

On coexisting, mending and imagining: notes on the domestics of performance
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In this text, I propose a small shift in addressing the relations between performance and politics, or for that matter, the politics of performance. To start with, I shall drop one of the terms involved in this binomial, ‘politics’, and put forward another one: ‘domestics’.

This expression does not quite exist in English, or rather it is not a term anybody would use in a standard sense, as a signifier immediately associated with a distinctive sphere, as opposed to ‘politics’. Speaking of ‘domestics’, here, I encourage language to conjure something it would not usually mean: that the set of activities associated with organizing, maintaining and inhabiting a house constitute a category in its own right, and that, as much as the organizing, maintaining and inhabiting a *polis*, this category is not a given, but a field of struggle and imagination.

Dropping the term politics, at least in the space of this text, I do not mean to deny the political potential of performance. On the contrary, I would like to suggest that for exploring such potential today, we need to first overcome a certain linguistic saturation which came to characterize this binomial. This is not only a question of terminology: it is the relation between the ‘political’ and the ‘domestic’ that needs to be carefully reconsidered, in politics as much as in art.

In what follows, I start sketching out a meditation on the possibilities that a shift from a ‘politics of performance’ to a ‘domestics of performance’ would imply, and put forward scraps of a connecting tissue that, hopefully, could be used for further weaving of thought and praxis. For this reason, this text is written in the form of a reconnaissance: as if taking out clothes from a chest of drawers, my own and those of

others, washing them, trying them up, playing with their combinations and their possible use, mending them, piling them up and sitting on them, building precarious castles or temporary beds, packing them up for future travels.

The domestic and the political

As I am typing these words, a particular strategy of denigration is being performed on social medias against María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, better known as Marichuy, the independent candidate who has registered to run for the presidency of Mexico in the 2018 elections, designated and supported by the joint forces of the Fifth National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZNL). Marichuy's candidacy is an extremely relevant political fact. Not only it is the first time, since its foundation in 1991, that the EZNL supports a candidate in presidential elections (so far, the Zapatists had scorned competition for state power, privileging a strategy of local struggle and progressive acquisition of autonomy and indigenous control over regional resources); but moreover, she is an indigenous woman, in a country where both indigenous people and women have been systematically abused, exploited and murdered for centuries. Born in Tuxpan, in the state of Jalisco, Marichuy is an herbalist and a traditional healer, and she has been politically active for twenty years in the indigenous movement.

The strategy chosen to denigrate Mariuchy on digital platforms like Twitter is to suggest that she looks like a cleaning woman. Various ironic remarks are associated with this comment: how suitable she would be for 'cleaning up' the country from corruption, how odd is to imagine her running an electoral campaign instead of making a good soup. The racist class prejudice at work in this denigration campaign is significant of a certain relation between the 'political' and 'the domestic', appearing first of all on the level of representation, but also entailing specific conceptions and value judgments in terms of capacities associated to these two domains. This very strategy is also relevant of the going public of domestic violence, which the immateriality of social networks easily allows. Marichuy's political performance, on its part, is relevant of a specific force of the field of 'domestics' which this text attempt to address.

It is true: Marichuy looks like many domestic workers employed in Mexican houses, who are, just like her, women and indigenous. This is not an insult, neither a secret which is suddenly revealed, but the index of a shameful reality on which Mexican society, as much as many others, are based: the gendered and racial division of domestic labor. This resemblance is therefore a political fact: the very association brought up by these racist comments is one of the reasons why it is so important that an indigenous woman runs for president in Mexico. Only to stick to the level of representation, her brown body, her dress code, her way of speaking are a scandal. She is making possible that such comments, reacting to such scandal, expose a simple fact: “the king is naked”. This points to the domestic labor in a house, but the political problem Mariuchy’s presence signals is much broader: the abuse and exploitation characterizing domestic relations also corresponds to the state’s expropriation of land and destruction of natural resources, which for centuries have been damaging, in Mexico and elsewhere, the lives of indigenous populations, who were signaling the danger of this conduct for the planet long before climate change became a ‘political issue’.

Making explicit the association between Marichuy and a domestic worker aims at questioning the candidate’s capacity to be a politician: the underlying assumption, on the part of her denigrators, is that she is not able to run a country, because she is an outsider of politics. Ironically, when someone with a distinctive professional identity outside of politics – for example, an entrepreneur like Trump or Berlusconi – had stepped into an electoral competition, the status of the ‘outsider’ was emphasized, on supporting media, according to the argument that someone who was able to successfully run a company, would be capable of successfully run a country. But apparently, someone who can successfully maintain a house, would not be as capable to successfully run a country: she – and many other women ‘looking like her’ – might well be useful in the private sphere, but cannot work in the public sphere.

Marichuy, however, does not work as a cleaning woman, although the skills she brings into politics, the expertise that she has gained in her militant background are definitely not fine-tuned to the way politics is conceived as a competition for state power. Indeed, she brings into the field of politics distinctive domestic capacities, in that she has been struggling for the past twenty years, and inherited the same struggle from her family members, to define what kind of home her community could imagine, in a territory which was progressively made unfamiliar and toxic by the violence of

investors and big corporations, backed up by the fatal embrace between criminal and state power. She embodies a capacity to *become a house* even when the house is stolen, disrupted, violated – a capacity of renewal which indigenous people have been practicing for centuries, and which only recently international medias have started to name as ‘political’.

Becoming a house means also becoming a chamber of resonance of other voices: it is not surprising that, in line with the Zapatist communicative strategy, Marichuy always appears surrounded by other indigenous women, who anticipate her first statement with the choir: “Todas somos Marichuy!”, we are all Marichuy. The “rebel dignity”¹ which Mariuchy stands for does not function in a logic of politics, not, at least, if politics is understood in a temporality of event. She does not function either in a logic of representation, neither in what came to be known as participatory democracy.

Marichuy both presents and represents herself, and a millions of others, because she *is* a million of others: her domestics works not only for them, but through them. She is all the domestic workers who are conjured these days by those racist tweets, even if they won’t vote for her. She is all of them, albeit she is not representing an identity, but a subjectivity in the making: a political subjectivity which is taking shape and transforming as it faces new urgencies.

She is, also, all the women who will be killed from today on, during the long electoral campaign, before 2018, one after another, as it kept happening in Mexico for decades, one after another like in the incredibly long, terrific, redundant, clinic description of female corpses found in the Sonora desert, piled one upon another in a seemingly infinite series of pages in Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2066*: one after another, too exhausting a spectacle to imagine, which the author made difficult for the reader to bear, so as not to allow her to forget how impossible it is to even speak of it, read of it, think of it.

Marichuy will, most likely, not get even closer to achieving the presidency of Mexico in the elections, but her own ‘domestics’ functions according to another temporality: it cannot be measured according to parameters of efficiency or success. It is a process of apprenticeship and building solidarity, not only within her country, but much beyond it, on an international level. Her domestics delineates different borders of

¹ This expression appears in the official statement of the EZNL, *Que retiemble en sus centros la tierra*: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2016/10/14/que-retiemble-en-sus-centros-la-tierra/>

reality, marking the public sphere with the collective effort to name a reality of the possible, which has been happening already for long time in what was never recognized as public. Going public, then, is a performance of this ‘domestics’. Such collective effort, which is embodied today in Marichuy’s political performance, functions beyond language, or more precisely: works to *unlimit the language*, that of words and that of bodies, towards what maybe is still unthinkable but is in fact perfectly possible.

For a non-domesticated notion of domestic

Originally stemming from the Latin word *domus*, "house," the adjective *domestic* literally defines that which "belongs to the household". ‘Domestic’ is also used to identify those activities taking place within a nation, as in the case of domestic flights. Yet another meaning results from the term’s association with the practice of ‘domestication’, the taming of wild animals and adapting them to intimate associations with humans. Moreover, in various languages the word ‘domestic’ is used as a noun: it names a professional role, and it refers to a person employed to take care of a house, traditionally the household servant.

‘Domestic’ is a term loaded with a long history of disregard: strongly associated with a gendered and racialized division of labor, it is an adjective particularly devaluated in capitalist patriarchy. It is also inscribed in a linguistic order grounded in a seemingly naturalized series of dichotomies, which are themselves historically constructed, but seldom seen as such: for example, the distinction between private and public, between local and global, between reproduction and production, between untamed creativity and everyday banality.

As Elke Krasny has insightfully suggested, at least since industrialization, and with the simultaneous explosion of urban growth, the organization and representation of men’s creative activity in public life has thrived upon the ideological and practical separation between the urban and the domestic spheres. It relied on the one hand on a rhetoric staging mobility, unpredictability and freedom as intrinsic qualities of public life (Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life* being emblematic of this rhetoric) against the safety, the routine and the stability of home life, and on the other on the supply of a massive domestic labor force, which was – ironically enough – constituted primarily by women on the move: persons who had left their homes to work as

domestics in other people's houses in the city.² This is a process we are well familiar with, as it persisted to this day: the global migrant workforce constitutes one of the backbones of international economy.

As much familiar is the unpaid domestic labor which women have performed in their own houses for centuries, during their supposed free time: a work of reproduction to which, at least since the 1960s, feminist activists and theorists (such as Silvia Federici, and the *International Wages for Housework Campaign*) and artists (such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, author of the 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*) have given visibility to and addressed as a crucial political issue, in society as much as in art.

I want to reclaim the word domestic taking into account such burden of historical disdain, and countering the idea of the 'domestic sphere' as something opposed to creativity, anomaly, estrangement and the unknown. As Kresny suggests, today more than ever we need to reaffirm that "the domestic is political".³ At the same time, putting forward the idea of 'domestics' I also wish to open up the domestic to what it does not usually mean, and what it might, in fact, stand for: a domain of radical immanence, a possible alternative to the globalized flexibility of relations and labor, an outpost to rethink what a home might be. I want to invent a different politics of use for the domestic, mending the fate of its predicament and imagining a possible future of redemption for all the activities which this word might evoke.

I also wish to uncouple the idea of domestic from the notion of 'domestication', understood as a process of restriction, control and limitation, according to the meaning which is emphasized, for example, by Deleuze and Guattari, who often ridicule the 'domestic' (in particular, but not only, when discussing animals) in their conceptual landscape, counterposing "a domesticated individual to a wild multiplicity", and associating the domestic with traditional family and with psychoanalysis.⁴ Here, I wish to call for a *non-domesticated domestic*, for a wild

² Elke Krasny, "The Domestic is Political. The Feminization of Domestic Labor and Its Critique in Feminist Art Practice" in: Anna Maria Guasch et al: *Critical Cartography of Art and Visuality in the Global Age* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing): 161-176.

³ Elke Krasny, "The Domestic is Political. The Feminization of Domestic Labor and Its Critique in Feminist Art Practice".

⁴ Deleuze – Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 3.

domestic, for an imaginative and unpredictable domestic. I wish to conjure a domestic beyond family and psychoanalysis, as it is already, in fact, in many realities: a domestic which is built, defended and sustained by a multiplicity, a domestic not based on identity, but on a mode of being which makes human life possible and desirable.

To a closer observation, actually, the idea of a non-domesticated domestic might well be seen as kindred with what Deleuze and Guattari called a “refrain” (*ritournelle*): a temporary being at home where “home does not pre-exist”,⁵ the drawing of a circle which marks an interior space in which a deed may take place, while at the same time opening onto a future, “as a function of the working forces it shelters”.⁶ Like “the house of the tortoise, the hermitage of the crab” – anomalous domestic images which Deleuze and Guattari evoke to conjure different strategies of territorialization - the idea of a non-domesticated domestic also aims to keep “at distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door”,⁷ creating a shelter of linguistic and critical distance from the predominant state of affairs.

In thinking about a ‘domestic of performance’, I wish to prompt the imagination of a domestic that is queer like the house on the hill which the two women, one-upon-a-time aristocrats and now living in rags, protagonists of Albert and David Maysles’s 1974 documentary *Grey Garden*, inhabited, surrounded by raccoons and feather boas, enacting hallucinated strategies of survival between a patina of dust and impossible glamour, precariously making their way between abandonment and autonomy. Or else, the domestics of Jack Smith, who staged in his apartment a radical political and poetic struggle against what he called “the rented world”, mobilizing theatre as a technology of time against the abuses of capitalism over space: the incomprehensible phenomenon he called *landlordism*, the interminable (and to his opinion illogical) demand to “pay the rent that can never be paid”, or to finish a work (which can never be, in fact, completely finished), so that it can be positioned in a museum, in a book, in a program, and be associated to a name, becoming a property. The domestic, in this sense, is also the space of autonomy of work before it could be considered a product in a distinctive market.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 311.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 320.

I wish to call for an imagination of the domestic which is as enigmatic and historically loaded, as complex and incandescent as the scene on which pivots the theatre piece *Lippy* (2014), by the Irish group Dead Centre: the scene of four woman who, for seemingly unknown reasons, closed themselves in a house and committed a collective suicide, or rather, died alone but in proximity, united in the pact to starve themselves to death. This is a scene which Dead Centre picked up from the news: it is a fragment of an unknown domestic life, it is the impossible fantasy of the death scene of four strangers, whose bodies are, on stage, the creative matter of a particular domestic phantasmagoria. “In 2000 in Leixlip, co. Kildare, an aunt and 3 sisters boarded themselves into their home and entered into a suicide pact that lasted 40 days. We weren’t there. We don’t know what they said. This is not their story”,⁸ Dead Centre simply comments in their program notes – but clearly, much more is suggested by the performance itself.

Beyond psychoanalysis, beyond the possibility of even making a distinction between an individual and a multiplicity, conjuring on stage those bodies who chose to die in proximity to each other strangely makes present a specific domestic history: hunger, which is so central to the history of Ireland, hunger as a metaphor and as an effect of misery, but also as a signifier of political resistance, as in the many hunger strikes which have punctuated Irish political history in the last century. I am not sure whether *Lippy* would be presented, programmed or even conceived as ‘political theatre’, not even by its own authors. But there is something about its politics which interests me, and does so by virtue of a mobilization of a certain domestics. It interests me precisely because “this is not their story”: the women in question are not given as an object of knowledge, neither chosen to represent a particular biography, nor the political history of a country. They however, participate in the making of a certain knowledge, which gets done by bits and pieces, using domestic instruments, tools that perhaps are not made for a certain use: as it happens in a house, when certain objects, which would be considered old or out of use in a market, function perfectly, entering another order of imagination for their use. In other words, as it happens when an economy of use comes to substitute an economy of value, and unexpected forms of expertise and knowledge are forged almost by accident, not at work but ‘at home’.

⁸ <https://www.deadcentre.org/projects-1#/lippy/>

Feeling 'at home'

The field of domestics I am thinking of is not a given, just like the idea of a house is not a given: a house is a complicated thing. It can be a matter of privilege, of survival, it can be a burden, a hope, a limit, a grave, and many other things. The recognition and configuration of what a house is, and how it is managed and sustained, the question of who has the right to a shelter and under which conditions, are all both immaterial and utterly material matters, in that they entail questions of affect and representation as well as instances of physical engagement and exclusion. 'What a house is' also stands as a central political issue, today more than ever, in life and in theatre. Today, a time in which big funds are allocated to support massive exhibitions on "the housing question"⁹ or large research projects investigating slums, while at the same time people are daily evicted from whatever shelter they desire to call home, be it an abandoned building, a square, or a bridge. Today, a time in which once again places are being, however temporarily, occupied, making the idea of 'home' once again a public issue: buildings, theatres, forgotten private properties.

What idea of 'home', however, is at stake in our 'domestics'? How to speak of home far from sentimentalism, far from nationalism, far from a dangerous horizon of identity? In this endeavor, it is helpful to draw on some reflections advanced by Suely Rolnik, who, writing at the end of the 1990s and facing today's globalized world and globalized ways of living, was denouncing the disappearance of a particular affect: that of feeling 'at home'. She did not refer to a physical shelter (although it is undeniable that an increasingly large number of human beings on the planet find themselves deprived of a place to live) but of 'home' understood as a "a subjective, palpable consistency – familiarity of certain relationships with the world, certain ways of life, certain shared meanings (...). The whole globalized humanity lacks this kind of house, invisible but no less real".¹⁰ According to Rolnik, one of the main issues at stake in experimenting different modes of subjectivation, through artistic production

⁹ For example, at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2015, inspired by Friedrich Engels' 1872 essays:

https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2015/wohnungsfrage/programm_wohnungsfrage/veranstaltungen_108606.php

¹⁰ Suely Rolnik, "Anthropophagic Subjectivity", In *Arte Contemporânea Brasileira: Um e/entre Outros*, São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998, 1.

and critical thinking, is to articulate a possible “vaccine” against neoliberal domination on bodies and subjects, detaching “the sensation of subjective consistency from the model of identity”; displacing “oneself from the identity-figurative principle in the construction of an “at home.”¹¹ Proposing to call ‘home’ a different subjective consistency means to question both stability and the idea of borders delimiting one’s territory, as well as conjuring alternative practices of perception and inhabitation of the world:

To build an ‘at home’ nowadays depends on operations that are rather inactive in modern Western subjectivity familiar to the anthropophagous mode in its most active actualization: to be in tune with the transfigurations within the body, resulting from the new connections of flows; to surf the events that such transfigurations trigger; to experience concrete arrangements of existence that incarnate these palpable mutations; to invent new life possibilities.¹²

In a similar spirit, I propose to call ‘home’ a structure of affective intelligibility and recognition in which a co-existence might be imagined.

This seems particularly important when thinking seriously about migration, and even more so in relation to the way the latter is treated as a topic, but hardly confronted as an issue, in contemporary art: the issue of mobility, in this context, reveals a deep problem of class, which might be stretched to even encompass more or less conscious forms of neo-colonialism. In fact, whereas a “global oligarchy”¹³ of curators, artists and people working in different capacities in the cultural sector move and work freely between different national spaces and contexts, quite often migrants are invited to ‘represent themselves’ on stage, in a questionable invitation to make identity and subjectivity coincide, and have them exposed to the public sphere. Hence, seemingly two different regimes of mobility and representation exist for what is curated, spoken of and written about, and what is displayed and represented in artistic work.

Furthermore, how the hegemony of such global oligarchy in the international art scene is affecting the ‘local’ contexts is hardly ever problematized, and it is again something exemplary of a necessity to rethink the idea of ‘domestics’ in relation to both performance, and the spaces where this practice takes place.

An almost emblematic example is the case of the nomination of Christ Dercon as the new director of the Volksbühne in Berlin, a theatre which, over a hundred years, has

¹¹ Rolnik, 16-17.

¹² Rolnik 17.

¹³ I borrow this term from a brilliant article recently published by Sven Lutticken on the occupation of the Volksbühne in Berlin: <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/sven-lutticken-volksbuhne-occupation/>

stood as a home for political theatre, and a political theatre of a specific kind: grounded in a distinctive socialist tradition. Furthermore, this theatre occupies a significant part of the city, being located in Rosa Luxembourg Platz, the centre of that East Berlin whose social fabric today has almost disappeared, eaten up by simultaneous processes of gentrification and historical removal. Having served for decade as a repertory theatre, the Volksbühne has also entertained over time a very specific relation with a local audience, a relation which will undoubtedly be interrupted with the arrival of the new director: a curator who has very little to do with theatre, and even less with the idea of repertory theatre, something that, by its own nature, has a distinctive relation with a local context, functioning in a continuity of artistic production and consumption. Dercon's program, instead, has a distinctive 'cosmopolitan touch': it is not only characterized by the prominence of global English, as well as by dance performances (hence eradicating the linguistic component) but is punctuated by productions mostly developed elsewhere, showcased in the Berlin house as in a permanent festival, as 'events' rather than multiple stages of a continuing process. Very experienced as contemporary art curator, with a remarkable curriculum and endorsed by both the global cultural oligarchy and local politicians, Dercon's nomination is deemed to lead Berlin towards its role as 'global cultural capital'. This episode is significant of a substantial transformation in the mode of production of contemporary performance, openly welcoming some strategic features of neoliberal economy. An analysis of such transformation, and of the specific case of the Volksbühne, exceeds the scope of these pages. It is worth mentioning, however, that the instalment of Dercon at the head of the theatre was countered by a series of important actions which, in different ways, reclaimed an idea of 'home' for this theatre, interestingly re-signifying the now normalized use of the term 'house' in relation to permanent theatres: the first was an open letter signed by all the workers employed in the theatre, which appeared in Spring 2015, asking the mayor of Berlin to reconsider Dercon's nomination, and the second was the occupation of the theatre by a group of activists, which happened in September 2017 and forced the city to face a public discussion on what the transformation of this theatre is really about, and on the cultural politics implemented on all levels in the public sector. I do not read those actions as defending the status quo, but standing for a certain idea of what a 'theatre for the people' could be, first of all in terms of production. In this respect, some important questions were raised, namely: how to

defend a continuity of collective work and production for contemporary performance, as well as a relation between production and consumption which is not *prêt-à-porter*? How not to let the mode of production of contemporary art cannibalize the mode of production of theatre, using dance and performance as fatal weapons in this process? And even more importantly, how to recognize, and to invent different forms of being at home in the theatre?

I suspect that such questions would be vital to step beyond a too easy discussion about what is local and what global, what is national and what cosmopolitan, what is innovative and what traditional. I suspect, as well, that considering the fabric of certain practices of making performance, the very domestic set up and arrangement of social relations which surround and sustain such practices, is vital to the possibility of building an 'at home' in the theatre, understood as a structure of affective intelligibility and recognition in which a co-existence might not only be represented, but concretely experimented with.

A domestics of performance

This text strives to articulate an intuition: that the idea of domestics might be useful to reflect on performance as a technique for figuring ways of living and working together not in terms of democratic consensus, but rather in terms of proximity, organization of material subsistence and modes of dwelling, in time and space. This intuition has to do with a necessity, which I feel strongly, to claim the stakes of performance as a laboratory for social reproduction, as well as a site of production, crucially holding that these two concepts are in fact not separated, but intimately connected, integral to each other. This also means to affirm, if it is still needed at all, that performance's ephemerality does not cast it outside of exchange value, but makes it very suitable to contemporary neoliberalism, where immaterial goods are especially valuable on the market and work demands increasingly flexible subjectivities, putting their own exposure, behaviors and communicative capacities on sale.¹⁴

¹⁴ These arguments have been made and extensively discussed before me by various authors. A classical reference by now is Paolo Virno, who has defined the performer an emblematic example of immaterial work in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. See also Claire Bishop, *Black Box, White Cube, Public Space*; see also Giulia Palladini, "Il disagio della performance: per una tecnica poetica del lavoro vivo", *Operaviva Magazine*, April 25th, 2017, operaviva.info/il-disagio-della-performance/.

Reclaiming the word ‘domestic’ for a reflection on the political potential of performance also means to counter, at least on a discursive level, a certain tendency to conceive the practice of performance primarily as a site of critique or meta-comment on what exists: on neoliberalism, on immaterial labor, on institutions, on gender, on racism and so on. In other words, to counter an increasing reduction of the politics of performance to a glossing over the wrongdoings of neoliberalism, while at the same time mirroring its dynamics in terms of organization, division of labor, and production of cultural and symbolic capital. Even more worrying, this mirroring also implies that discourses on production and on work have progressively come to substitute production and work.

Thinking a ‘domestics of performance’ means to recoup to the domain of performance a material attentiveness which characterizes the practice of building, inhabiting or defending a house, and characterizes as well the numerous and important struggles for housing which have taken place over the last decade, significantly led, organized and carried on by migrants: people whose home supposedly lies outside of the space they have to inhabit. With this idea, I am not so interested to address ‘domestic performances’ – performances happening in private houses, or valorizing the domestic dimension over the public sphere – but rather performance gestures, images and circumstances which undo precisely the dichotomy in which the domestic has been historically constructed and confined: I am interested in gestures which uncouple the idea of ‘home’ from the realm of private life and make it an instrument to think and build public life.

Domestics as the area of desire, or the marvelous real

Although hardly used in English, the word ‘domestics’ is not my linguistic invention. I have encountered it in a particular text, and I want it to retain the resonance of a distinctive politics of use. The text is the English translation of Roland Barthes’ book *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*.¹⁵ There, Barthes discusses in parallel the work of these three authors attempting to extract their writings from the traditional economies of meaning in which they are commonly received and normalized (namely, sadism, political

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. 1971. Berkley and Los Angeles: U of California, 1989, translated by Richard Millet.

utopia, and religion), and addresses them first and foremost in light of their common trait: their respective formulation of new linguistic systems. The creative invention Barthes recognizes as characteristic of the writing of Sade, Fourier and Loyola is also the base for these authors' world-making gestures: it is the display of an excess which, in a sense, forces the world to confront a radical otherness, in terms of imagination, behavior, affects and language. Such creative invention, Barthes suggests, is not only valid on an aesthetic or conceptual level. It is also vital to the social positioning of the text, which, as any text, is never neutral or innocent, as it is always already condemned to take place (just like performance) within the space and the language of bourgeois ideology:

The social intervention of a text (not necessarily achieved at the time the text appears) is measured not by the popularity of its audience or by the fidelity of the socioeconomic reflection it contains or projects to a few eager sociologists, but rather by the violence that enables it to exceed the laws that a society, an ideology, a philosophy establish for themselves in order to agree among themselves in a fine surge of historical intelligibility.¹⁶

In the case of Charles Fourier, such "violence" corresponds to the radical refusal to cope with both the language and the structures of what existed in the society in which he lived, and from within which he articulated his text. One of the expressions of such refusal is the choice to conceive his utopian project not in the domain of politics (*la politique*) but in that of 'domestics' (*la domestique*). These two terms, however, have to be grasped according to a specific meaning in Fourier's thinking, which Barthes spells out as such: "the area of Need is Politics, the area of Desire is what Fourier calls *Domestics*".¹⁷ This is the resonance I feel important not to lose when we speak of 'domestics'.

Choosing the domestics over politics meant for Fourier to approach the question of living and working together outside of most common understanding of both work and life, in the attempt to reverse not only the relation between desire and need, but also that between private and public, between family and community, between material and immaterial, between real and unreal. The real within the domain of the 'domestics' was beyond both reality and realism. It was what Barthes, with his

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. 1971. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1989: 10.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 84.

distinctive interpretative touch, calls “the marvelous real”: “the marvelous real very precisely is the signifier, or if one prefers ‘reality’, characterized, relative to the scientific real, by its phantasmatic train’.¹⁸ It is in this sense that Fourier’s refusal does not equal a refusal of reality, but it is rather a quixotic attempt to look at ‘reality’ into its excess.

The domestics, therefore, served to Fourier not as a field of stability, but as a field of invention in which he could articulate his own utopian organization of society behaving, or so Barthes suggests, like a child who “vomits up politics”, if politics is to be understood (as it is necessarily to be understood, according to Barthes, at least after Marx) as a purge to regulate the indigestible imbalance between desire and need.¹⁹

Fourier turned the ‘domestic’ into a technology: in one of the many programmatic statements which punctuate his books, he declares that his intention would be to “demonstrate the extreme facility of exiting from the civilized labyrinth, without political upheaval, without scientific effort, but by a purely *domestic operation*.”²⁰

The political revolution which Fourier foretastes, foresees and prepares in his writings does not have the quality of an event: it is the persisting labor of making visible, and usable, the ‘marvelous real’. This revolutionary turn is not precisely an action: at least not if we understand this term as proposed by Hannah Arendt, who considered action as a central category of politics, something the human animal is intrinsically capable of, opposed to both labor (which Arendt saw as the necessary task of subsistence or reproduction), and work (which she understood as ‘producing’, making, including the making of art). The central activity in Fourier’s domestics, as well as the domestics we may wish to make our own, might be figured instead as a persistent ‘doing’: a temporality which disavows both the horizon of the event, and a messianic notion of futurity. It is a radical immanence of social production, which takes into account the necessity to encompass both the bliss of sensual delights and the execution of repugnant and filthy work.

The starting point of Fourier’s effort to conceive another societal organization was the acknowledgment that what he called ‘civilization’ had reached a state in which it was incapable to overcome its own contradictions. The ‘civilized world’ appeared, to his

¹⁸ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 96-97.

¹⁹ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 88.

²⁰ Fourier (I. 1 2 6), quoted in Barthes, 87, footnote 10.

eyes, not only unfair, exploitative, based on the oppression of men over women and on the repression of pleasures, repetitive and boring, but also ‘unproductive’, or to say it otherwise: enemy to what production essentially is, outside of the monster of civilization.

I am inclined to see such imagined production pretty much in terms of what the young Marx of the *Economic Manuscripts of 1848*, and later Bertolt Brecht, will articulate as an horizon of ‘production’ whose main enemy is productivity: a production conceived outside and beyond what this concept has come to stand for in capitalism. Essentially, this is an idea of production as a process of transformation of creative matter, an intrinsically material and human activity matching together individual and social time, prolonging and molding a world.

Since the world of ‘civilization’ was soaking in its own contradictions, in his oeuvre Fourier decided to *remake the world*: not trying to correct existing patterns of an unfair order of things, but imagining how things could be thought and done otherwise. If the phantasmagoric organization of work according to pleasure, which Fourier describes in great details in his books,²¹ is hardly imaginable as a political program, it can well be understood as a magic lantern figuring possibilities for a different *co-existence*: the latter involved not only humans, but also animals, objects, plants and even planets. Key to such operation is a temporality – a temporality of writing, and a temporality of social coexistence - in which “the domestic detail of the example and the scope of the utopian plan” themselves co-exist: they contribute to figure an “imagination of detail” which is perhaps “what specifically defines Utopia (opposed to political science)”²²: a passionate dwelling on the materiality of pleasure on which different forms of life could be based.

Whereas Fourier’s bizarre meticulousness in describing the objects and forms of his new model of coexistence – including excursus on melons or peacocks, theoretical lingering on bergamot or pears, or particular agricultural practices, or the figuring of inventive ways to train a Juvenile Legion of youngsters aged nine to sixteen to do dirty jobs such as picking up garbage – has been often ridiculed by political thinkers (starting with Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, continuing with Adorno), in his material attentiveness and feverish curiosity towards the things of the world (as

²¹ See in particular *Theorie des Quatre Mouvements et des destinées generals, in the Traité de l’association agricole domestique* (1822; “Treatise on Domestic Agricultural Association”) and *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel* (1829–30; “The New Industrial World”).

²² Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 105.

creative matter to mold another world) I see a radical overturning of the procedures and language of politics, as well as a possible key to address what ‘a domestic of performance’ could be.

Significantly, in fact, Barthes calls the technique chosen by Fourier to realize his domestic operation *theatricalization*: a technique that consists not in “designing a setting for representation, but unlimiting the language”.²³

Unlimiting the language: on mending history and domestic tools

How to unlimit the language? What sort of theatre of the domestic might appear through such operation? What kind of tools would a domestic of performance require?

A scene come to my mind. It is the opening scene of Mapa Teatro’s performance *Los Incontados: a Tryptich*. This is part of a trilogy on the anatomy of violence in Colombia, a long journey composed by various performances, installations and artistic drifts around episodes imagined and dreamed of, remembered and invented anew in the Colombian history of the last fifty years, all of which focus in different ways on the relation between violence and festive celebration. This history is stained with blood, it is a history which on the international level is both very well known, through the spectacularized version of the 1980s Medellin and the legendary figure of Pablo Escobar, and at the same time, very little known, as it is blurred for many in the nebulous mist of social and political unrest in which many Latin American countries have been wriggling over the last century. It is a history which comes on the international stages as an echo, seemingly too far away and too ‘domestic’ – in the sense: too internal to the nation - to possibly hail a non-Colombian spectator. And yet, it is precisely by virtue of a domestic operation that the scene I shall describe in a moment succeeds to open a crack in theatre time, making it possible that a truly political potential unfolds in the live encounter with spectators.

The scene is that of six children sitting in what happens to be a domestic space, a living room, which is adorned as if a party is about to start: the image itself is a quote

²³ Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. 1971. Berkley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1989: 5-6.

of a photograph by Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, one of those photographs which are too real to appear realistic, or too realistic to be regarded as slightly close to any reality. The children sit quiet, each of them holding an instrument, which they will play later on, before marching off-stage as a small festive band: all of them but one little girl, who will remain on stage throughout the show, as a privileged spectator to this history, as if the performance that follows is done for her – a work about the fantasy and the sorrow of a revolution which never took place, an hallucinated journey into a tunnel of history which finally will disrupt the quiet domesticity of the living room she sits in.

Among the children, in the first scene, there is a grown up woman, who sits with them, holding a drum, seemingly taking part in the scene as anybody else, not as an adult, but as a child among other children. She is the one who, almost accidentally, activates an old radio, which stands at the center of the living room, on stage, and starts transmitting a voice. The radio plays archival broadcasts from Radio Sutatenza: a radio founded in Colombia in 1947 with the prime purpose to contribute to bring information and political education to the working class. Mainly, the transmissions were conceived to reach peasants who were living in rural areas and had little access to the news, as well as to education. The broadcast coming from the radio, overlapping and interweaving with strange sounds which slowly will take over the stage, is a political dictionary, spelling out the meaning of certain words: it spells out the different meaning that words like ‘oligarchy’, ‘violence’, ‘revolution’, or ‘popular press’ have for different social classes. The voice coming from the radio, on stage, takes the time to articulate those words, again, in a public sphere, but it does so in the theatricalized space of this domestic audience: a gathering of children, who are at the same time the consumers of these sounds, and the producers of future sounds, for the ‘real’ audience, as it were, the audience watching the scene from their theatre seats. The words coming from the radio are those of the priest Camillo Torres, legendary figure in Colombian history, who preached and practiced class struggle and land expropriation, and later radicalized his position becoming militant, to be found dead in his first action in the NLA armed struggle in 1966. ‘El Cura Guerrillero’, Camillo Torres’ affectionate nickname, is the figure of an infancy of revolution for Colombia, a time whose memory glimmers from behind the smoke of the armed conflict which has affected Colombian population for almost sixty years, and which has not always been led by poetic and generous figures, as the guerrilla also found itself very much

implicated in shameful episodes of land control as well as proximity with criminal organizations. The armed conflict is to this day still an open wound in Colombia, besides and beyond the ongoing peace process celebrated on international level, and for which the current Colombian president Santos gained a Nobel prize in 2016. Besides resonating in the ‘domestic’ history of this country, I want to suggest that this image has the potentiality to reverberate in multiple other directions. It resonates with other militant radios, with other ideas of radical pedagogy, with other attempts to reclaim language as a weapon in class struggle. It resonates with other domestic spaces, in which the presence of radio broadcasts have made a difference in terms of information, activating processes of political subjectivation, occupying immaterially, through the air, a material space of living, the domestic space of everyday life, with the aim of transforming it.

This scene does not represent the scene of those who listened back them: it evokes this reality through what Barthes would call its ‘phantasmatic train’, but first and foremost constructs a situation in which spectators cannot help but listening, again, to those words, allowing again this dictionary to question one’s aural space. This scene creates a ‘feeling at home’ which is cross-temporal, and cannot be limited to a national context. To a certain extent, this scene resonates, at least in the echo which makes in the pages of this text, with the political call articulated by Doreen Massey in the *Kilburn Manifesto*: a call to find strategies to carefully reconsider the use of certain words, which are not simply side-affects but part and parcels of the naturalization of specific economic and historical processes:

Underpinning the apparent common sense of these elements of our economic vocabulary (...) is the understanding that markets are natural: that as either external to society or inherent in ‘human nature’, they are a pre-given force. The assumption is all around us. There is the language that is used to describe the financial markets as they roam Europe attacking country after country – an external force, a wild beast maybe, certainly not the product of particular social strata and their economic and political interests.²⁴

According to Massey building a different vocabulary for economy, and for the life in common which economy should serve for, is one of the main political tasks we face today, while living in a condition in which “neoliberalism has hijacked our

²⁴ Doreen Massey, “Vocabulary of the economy”, in *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin ed. <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/kilburn-manifesto>.

vocabulary”,²⁵ and intoxicated our way of speaking, so much so that it also affected a certain understanding of possible ways of co-existing.

The children who are listening to the radio, at the beginning of *Los Incontados*, are at the same time ‘real’ and ‘unreal’: they are the children who might have listened to those broadcasts, and those who listen to them today, on stage. They are those black and brown girls and boys wearing a school uniform, they are those children studying history at school and possibly learning that words have only one meaning, to be learned once and for all, they are those very children standing there, holding a musical instrument which they might start playing, and there, during rehearsals, performances and international tour, listen a voice coming from the radio saying that words might perhaps mean different things, move bodies differently. The children are, in a sense, both who they are and who they stand for, they are for a moment all the children who are growing up in a language they might want to undo. In their attentiveness, in their dynamic stasis, these children might be seen as holding in their bodies the very revolutionary capacity which Asja Lacin and Walter Benjamin described, in their *Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre*, as a counter-force to pseudo-revolutionary bourgeois theatre: children who are beyond any idea of domesticity, children whose infancy is not domesticated, bodies still capable of incandescent gestures of political potentiality.

It is perhaps the very ‘domestic’ nature of this image which makes it possible for it to unlimit the language, that of performance and that of political discourse: its concern not to let go of the attachment to a local context, but the capacity to make it stand for a much broader spectrum, its care for a particular history and memory, for the way the latter are reproduced through theatre. This scene is not only and not primarily celebrating a nostalgia for a preparatory work for revolution, today, when a revolution has not taken place. It is a way of mending history in a public space: mending holes and accidents like one would do with an old sweater, convoking not the private sentiments attached to it, but the public affects which have interwoven the thought and praxis of a possible revolution, in Colombia or elsewhere, which have left traces that official memory is keen to erase, which have developed accidental techniques that perhaps will be lost, and perhaps can be recouped for different uses. It is perhaps

²⁵ Messey, *Vocabulary of economy*, 15.

a way of mending this history from the ruptures of its own future, which is now already past, and expose it to possible echoes with whatever other future might be out there.

It is by virtue of this domestic concern, by means of this domestic operation taking place in public, in the theatre, that these words might be listened to again, not as mere memorabilia, but as a call to the present, a questioning of its contradictions. It is by means of this domestic operation that these words can be sorted from the chaos of history, organized, and staged in a structure of poietic and historical intelligibility, used not to build an illusion but to enlarge a possible idea of reality, a possible 'home' for certain thoughts and political techniques. What is at stake in the particular domestics unfolding in this scene is also the materiality of a certain theatre production, which does not gloss over history, neither conceive itself only or primarily as critique to the present. It is a scene taking the risk of conceiving itself as production: a production which reclaims its status of activity beyond notions of productivity, in that – perhaps in Fourieristic fashion – it uses and transforms the things of the world as creative matter, it awakens a use value of forgotten materials, it dwells in the meticulousness of details, in a material attentiveness to the possibility of wonder, in theatre as much as in politics. This scene could be seen an expression of the 'marvelous real' which a domestics of performance might display: a micropolitics of detailed actions which are, however, part of a continuous doing and imagining.

How to co-exist with performance

Fourier's domestic utopia, his quixotic attempt to create a system based on excess, was an important reference for Roland Barthes' own reflection on the question of co-existence: something which has kept him busy in different forms towards the end of his life, and which emerges with particular relevance in one of his last seminars: *Comment vivre ensemble: simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens*, given at the Collège de France from January to May 1977. Rather than sketching a politics of co-existence, Barthes' seminar focused on various literary scenes which, to his view, expressed a certain domestics of co-existence: the particular co-existence which might take place between subjects of different sorts, including what he called 'a text' and its reader. What Barthes considered the most profound pleasure of a text

was, in fact, the achievement of a form of co-existence between the author and the reader, a co-existence which was, interestingly, imagined as a contagion of sort: I would like to call it a *contagion of doing*. In Barthes' thought, this was achieved when a particular writing succeeded to "transmigrate into our life", to generate from the pleasure of reading a desire to write. This is, in a sense, the gist of the Fourieristic utopia of eliminating any distinction between producers and consumers. A utopia to which Brecht's theatre also aspired throughout, and which he neared in his invention of the 'learning plays'.

What would a form of coexistence with performance be?

Perhaps the activation of a particular desire of 'doing', outside of common understanding of production, perhaps the intensification of a certain temporality of *remaking the world*, which is not limited to the time of the event, but functions beyond performance time, beyond representation, in small details as much as in great, utopian scope: but can utopia be anything else than domestic? Barthes asks with a slight irony, "can a utopia ever be political?"²⁶

Perhaps a domestic of performance is a form of inhabiting and anticipating the 'marvelous real'. It is the triggering, for spectators, of ways to extend them beyond the encounter with performance: techniques for inventing different ways of 'feeling at home', in a live gathering, although not safely, not protected from conflicts, but in touch with palpable possibilities of recognizing a distinctive social space.

Perhaps it consists in figuring ways to finally uncouple once and for all the idea of home from the realm of private life, and using performance as a laboratory for inventing concrete arrangements of existence in which the proximity between humans and things, the movement of humans and things might find a shelter from the generalized homelessness of neoliberal subjectivity.

²⁶ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 85.

Coda: domestic disturbances

Years ago I was contacted by an art historian I had never met before, who worked in the university where I used to work and had been given my contact by someone who knew my work on queer performance and the 1960s New York scene. The art historian asked me for a Skype meeting in order to present me a project in which he wanted to invite me to “collaborate”, focusing on the politics of appearance of the queer subject in twentieth-century Italian art history.

The Skype conversation very quickly turned into an interrogation to me, aiming at digging out ideas, lines of inquiry, bibliographical references and also possible professional contacts. For quite some time, during the conversation, I answered the art historian’s questions, suggesting ideas, names and titles of books which were relevant to the subject of his proposed project: thinking out loud, putting my own knowledge and intellectual capacity *in the service* of what I imagined was the beginning of a collaboration. Especially in view of the political affinity which the project topic seemed to promise, and thinking I was setting up a relation of collaboration, I did not hesitate to share my ideas, neither I thought it was necessary to protect the value of the information I was providing him with.

At some point, during this conversation, some noises started to come from the back of the room where the art historian was sitting: a typical bourgeois living room, with an arty touch and a big bookcase full of dusty volumes, as in the house of many academics. As I was speaking, I started to notice on the background of the screen, behind his middle-aged, white, male head, a brown figure moving around, cleaning. It was she – the Filipino domestic helper who was working in the house during our Skype meeting – who was producing those noises, I realized, while dusting off books and vacuum-cleaning the carpet.

The art historian, who was busy taking notes as I was speaking, took a while to notice the noises and the presence of his cleaning lady, who was now visible to me on the screen. When he did, he simply said: ‘Sorry, I shall now move with my computer to the other room, because there are some disturbances here’. Once in the other room, he sat down to continue the conversation, but the interruption had been for me more than a pause: it had opened the necessary time for me to realize what this situation really was. Not surprisingly, when I stopped talking and asked a bit more about the conditions of the project he was inviting me to collaborate in, I found out that what

the art historian was proposing me was to gratuitously sketch out a research project for him, starting with compiling a bibliography and building up a scholarly network, and further allowing him to apply for potential research funding that, in the future, might also involve a scholarship for me.

The unease and indignation I felt during this Skype meeting endured in me long after I closed, quite abruptly, our conversation, long after I sent him an email explaining how shameful I found his attempt to exploit my labor. Such indignation bond in my memory the labor of the woman working behind the professor's back, in the house, and the gratuitous labor which he felt completely entitled to expect from someone he did not even know, but surely appeared on the screen as a rather young, female, precarious cognitive worker.

This association was obviously inaccurate, and can hardly be considered a bond between the two of us: on the one hand, I can imagine that the professor's domestic helper was paid for her labor, whereas I was not, and would not be; on the other, I am fully aware that the differences between the two of us, in terms of class and race (and how these two things matter in contemporary capitalism) make it much more complicated for her than for me to negotiate working conditions, or to simply shut the door and go whenever facing an unjust treatment. Truly, I also ignore the nature of her working conditions: perhaps she is well paid for her work, and she has a good relation with her employer. One thing, however, I know for sure: in my presence her employer hardly acknowledged her labor, and disregarded it as a mere 'disturbance' to his meeting. In very much the same fashion, I can imagine that my own withdrawal from the nature of this conversation was quickly filed by the professor as a mere 'disturbance': a background noise in the setting up of a shelter for his project, an annoying and hardly understandable whim in the frame of the exploitative economy of knowledge which, especially but not exclusively in Italy, constitutes an unwritten rule of academic work relations. In a sense, I can well imagine that within the "economy of the promise"²⁷ in which this academic is accustomed to work, his proposal of collaboration functioned, in fact, as an offer of investment for me, in view of a potential future payoff.

Both the labor of the domestic helper and my own (or, for that matter, that of another researcher who would agree to work for free) is key to the daily renewal of the art

²⁷ The expression "the economy of promise" and the dynamics it names is explored in the collected volume *Economia politica della promessa*, edited by Marco Bascetta (Rome: manifestolibri, 2015).

historian's life and productivity. It is this labor which makes up the conditions for his own work to happen: for this reason, perhaps, it is vital that such labor – whether corresponded to by wages or by the promise of wages – is made invisible, it is not recognized as such. It is for this reason, perhaps, that while the art historian might think of his research project about the appearance of the queer subject in Italian art history as a contribution to think or write on art and politics, or on the politics of art history, he completely fails to understand the profound injustice of his own 'domestics'.

I couldn't resist to share this little story because it is so strikingly exemplary of something which, to different degrees, is quite common in contemporary academia, and which, unfortunately, does not involve only men, but also women: most likely women who, in their scholarly research, are busy with 'political' issues, but likewise do not question at all the organization of their domestics – neither in terms of the management of their house, nor of that of their research projects. At the time of this episode, I wondered what sort of political solidarity might have taken place between me – a white, educated, European woman, precariously working as a producer of knowledge – and the professor's domestic helper – who I cannot describe in as much details, but I can imagine having a background of migration and I know is currently performing domestic service in a white man's house. The leap between us seemed very large, although I could already see clearly how close could possibly be our collaboration in boycotting this man's life.

This question is not easy and of course is also not new: how hypocritical it is to fill this gap on a conceptual level is an issue which Audre Lorde used to spell out loud in many of her interventions, especially in conferences organized and monopolized by white middle-class feminists. In the same spirit, bell hooks pinpoints the question of 'work' as a major problem which the feminist movement has faced since the 1960s, when, for example, white, middle class feminists like Betty Friedan emphasized the emancipatory potential, for women, of working outside of the domestic sphere, while neglecting the fact that many women of color were already working hard and daily outside of the house (and, for that matter in the house too), and that this was not always emancipatory work, but often just degrading toil. This question necessarily points also to the fact that a great amount of material labor still exists today, in and

outside of the art field, alongside the immaterial labor which is a prominent topic of our discussions within the art field, when thinking about performance and politics. The fact that most of this material labor is performed by racialized bodies or by women, is another aspect hardly negligible, in political struggle as much as in critical reflection.

After many years, I still do not have the answer to that question. Perhaps a possible answer lies precisely in the “domestic disturbance” which, albeit involuntarily, our co-existence during this Skype meeting produced: a short but significant co-existence which was for me a source of knowledge, if not a posthumous form of subjectivation. The awareness of this possibility of co-existence does not pass through political discourse, but through inventing ever new forms of domestic solidarity, in praxis as much as in discourse, in production as well as in representation. Perhaps Marichuy, with her marked body and the long-durée of her domestic and political work, with her potentiality to delineate the borders of an unthinkable, marvelous real, is a very good place to start.