuals separated out from one another, but a kind of mixture.

**GE:** What struck me about the pictures and about the material is the wool that on the one hand – as you said – comes out of the actor, is the wool of the sheep, but at the same time it creates a web across the group. It is not an individual kind of code but material spanning across the group and probably even further.

**PPP:** Exactly, this is the kind of situation we regularly encounter. It is uncommon to have defined characters that are in a kind of dialectic polarization (sometimes we have also this) but you have this atmosphere of collective ambiance or you have this string, and it crosses everybody. It's a kind of situation where one material or one flow or one intensity crosses the field, and consequently there is some deindividuation that occurs here that is very strong.

**GE:** About one and a half years ago at the SenseLab we had an event called “Into the Midst” where we also worked with red wool. We brought the strings to a public space in the city in Montreal and started to crochet a web. By knotting the web we expanded and so people got caught up in it and had to change direction. Suddenly you had to move differently and the web responded and changed to the movement. It is a really nice way of thinking about the collective how it is not so tightly bound, but includes distance in the relation.

**PPP:** Yes, this is important, this kind of plasticity, where the limits are not clear and the 'space between' becomes more important than individual people. It allows a kind of elasticity. It is a way of feeling and being collective, without becoming a compact unity, but rather through a game of proximities and distances, deindividuations and individuations, in a very sensorial way because it is not an intellectual decision: it's through affective and bodily connections. In the middle you can have sounds, not necessarily words, but the 'baa, baa' of sheep along with bird sounds, 'uuurr, uuurr'. The sounds contribute to a preverbal and prelinguistic dimension, and take us into a sphere composed not so much of lambs or animals, nor human characters, but something else, something I don't quite know. I could use many philosophical words, but I don't want to overcode the situation. I would say that we abandon some kind of structure of communication or way of organizing the space and the time, and language and narrativity, so that there is a kind of collapse of all the structured dimensions which create the conditions for something to emerge in the occasion that we don't yet know.

There is a moment a little bit later when one person is alone, and a thought emerges. Everybody is trying to listen to it or to verbally approximate it, trying to guess which language it is in, and even whether or not it could be a known language, or belong to another planet entirely; they wonder if it is even thinkable, if it could be a message, perhaps even a message from God; they wonder if it is just sound and if it means nothing. This for me is a very

interesting moment of openness to giving birth to something unknown but possible, even if it's incomprehensible.

**GE:** This again seems to me a question of relations that is very much concerned with the community. In your writing you repeatedly address the concept of community, or 'how to live together'. How would you describe the community of the theatre group? How do you work together?

**PPP:** The practices or the theory?

**GE:** Both, I guess.

**PPP:** It is possible to come across a theory and to realize that it corresponds to an already-existing artistic practice that just didn't have a name yet. Sometimes this encounter between a particular practice and a particular concept works well but in a very flexible way. For me it was important to meet this problem of the community, the community of those who have no community, the community to come, the community of the celibates, so there are many different authors that talk about it but in general. Some of them talk about a literary community or a philosophical community that doesn't imply cohabitation. But the way that Barthes talks about it is more concrete, and he poses the question: how to live together? His example was the monastery, where they live together, they eat together, they pray together but they are not together all of the time; there is some solitude, some distances, some singularities. How to think both things at the same time: the collective life and the singularities, the distances? For me it is a theoretical problem but it is also a very practical problem. How to live together is a question of the everyday. In terms of our collective, we don't live together, people are not in the same house, they don't eat together all the time. We meet once a week, it's not much but it's very intense. During 18 years it's a lot, 18 years, once a week, we build a common experience, a common adventure, even a common way of discovering what it is to make theater or what it is to travel, what it is to live together with our craziness in a common space and how to share these impossible projects or strange states of being. How to share it is very concrete.

We share a room. For instance, for many years I loved to do the strangest thing in the room we shared: I loved to lie on the floor, to close my eyes and to disappear a little bit. And I knew it was the only place I could do it with other people, without being considered autistic or crazy. I couldn't do it in the university in front of my students and I couldn't do it in the middle of my family. I know that many in situations you are expected to do certain things and this was the only place to do it without feeling guilty. So it's strange, being able to share something like this momentary disappearance and be dead for a while. It is a sign that many other things can be shared as well, including distance. We could also share states of mind, of soul, of body and all sorts of strange connections that border onto crises and tensions. However, let us resist the temptation to think that these states arise out of some individual capacity. I always think about this group as a device or an apparatus (*dispositif*). The challenge is to sufficiently sustain the heterogeneous ensemble of different ways of life when they are in connection through this apparatus, and not try to create a homogenous experience. We know very well that each individual connects himself to these in his way, and sometimes in a very different way, so that if you give a instructions for a scene to somebody you can be absolutely sure he will not obey you. It is almost a rule of the game, thus complete obedience is impossible. There is something that always escapes, that collapses or does not work as expected and this is the interesting part. An atmosphere must be built for that. I would say an atmosphere of affectivity, of humour, of a kind of complicity, but also not an inter-subjective expectation. Relationship is a very broad word. Sometimes we think about relationship as an inter-subjective relationship but here it's about the material, the contiguity, the words that don't know where they come from. And there are some movements that aren't directly attributed to an individual. Sustaining this assemblage (*agencement*) is an art. I think art lies mostly in this sustaining, not the art product that we make. I don't care if we make art. It is the art of sustaining this assemblage where many becomings, and very different ones can occur. Maybe this is the most interesting thing we do.

**GE:** What interests me is the care you talk about and how to go about creating this atmosphere for this precarious process, which takes a lot of care, a lot of time and development of a shared sensibility in the group. In your written work, you mentioned the necessity for collaboration, to always build new contexts and to get in contact with other artists and people in various places. It is a very interesting combination: on the one hand you have this very intimate or very carefully created space and on the other hand the desire toward opening up onto the outside. I don't think they are opposing tendencies, but how do they go together in your practice?

**PPP:** Yeah, because the danger lies in the atmosphere created: if you live only inside it, it will be closed in on itself and it will implode in some kind of entropic movement and the energy will fall out. I believe that we always need the outside. Not everything that is outside is the outside. The outside can also be a concept. When we choose somebody to collaborate with, we choose somebody who visits many other worlds and other perceptions, and can open our field of experience. Once an artist came to visit us and wanted to film the collective. But just like that. All she wanted were the images. I said, "no, you don't know the group, you never came and just got to know us." So she was a little bit angry, and wanted at least to have a conversation with me, so I said "okay," and we went to a bar. She asked if she could record the conversation, I said "no, it's our first meeting, it's not an interview." It takes time to approach the experiential sphere our collective creates, and this journalistic speed doesn't fit the slowness and intensity and delicateness of how we work. I am not saying that we are Chinese porcelain that you can't touch, no, absolutely not, but with all sorts of bridges of collaboration it is very important that we do not submit ourselves to being caricatured or framed. When somebody approaches with this caricature in his mind, thinking 'oh, lets see connections between art and madness,' they are not able to feel what is going on and how to abandon these clichés and these categories instead of entering into another realm.

The collaboration with Alejandra Riera is very important, we are preparing something for the Biennale in São Paulo together and she proposed that we



make a film in Buenos Aires. So we all went there, the whole group, but to a very specific place in Buenos Aires. There was a monument to Christopher Columbus built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, near the government house, Casa Rosada, exactly in front of the president's window. It was a gift of the Italian colony to Argentina. Christina Kirchner decided to replace this monument with another monument or statue in homage to an Indigenous woman fighter, a Native South American fighter. The statue of Columbus and all its pieces were on the floor at this monument. Alejandra's idea was to bring the group there in the middle of these pieces and explore the idea of the colonization, its end or at least its suspension. So we were in contact with some Indigenous people who came there and entered into this situation. Through Alejandra our group was introduced to some Indigenous peoples of Argentina, but surrounded by pieces of this destroyed colonial monument. It opened up the whole history of colonization in Latin America and its Indigenous peoples, and posed questions about the relationship of the Indigenous peoples and colonial civilization. In a very strange way all of this affected our group very strongly but not in an intellectual sense, maybe because they have their experience of colonialist or authoritarian behavior in their daily fragile life so the connections they can make are very zigzagian. The encounter produced the meeting of many histories and the Indigenous chief spoke about white civilization and how it brought destruction to the Indigenous peoples. So this was a collaboration that really altered the group's routines and practice. Now we will perform in another Brazilian festival and the Indigenous group will be present in our performance, and for that performance the actors proposed that we stage a drunk Christopher Columbus lying there on the ground as the Indigenous peoples are trying to talk to him. So all this migrated into the performance. It is through these migrations of fragments of the history, its indignation and suffering that we opened up to the outside.

**GE:** Could you say more about these different practices: the art, the thinking and also the activism? How do they influence your work and your writing? What happens in the interplay of these forces?

**PPP:** We have the freedom to make these migrations and not be restricted to the artistic professionalism of most actors. All of this doesn't matter for us because we are not an institution; we have no sponsor (only sometimes). For instance we were in Buenos Aires for five days and Alejandra was very touched by one detail of the town: there was a lake. Many years ago when the dictatorship in Argentina came to power the military thought to make a big gymnasium, a kind of fascist sports hall on the lake. They wanted to cover the lake and build their hall. They didn't end up doing it but instead they destroyed many houses and buildings and threw all the garbage into the lake and so they abandoned the lake completely. Many years later vegetation grew, now there is a forest there, rising from the seeds of flowers that were in the ruins of houses, or something like that. Now the Buenos Aires natural reserve is exactly there. It is truly one of the most important places to visit in the city. All of this emerged from what was abandoned by the dictatorship. Sometimes abandonment can create the conditions for something to grow, and it provokes many questions. I see that during this week in Buenos Aires we crossed all the levels you were mentioning and not because we are strong or big but the contrary, it was the collaboration with Alejandra that gave us the opportunity to, let's say, enact a testimony of something. This testimony is not a passive attitude, it is something else. And I am sure that all this will have its effects on our work, in our work for the biennale, but also on our lives. That our work will be in the biennale, it's not what is the most important, but let's say, at least, it's not restricted to some private space. It can multiply itself in very different ways.

**GE:** I just wanted to come back to something that you mentioned earlier, the question of institution. If I remember your text correctly, you left the institution, the very strong institution of the clinic, with the theater group a couple of years ago. So I would be interested to know how this affected your work but also how other institutions like the art biennale or even the institution of being an artist play into and effect the group? What changed with leaving the clinical institution?

**PPP:** It changed everything. Because in the beginning the institution accepted this experience but with time they tried to control it and turn it into a kind of show. And we didn't accept this kind of manipulation, of instrumentalization of an experience that didn't have this goal. So when we left the institution, it was a shock, also for us, it was a new situation, with a lot of insecurity, but we preserved something important from the beginning. We could navigate in the situations the town offered us. A club offered us the room for rehearsal, a cultural center offered us the opportunity to perform and with time we built connections with institutions. For instance there is a very big Brazilian institution, called Sesc and they were very interested in our work. They invited us and later we not only made a performance but we also created an occupation. For twelve days we lived on an entire floor of a building, where we performed once a day, we had some workshops with Alejandra Riera who made a film about it, we held some conferences, we invited Jean Oury from La Borde, we invited David Lapoujade, we invited Laymert Garcia de Santos, we showed many films on Tosquelles, La Borde, Deligny, so we lived ten or twelve days of very intense connections. It was in an institution, but at the same time they were absolutely enthusiastic about the fact that their space became so different and so unusual. So yes we had this contact with these institutions but at the same time after we left, dealing with us became a problem for other institutions. For example the Biennale invited Alejandra and us. They don't have a structure to deal with a group and an artist that cannot say what they will do. How will they give money to an experiment that will maybe not have a product to be shown – it's unthinkable! For me it was a fight, but it was also fun to see how Alejandra couldn't answer the questions an institution need to have answered for that giant exposition that is the biennale: 'What? When? How much?', etc. Anyways, I'm not sure if this can be considered a conflict, but in any case, for me it's not a weakness, it's a sign that we preserve our singularity in the temporality. Everything must be quickly made and quickly seen and quickly forgotten, and so we resist in our own – singular – way.