

A brief note on WASTELand By Frida Robles

*'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
Nothing again nothing.*

*'Do
'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
'Nothing?'*

The Wasteland, T.S. Eliot, 1922

When does a performance begin? What becomes theater? Choreography? On the day of the premiere, there was expectation; the weather had suddenly shifted, marking the end of summer. From 30 to 15 degrees Celsius, persistent rain throughout the entire day, and the famous Viennese fog. *Prepare yourself, wear warm clothes*, I was advised. I arrived at the land, the vacant lot, the urban clearing. A defiant blue and metal tribune was waiting for us, the spectators. The placement of the tribune itself was already an act of theater. The blue seats, in the shape of an auditorium, stood defiantly. My orientation became clear: a theatrical element predisposes the manner in which we see a place. The narrative was already (trans)formed. The distribution of the city works in connection with the narrative of what is considered urban or not, what follows the logic of something or not. I stood in line to access the tribune and then walked up towards a seat to see the city from that perspective—already as theater. The performance had started long before any person had actively stepped into the proscenium...

Five women step into it, now understood by everyone as *the* stage. A triangular one, bordered by sidewalks and streets. All wearing blue denim outfits, with hats reminiscent of mine workers from the 19th century—or at least, that is the image evoked within me. Looking at us, smiling at us, welcoming us. One of them starts touching herself, then the person next to her, then the other. A line of touch, of bodies, of matter. There is an intense silence at the beginning of the piece; we are all *in expectation*, looking at the scene. How to continue the rhythm of a space? Its musicality, its tonalities? The yellow flowers, the bushes, the rain... A man dressed in neon orange shorts shouts into his phone in a heated conversation that lasts for about ten minutes and the baby crying in the stroller while his father pushed it along the street. The porosity of performance, the unequivocal, fluctuating nature of "the scene."



The dictionary defines the proscenium as the part of a stage situated in front of the curtain. The actors/dancers/performers make a clear marking of the proscenium in this vacant lot—there is even a center stage. They play between the upstage, the downstage, the onstage, the offstage. For us, the audience, whenever a performer crosses the line of the sidewalk, it feels adventurous, defying the architecture of the tacit agreement for this performance. We follow them, see their bodies against the grey façade of a massive building, following the street lights, the passing tram. A stage gets defined in spatial terms.

"Theater is an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation [...]" Rancière quotes Brecht in *The Emancipated Spectator*. An interesting proposition. What about placing a tribune in the middle of a city? Does this act allow for such awareness? Do we, as unemancipated spectators, look at the geographies of (un)touch in the apartment-boxes at the periphery of Vienna's main train station? Do we allow the absurdity of rush, speculation, and gentrification to sink in? Or do we remain silent observers, watchers, consumers? Towards which direction are the myriad performing hands directing us?



The performance develops in a series of shapes: body shapes, material shapes, urban shapes, sonic shapes. The cacophony of matter. Purple cocoons, trembling chests, extended hands. The self becomes a monster, becomes a plant, becomes a stone, becomes an actor. And, in the midst, in the backdrop, in the foreground—there is the space. *WASTEland* feels like a reflection on the nature or constitution of landscape, the anthropocentric and romantic trope of space as landscape. Nature turns itself into narrative matter, into philosophical reflection. The storm is transformed by 19th-century Western poetry into a reflection of romantic deception, of existential anguish. Our approaches to nature are always historical. Nature became a literary trope in the configuration of modern times.

Nowadays, in our postcapitalist desire, we speculate about more-than-human perspectives—to forget about the human, to allow the human to dissolve as a carcass of organs. How to allow the flower to take ownership? Do we need to allow it? What can we do for the flower to be yellow, to be plant, to be roots extending into the underground?

The proscenium of the world breaks when the body crosses the border. Lying on wet grass, moving bodies lose composition, like a conglomeration of flesh. Amorphous, distorted. Something brutal is here, on stage—blurred, inquisitive. Am I allowed to think about war?

Trembling as choreography, whispering to plants, extending their hands to us, the other, telling us stories about the past. Claudia Bosse has been

working on the choreography of a fragmented body, a body turned by cold, by *tremblement*, by weight. “How to break a body” seems like a guiding question in her performances; this one is no exception. Which ghosts did she want to bring forth through the costume choice, through the almost painterly character of the proscenium? Were Brueghel’s monster-like creatures invoked in the bulldozing effect of the contemporary urbanization of Vienna?



The performers whisper to us fragments of stories, vestiges of the river that was once there: the swamps, the workers, the clubs; all turned to rubble, still contained in the vacant lot. Is it a *WASTELand*? Can the nothingness and psychiatric breakdown of T.S. Eliot have anything to do with this calling?

“The present is the future of the past. The past is the future of the present. The present is the past of the future,” the performers say. Water is persistent, like rain, like buckets, like weather. There are questions—some drafted, some lost.

When does a performance end?

Frida Robles is an artist and curator, whose practice spans public art, performance, and text, exploring political dimensions of the personal. Photos by Markus Gradwohl