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Essay

Local Interferences

Local Interferences:
Mapping the City as Resonant 'Counter-Text'

by Peter M. Boenisch

Dramaturgy today has come to be understood as a practice – even more widely: as a way of thinking – that is no longer confined to a performing art work's compositional structuring of meaning and the audiences' experience. With the focus shifting from questions of *signification* towards concerns about the production's *significance* – its cultural and socio-political place within the society that brings forth the art work – dramaturgy expands beyond the literary and aesthetic domains to navigate a continuum of artistic and everyday action. It principally 'weaves together artistic methodologies and socio-political concerns' (Georgelou e.a. 2017, 39). In their quintessential exposition of this 'state of the art' of 21st century dramaturgy, the Greek performance scholars Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou accordingly reverse Eugenio Barba's classic definition of dramaturgy as 'actions at work' (Barba & Savarese 2005, 66f.). They outline contemporary dramaturgy instead as the 'catalytic […] working on actions', based on the three core strategies of mobilising questions, alienating, and commoning (Georgelou e.a. 2017, 37-63). Instead of giving answers and helping to fix a theatre piece's semiotic meaning, the dramaturgs' work is here seen 'as the "motor" that makes questions appear' (ibid., 41), resonating with the core proposition of this *Peripeti* issue in considering dramaturgy as a practice of interference.

Drawing on the metaphor of a motor, or an engine, the cited authors allude to yet another well-known definition of dramaturgy, provided by US-drama teacher Bert Cardullo in his 1995 book *What is Dramaturgy?:* 'A dramaturg is to a play as a mechanic is to an automobile: he *[sic]* may not have built it, but he knows what makes it work.' (Cardullo 1995, 11)

The slippage from the mechanic taking care of the well-oiled theatre engine to the productive motor of interference reflects the major transformation of the dramaturg's role over the past quarter of a century since Cardullo published his seminal exploration. Both in experimental and within more institutionalised contexts of theatre making, dramaturgy now negotiates the ever more 'shifting grounds' of – and in-between – social, political and material conditions and power structures, both within and beyond the theatre (see Lehmann & Primavesi 2009; Van Kerkhoven 2009; Gade 2018). The professional certainty of 'what makes it work' is no longer a universal certainty, but needs to be negotiated anew for every production. Today's mediatised, globalised and postmigrant Western European society is, above all, characterised by an encompassing 'singularisation', as German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has pertinently pointed out (Reckwitz 2020). Instead of the modern, enlightened 'public sphere' of a rather homogenous middle-class audience defined by its cultural education and shared set of (aesthetic and ethic) values, performances today address a diverse conglomerate of 'singulars' who may have (or rather: feel that they have) only very little in common.

This new 'plurality of singulars' presents a particular challenge for the dramaturg's work on actions. Within the uniform context of 'educated bourgeois art theatre', it was sufficient to encourage the dramaturg: '*Be yourself and trust your own responses.*' (Lang 2017, 82, original italics). Such was the advice given, in another recent instruction book for emerging dramaturgs, by US-drama pedagogue Theresa Lang. Debating how best to navigate, as dramaturg, between the play and the performance, and the production and its audience, she in fact puts forward a rather

advanced, contemporary perspective. Lang no longer pushes towards unearthing and reiterating assumed universal truths about Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Euripides's plays, but instead advocates an almost 'site specific' dramaturgic sensibility. She admonishes her dramaturgs to find pertinent answers to the fundamental dramaturgic questions, 'Why this play, for this audience, at this moment?" (Lang 2017, 80). Such questions direct the dramaturgic mobilisation of questions towards the specific cultural context of each production, mitigating traditional, blunt cultural universalism as it underpinned the old notion of the dramaturg-mechanic who fixes the machine. It is an approach to dramaturgy that fosters through its interference what we may term 'resonance'. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa introduces this important term as cornerstone of his relational analysis of modern culture that he interprets, following Paul Virilio and others, as a culture of escalating acceleration. While the discipline of sociology investigated social interaction mainly from the perspective of the (quantitative) acquisition and exchange of material and symbolic resources, Rosa calls for attention to qualitative 'relationships to the world' (*Weltbeziehungen*). Building on ecological, aisthetic[1] and affective theories of atmospheres and ambience (Böhme 2013, Welsch 2017; Michelsen and Tygstrup 2015), he supplements the well-known Marxian trope of cultural 'alienation' with attention to what he describes as spheres and axes of resonance, including art (Rosa 2019, 285-98). For Rosa, the lack of resonance is at the heart of numerous, interconnected societal, political and ecological crises of the present. He defines resonance not as unidirectional 'echo' of the world outside, but as a dialectical mode of responsive engagement, as inter-relation to and encounter with the subjects' world environment:

> Resonance is a kind of relationship to the world, formed through affect and emotion, intrinsic interest, and perceived self-efficacy, in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed.
> Resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak *with their own voice.* […]
> Resonance is not an emotional state, but a mode of relation that is neutral with respect to emotional content. This is why we can love sad stories. (Rosa 2019, 177)

It is therefore possible to experience the exact same situation in radically different ways as a result of an individual's differing practical, emotional, habitual, mental and physical relationship with the world. Dramaturgy's 'working on action' consists precisely in the shaping, within an artistic context, of such relations that are based on the negotiation of individual aesthetic and ethic values (see Szatkowski 2019). We can therefore understand dramaturgy as a 'motor' producing *resonant interference* – a term I propose that takes its prompt from Rosa and succinctly brings together the three core dramaturgic strategies defined by Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoridou, of mobilising questions, alienating, and commoning.

Aiming for resonant dramaturgic interference, however, I do not find Lang's advice of 'being ourselves' and 'trusting our instincts' helpful. In fact, the dramaturgs' privileged singular positionality might be all the more reason to *mis*-trust 'being myself' and my responses. The dramaturgs' instinctive responses must remain *their* respective 'singular' responses; they cannot effortlessly

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1) To distinguish sensory perception from aesthetic theories of art following Kant and Hegel, Böhme, Welsch, and also theatre scholar Helmar Schramm prefer the original Greek spelling *aisthesis.* See also Rancière 2011.

transcend their personal horizon and notorious 'filter bubbles'. Privileging 'singularity', to return to Reckwitz' term, is therefore no viable response to old-style colonising universalism. Even though some theatre systems celebrate such universal individualism and reward neo-Romantic artistic idiosyncrasies, an understanding of theatre as a place on Rosa's societal 'axis of resonance' suggests a different perspective. Theatre derives its cultural value not as place of radical self-expression and self-presentation (hence as 'motor of singularisation'), but on the contrary as a forum to come together, as a place creating a common sphere of resonance that establishes relations between singularised individuals (see Boenisch 2019). In order to avoid talking only to ourselves and alienating everyone else, we therefore need strategies of interference that interfere with our conventional, habitual modes of dramaturgic interfering: an interference that uses the detour of alienation not as an end, but as the means to produce 'resonant interference'. Let us turn to the exploration of one such strategy that is based on the pragmatic, practical, and most of all joyfully exciting interference created by 'countertextual mapping'. Leaping off from D.J. Hopkins's 2003 notion of 'counter-textual dramaturgy', a pertinent example from the field of the (contemporary global) visual arts market will illustrate such an approach: the mapping study of Palermo by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, which served as the curatorial basis for the twelfth edition of the nomadic European arts biennial Manifesta (M12) in 2018. This example demonstrates how an attentive counter-textual mapping of the local situation enhances and extends Lang's emphasis of the situational context of theatre-making, helping dramaturgs to leap beyond their singular instincts and assumptions of 'what makes it work'.

The dramaturg as trouble-maker: 'Counter-textual' interference
In 2003, dramaturg, Shakespeare scholar and now Professor of Theatre at San Diego State University D.J. Hopkins introduced the (especially in an Anglo-American context) controversial idea of active dramaturgic interference in his still inspiring essay 'Research, Counter-Text, Performance: Reconsidering the (textual) authority of the dramaturg'. Especially within his Northern American context of theatre making that had not been permeated for decades by the critical deconstructive approaches of European *Regietheater,* Hopkins called for a much-needed shift of perspective. Confronting the still strongly held suspicion against any dramaturgic interference into the playwrights' words on the page, he advocated for a 'co-creative' praxis that no longer satisfied itself by explaining the text, solving textual problems, or finding ways of 'making a play relevant' for the theatre's presumed audience. Instead he declared: 'The dramaturgical method I describe here is about starting trouble' (Hopkins 2003, 3) – an even more revolutionary suggestion considering that Hopkins himself is a Shakespeare scholar. He went on to introduce the notion of 'counter-textual research', imagined as 'independent, serving not as a corollary but as a supplement to the [play] text' (5). Drawing on Roland Barthes's extended understanding of textuality, Hopkins defined: 'Counter-text is the term I use to describe the results of a period of independent dramaturgical research and development, and the contributions this material makes to a theatrical production.' (2) He illustrated his idea through his previous work as novice production dramaturg on a production of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck.* The show's director Robert Woodruff had given the young drama student-dramaturg on his show the task to search for material – not about Büchner and the 1830s, but about the emigrated former member of Freud's Vienna circle of psychoanalysis, Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957). Hopkins admits that he at first did not grasp the task, yet as he brought heaps of research on Reich's work, his writings, their impact, as well as the person and biography of the psychoanalyst, into the rehearsal, a stimulating counter-textual interference indeed began to

emerge. The production in no way ended up becoming a show about Reich – in fact, this counter-text beyond some articles and quotations in the programme book remained largely invisible to the audience. Still, the rich counter-textual compilation of material inspired the creative process, offering new ways into the difficult play and its new translation that was written alongside the rehearsal, while equally contributing to scenographic and directorial decisions. For Hopkins, this 'counter-text' eventually pushed the production beyond a standard representation of a classical repertoire play. It infused a sense of urgency and significance without reverting to standard stratagems of 'modernisation', such as the associative, at worst random injection of modern songs or texts, or simply putting the actors into present-day costumes to speak their *Woyzeck* lines.

Hopkins's essay served me well for many years to explain and introduce students, especially in the UK context I used to work in, to European postmodern and postdramatic directorial thinking for which this explanation of the dramaturgic 'counter text' offered a pertinent lens. In his article, Hopkins also pointed as important inspiration and further illustration to underpin and articulate his evolving understanding of counter-textual dramaturgy to the work of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944). The creative, artistic form of 'research & development' he pursues with his Rotterdam based design practice, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), and its research-focused subsidiary, the Architecture Media Organization (AMO), goes beyond finding straight answers or solutions. Instead, it seeks to interfere through a radical change of perspective in order to arrive at an entirely new understanding of the problem or situation, through associative, radical conceptual thinking. For Hopkins, Koolhaas' 'idea-driven' approach to architecture offered a blueprint for his own co-creative dramaturgic 'trouble-making':

> [Dramaturgic] research would be understood in the way that it is understood by Koolhaas and AMO: not the drive to 'solve' or 'explain' problems or conflicts in the text, but instead the drive towards independent development of an equal and opposite idea. […] Counter-textual research and development need not be limited to the merely "relevant"; the dramaturgical counter-text is, by definition, *irrelevant:* it is not confined to references in a script, nor bound by any proprietary notion that only a writer or director should be considered an "author" of a production. Under a system of co-creative dramaturgy, "decorum" would be replaced by audacity." (5)

Towards dramaturgy as 'creative mediation'

While certainly 'mobilising' questions and destabilising conventions, clichés and assumptions, Koolhaas' approach, however, did not yet immediately tackle the stated problem of the privileged singularity of our 'own responses' yet. The audacity of 'trouble-making' still requires a complement through sensibility for resonant interference. It was exactly this sensibility that I discovered as I was newly reminded of Hopkins' side-note on the celebrated architect when I encountered Koolhaas' thinking again. In 2018, it influenced – precisely as a dramaturgic strategy for 'resonant interference' – the curatorial concept for the 2018 Manifesta arts biennial, that year hosted in the Sicilian capital of Palermo. The organisers had commissioned OMA to produce a comprehensive urban study of Palermo, which followed Koolhaas' seminal 1978 study *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan.* Koolhaas had there compiled a formidable cultural analysis of the formation and transformation of New York into a 'metropolitan' city since the 1850s. His book offered a history of these processes as told through objects, buildings, streets, ferry and train

routes, and city planning, amongst other things. Koolhaas thus demonstrated the interdependence of the architectural and infrastructural context, and the culture and ideology that had created them, as the concrete materialisation of cultural desires and energies, even an expression of a city's 'collective unconscious' (Koolhaas 1994, 39). In the case of New York, he described it as 'culture of congestion' (125) that served him as the foil for his own (often misunderstood) vision of a 'generic city' that he later unfolded in *S M L XL* (Koolhaas 1998, 1239-64). For Koolhaas, 'generic' does not signify the indiscriminate postmodern ubiquity of the same, but instead proposes an idea of an environment that does not put people into categories, that reinforces hierarchies, works for some but brackets off margins, and thus reiterates what Koolhaas dismisses as the uniform 'straightjacket' of capitalist individuality. Following Rosa, we may thus think of the 'generic' as a precondition to resonant world-relations.
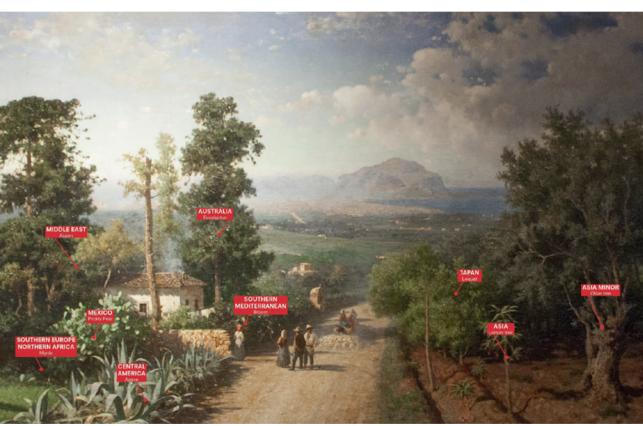

Fig. 1 The Palermo Atlas analysed in detail the stories that cultural artefacts, from recent films to historical paintings, reveal about the city. The trees depicted in the 1875 landscape painting 'View of Palermo' (Veduta di Palermo) by Francesco Lojacono revealed the region's global connection long before modern globalisation, as the plants originally hail from Asia, the Middle East, Central America and even Australia. Reprinted courtesy of OMA.

The *Palermo Atlas* became a kind of Southern European sequel to the influential mapping study of New York. It would serve as 'counter-text' for the planning of the art events of 2018. Its commission was, above all, a response as the globalised visual arts biennials, far more than performing arts festivals, had gained a negative reputation for invading and taking over their host cities for a short time and then disappearing again, leaving mostly mess and pollution behind, yet little substantive creative input into the city's life. The *Atlas* should support an attempt to make the Palermo events 'generic', in Koolhaas' peculiar sense of this word: It was meant to help embedding them within the city's environment, its history, while also increasing the resonance with the local population beyond just the select, privileged art crowd. In the words of Palermo's mayor Leoluca Orlando, the *Atlas* as a tool of curatorial-dramaturgic interference intended 'to permeate the 2018 biennial with the cultural richness of our city' by 'providing the tools to connect the threads of its past and recent history to future prospects for development' (Manifesta 2018, 5).

Overseen by Koolhaas's equally local, Palermitan partner Ippollito Pestellini Laparelli, the *Palermo Atlas* emerged from a huge, interdisciplinary analysis of the city. Its three parts offered, in the popular term of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, a 'thick description' first of Palermo's history, then unveiled a detailed statistical survey of Palermo's entanglement within the current globalised configuration of the planet (from migration to climate change), and in its third part, presented a local micro-geography based on numerous walking tours undertaken with Palermitan citizen. The *Atlas* thus became an encompassing catalogue of the city's architecture, archaeology, history, society, art, and culture, drawing on knowledge from historical archives, big data statistics as well as on the personal 'street history' revealed in the direct encounters (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Importantly, its multi-layered dimensionality tried to avoid a usual cartographic top-down view from above that would erase, in the critical words of anthropologist Tim Ingold, 'the practices and itineraries that contributed to its production' (Ingold 2000, 230). Drawing on a range of different knowledge sources and systems, combining scientific research with the vernacular epistemologies gained in the local walks through the communities that opened access to personal archives, collections of private photographs and other memorabilia, the *Atlas* did not present itself as ultimate knowledge collection, but as an archive of a mosaic of identities, cultures and ecosystems that make up Palermo. It thus emphasised the cultural legacy of many centuries of encounters and exchanges between civilisations at this Mediterranean meeting place with its connections to three continents. For the engaged mayor, it was a further tool in his fight to reinvent Palermo through art and culture, leaving behind decades of abuse, neglect and oppression through the mafia and economic inequality in Italy and Europe more widely, while further propagating a culture of hospitality in the face of the migrants that arrive in the city from Africa and many other corners of the Global South, which Orlando had marked in his 2015 initiative of the human citizen-rights 'Carta di Palermo'.

The systematic revelation of the local palimpsest of histories, stories, journeys and trajectories through space and time helped both the Manifesta managers, the appointed curators and the artists involved to 'read' the city, and put their artworks within this specific contexts in resonant ways. It generated new perspectives that helped to answer the dramaturgic core questions of 'why here, why now, why for this audience' differently. Instead of a singular curator, the Manifesta foundation appointed for this edition an interdisciplinary team of four 'creative mediators': Instead of 'curating' a programme of art works, their task was to 'mediate' in a dialogue between the art works and the city they were presented in. As Laparelli suggests, the information made available through the *Atlas* research enabled the art to function 'as form of urban acupuncture' – the pricks worked both ways: they interfered with the art-making and exhibition-curation, but also stimulated a response

and interruption in the city's every-day life. Laparelli's metaphor neatly furthers Hopkins's idea of the dramaturgic 'trouble-starting', and similarly the proposition of Georgelou and her co-authors of 'mobilising questions', while not overemphasising the potential of artistic intervention in societal and political domains: it may serve as complementary treatment to ease tensions in our contemporary world, stimulating some resonant responses through the pricks of the artistic needles. As Manifesta foundation director Hedwig Fijen expressed it, the urban study thus instigated a significant shift for this 12th edition of the nomadic arts biennial she had organised: 'a shift away from framing artistic practices as internalised modes of art-historical knowledge to externalised modes of thinking and experiencing the world differently' (Manifesta 2018, 10).
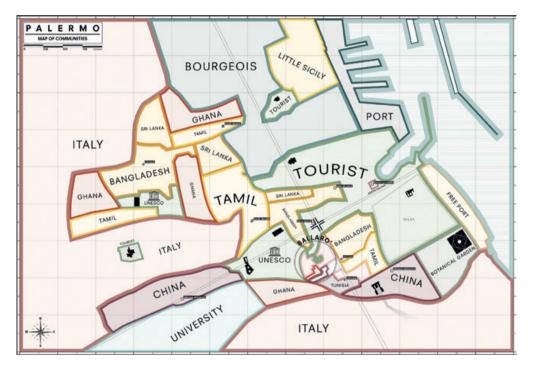

Fig. 2 Based on detailed surveys of 'big data' as well as traditional archives, official records and registers, the Palermo Atlas made legible in its richly illustrated cartography compound knowledge of the city, from its many places of worships, lists of unfinished buildings to the map of communities that define Central Palermo depicted here. Reprinted courtesy of OMA.

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Listening to resonant micronarratives

The aim of the Manifesta directors to create a cultural event that does not pass indiscriminately through the city, but instead engages with local histories, specific situations and traditions, and not least local audiences, and thereby leaves a certain legacy, resonates with intentions of many contemporary theatre makers. As particularly prominent 'pars pro toto' example, Milo Rau took on the directorship of NT Gent in Belgium in 2018, trying to reconceive a 'city theatre of the future',

noting that usually today, 'the city itself is constantly excluded from the work of the "Stadttheater"' (NT Gent 2018). In an important postscript to the ten rules of theatre-making he compiled in his 'Gent Manifesto', he advocated in his 2020 'State of the Theater' speech: 'Start listening and stop producing!' (Rau 2020). Just as the Manifesta example in the visual arts, Rau's directorship at NT Gent (see also Boenisch & Houe 2021) thus proposes dramaturgy as 'creative mediation' that relies on attention to the often rather silent local resonances. This approach advances the understanding of the key dramaturgic 'why here? why now?'-question, both at the level of festival and programme curation, as well as for individual productions, building on the vantage point of resonance, not identification or representation. The approach of artists such as Rau thereby has moved significantly beyond the 'relational aesthetics' of past decades, where 'high art' interfered in less 'cultured' districts, following agendas of 'audience development' and 'increasing participation' (see Bourriaud 2002). Creative mediation, instead, draws on research into the local context, aims for familiarity with local histories, and discoveries based on local stories and conversations to form a resonant counter-text and to thereby contribute, stimulate, and equally challenge artistic ideas, furthering Hopkins's proposition in order to respond to a context of art-making that has become both global and sensitive to decolonial practices of equality and sustainability.

As Koolhaas pointed out in his preface to the mapping of Venice in 2014, one of the numerous 'Atlas'-type follow up projects to his 1978 New York-mapping, the careful observation of and close listening to often tiny, and very specific details of local surroundings expose what he describes with a rather dramaturgic term as 'micro-narratives'. They expose the place's histories, origins, differences, links, relations and also contaminations 'in a sharper way than a typical global overview' (in Foscari 2014, 7). As theatre-makers, we often seek to engage with 'big' cultural, political and social narratives (whether Reckwitz' singularisation, the abstract force of 'neoliberalism', or climate change), but they inevitably remain too intangible to be grasped by the rather concrete dramaturgic demands of stage performance and theatrality. Yet, such small, usually invisible or unheard micronarratives may be just the ideal point of departure in order to saliently 'put into (a) play' such grand problems, helping us to develop a viable stage form to express, and embody, abstract global topics and problems, precisely through the often tiny signs of impact they show right in front of the doorstep. As counter-text, however, just as Hopkins has noted on the Reich-references in his *Woyzeck* example, these local 'micro-interferences' may not even be evident in the performance itself. The role of the counter text is, precisely, that of provocative and stimulating interference: it reminds us to listen closely, while not aiming to become the loud main text in the spotlight. In the true spirit of the dramaturgic principles of questioning, alienating and commoning, the local mapping cannot just become another tool for sourcing new stories and building original characters to be then appropriated by an otherwise unchanged art business machinery – this is the trap of 'cultural colonisation' that ethical practices of arts making ought to resist. Rather than serving as mechanism to enhance a fetishized 'authenticity', intimacy or 'relevance', the dramaturgic practice of mapping helps us to occupy unstable, depersonalised, 'generic' positions, in Koolhaas's sense. Representation too often means affirmative reification and spectacular commodification of the other as 'Other'. The aim of a resonant mode of dramaturgic interference as proposed here is, however, to incorporate that other perspective into a common, in Rosa's sense resonant relationship, which challenges expectations on both sides, and thereby establishes common (but not identical) relations, fosters curiosity and lays the ground for dialogue. In the suggestive words of Georgelou and colleagues, such a dramaturgic approach is precisely 'indirect, inefficient, interfering, or negatively efficient' (2017, 21). It opens us processes of 'common thinking together' in and through the

performance work, which disclose alternative and different questions and possibilities, instead of solidifying any singular individual position.

Much more than the conventional strategy of 'representing' local contexts on stage, the counter-textual infusion of theatre work with such micronarratives seems a promising strategy to 'common' theatre art in the present post-bourgeois cultural context. It creates resonances with audiences without relying on the traditional mechanism of affirmative (yet exclusionary) identification. For the dramaturg, the exercise of mapping itself – even when it realistically must remain partial, fragmented, and inevitably falling short of the sheer scale of Koolhaas's detailed catalogues – will almost always immediately reveal blank spots, absences, and missing links of any singular 'instincts' to provide productive starting points for new 'trouble' through the work that is created, curated and instigated. In the ecological metaphors of Manifesta 12, such situationally rooted 'working on action' will aid to cultivate art works that organically grow out of this very situation, extract their inspirational creative energy from the soil in the immediate vicinity, and thereby bring to blossoming a fertile arts-practice that is nourished by, as well as nourishing for, its local context, communities and audiences.

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