

BEFORE THE WORDS: TEMPORARY SHELTER

11.03–28.08.2022



MAL PELO

INHABIT ANOTHER SPACE: WILL YOU LEAVE YOUR BODY?

Imma Prieto

This place is beautiful. It could be here¹

A breath. A gaze. A gesture...and then, a touch. Silence. Then another breath, and two. A gaze with a twist. A gesture fanning shared air, the touch understood as an encounter, jolt or dialogue of bodies, without the need to articulate words, for now.

This beginning could be a possible score whose objective was to lay out the space created by the Mal Pelo collective. A place that gives rise to encounters charged with present and absent bodies. Memories of shared listening and learning, of having wanted to dislocate/be dislocated, so as to be thought again without bonds.

“Before the Words: Temporary Shelter”, is an open and shared reflection by the Mal Pelo collective. For the third time in its career of over 30 years, Mal Pelo has articulated a de-located staging that accentuates and pushes the concept of “exhibition”, expanding their invitation to the bodies of those visiting the museum galleries. Isn’t the greatest exhibition the one that encompasses bodies? Aren’t we always being exposed to something?

This exhibition is the result of a working process carried out over various phases. The first was done in the creation space L’animal a l’esquena, while the second took place in the museum itself, which forced the way of understanding the institution, thinking of ways to inhabit it from the process of creation, without ignoring the difficulties and possibilities that go with shifting life into the museum institution.

The project’s potentiality lies in making visible the bodies in absolute and free exhibition, in the most radical, poetic and violent sense of the word. In this way, the show becomes a receiving place, a shelter, run through by parallel universes

Margaret Williams, *Wrist*, 2009 (video still).
Courtesy of the artist and Mal Pelo

1. Mal Pelo, *Highlands*, 2021.

that temporarily live somewhere else. A shelter opening up to dynamics that tend to infuse another other space.

The Mal Pelo collective, with co-directors Pep Ramis and María Muñoz, is a creative group in the performing arts characterised by shared authorship, something that is neither straightforward nor overly common; it is one of the pending challenges of our time. Since 1989, they have developed their own artistic language through movement and the creation of dramaturgies featuring text, original soundtracks, constructed spaces and unique devices, or just as well the use of light and audio-visual resources as vibrant elements on stage.

On that stage, Mal Pelo has found an ideal place, depositing in it the need to experiment, question and share common subjects and life interests: love, time, relationships, conflict and death, amongst many others

In Mal Pelo's way of thinking about works for the stage, this set of features points to an unusual quality, to a difference or movement in relation to themselves, something that distances them from being considered as mere objects. A double nature whereby the presence of a chair, a plant or an animal requires us to ask the question: subject or object?

Delving into their universe leads us to an experience where time, bodies and space are multiplied, allowing for the presence of other memories. The presence-absence dichotomy gives rise to a shared score, where everything moves with autonomy and permeability. With this, the group of creators proposes a common space derived from the idea of unfolding, where this time bodies appear without being, inviting our bodies to come and settle as well. Incessant rhythm, movement and reverberation, together accentuating the potential arising from the idea of community. "We do not view the performance as an ultimate destination, but as a place of transit, provoking other gazes, creating other subjects. All we have to do is look at what we have left behind once we get to the premiere of a show, and observe that plenitude of residues, ideas, drawings, images. The sediment of labour that now we give another form and structure to. The performance, in the end, is like a site of thought."²

2. Mal Pelo, *Swimming Horses*. Girona: Mal Pelo, 2013.

BY HAND, BY FOOT...

Ric Allsopp

There is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life.

—W.B. Yeats¹

It is January and an unusually mild midwinter in a rural farming community in South Devon, England. I am sitting in a studio that looks out over mist covered hills, fields and woodlands in a house that has been home for the last thirty years. Outside, a flock of quarrelsome goldfinches vie with blue tits and a pair of nuthatches for a scattering of seeds; blackhead sheep graze in the orchard below or sit under apple trees in the warmth of a weak winter sun. At this time of year, the landscape is quiet with only an occasional farm vehicle or dog-walker passing down the track to the valley. This rural scene will continue to replay itself in differing conditions of light and shade, wind, rain, mist and sunshine as the seasons turn. Like the clouds that are moving in slowly from the south-west, this landscape forms a gradually shifting memory from which I cannot entirely extract myself, a memory that is shot through with other places, other valleys, other fields, other people.

The mist filters across the valley beyond the woods revealing and obscuring the details of the landscape, like the mists of involuntary memories that float across and interrupt or enhance our immediate everyday experience. In his exploration of memory, the sculptor Christian Boltanski has identified in the details of everyday lived experience, what he calls "small memories" consisting of the "hoard of small bits of knowledge that each of us accumulates [that] make up what we are". Such small memories—the

1. Quoted in Philip Marsden, *The Summer Isles: A Voyage of the Imagination*. London: Granta Books, 2020, p. 306.

flowering of an almond tree outside the office building at Mas Espolla, the sound of an owl through an open window in the night, the taste of local red wine—are gathered up in narratives and images as catalysts, their sensory as much as their semantic qualities giving resonance to the everyday and to the experience of its transformations in artwork.²

I want to elaborate here on what I see as a relationship between place and what can be called a “choreographic image”. The materiality and physicality of place, and the memories, experiences and images that it provokes, is not something simply seen or experienced as outside ourselves, but is engaged as a reality through lived and embodied experience.

A choreographic image emerges from the various spaces and layers of appearance that may surface in the artwork, a “something else” beyond the formal movements and scenographic elements that, in relation to this present exhibition, constitute the works that Mal Pelo have produced since their move from Barcelona to Celrà in 1989.

In 2003, around the time that Mal Pelo were working on *Bach*, I was writing on the relationship between text, event and location, and suggesting that if art has disappeared as a “symbolic pact”, a means of setting up another scene in opposition to reality where things obey a higher set of rules, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested,³ there remains the possibility of setting up temporary zones of consensus and coherence. If the project of art is to take up the fragmented world and find its living connections outside or beyond an increasingly delocalised and institutionalised world, then it does so by creating temporary zones or meeting places that are essentially localised, and that sometimes manifest within the boundaries of the institutionalised art world, sometimes

elsewhere. In this sense then, a space of performance can exist that continues to redefine values in relation to the local and that results in an ambient shelter or temporary zone that does not shut out the world to provide the conditions for artwork, but rather opens to the world, a world seen as fluid, ephemeral, in the process of becoming—a constant redefinition of what is at stake, the understanding of a fluid and contextualised language of performance, an ethics of the marginal within which further temporary zones and shelters can be constructed.⁴

In his discussion of the process of “making”—a word with its etymological root in “fitting together”—the anthropologist Tim Ingold proposes that making is “a process of *growth*” rather than an imposition of a preconceived design on the world. He asserts that “to view the work is to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look *with* it as it unfolds in the world, rather than *behind* it to an originating intention of which it is the final product”.⁵ It is perhaps worth noting here that the notion of a choreographic image as a “something else” that can emerge in and through the temporary zones and shelters of dance performance, is not to seek out some originary or explanatory intentions that may exist prior to the work, but to understand that such evanescent and immaterial images, and a “choreographic unconscious” that gives rise to them, are a key aspect of the receptivities and correspondences that give impulse to dance work.⁶

The title of this essay—“By Hand, By Foot”—intends to provide a physical image of the process of making, an

2. Boltanski, Christian (1996). *Réserve de Suisses morts*, 1991, <<https://www.macba.cat/en/art-artists/artists/boltanski-christian/reserve-suisses-morts>>

3. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Cambridge: Semiotext(e), MIT Press Books, 1983.

4. Allsopp, Ric. “Text, Event, Location”. New York: Society for Textual Studies Conference, 2003.

5. Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2013, p. 21.

6. See Marko Kostanić (2008), “The Choreographic Unconscious: Dance and Suspense”, <http://bezimeni.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/kostanic_the-choreographic-unconscious.com>; and Alan Read (2020), *The Dark Theatre: A Book of Loss*.

approach to life and art that encapsulates the project of Mal Pelo in its broadest sense as the establishment of a shelter or temporary zone. It is ongoing work that does not essentially separate the processes of life and art, but rather builds on the experience of how one lives through the efforts, joys and frustrations of handiwork and movement, the everyday tasks of making, building, planting, harvesting, cleaning, washing, tending, caring, cooking, feeding, eating, dancing and so on. From a dance point of view, such work aligns with and continues to extend the possibilities of “pedestrian movement” as choreographic material.⁷ These processes are not directly or literally represented in the work, but as I will elaborate, emerge affectively through the work as a relation between a thinking *from* the body of the performer and *from* the attention of the spectator—an affective meeting of bodies in the temporary space of performance that surfaces from the experiences of each individual. A choreographic image, produced or rather emerging from movement by hand, by foot, is informed by an intimate attention to the detail of everyday movement that it entails. It resonates with John Berger’s formulation of “receptivity” or “likeness” in the process of the artwork itself, of which more later.⁸

María Muñoz’s solo dance *Bach* (2004), to take an example of a particular work that (at least for me) surfaces a choreographic image, is a particularly formal, seemingly abstract yet intensely sensitive work, in part to do with the ordered geometries, polyphonies and emotional range of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* which provides, in Glenn Gould’s 1962–1975 interpretations, the sound world; and in part to do with the affective and vital counterpoint that María Muñoz brings to the work which is here and elsewhere

a characteristic of her dancing.⁹ As I re-watch *Bach* in the video version filmed by Núria Font in 2004, I continue to ask that old question: “What is it that I am watching when I watch dance?” Clearly the “I” that writes here is standing in for a more general experience of spectatorship, of watching dance-theatre unfold in a particular time and space in front of where I sit or stand as a spectator in a formalised relationship to a stage—in this case, mediated and edited through the lens of Núria Font’s video camera. This familiar “at a distance” relationship to dance-theatre, or art-dance, remains predicated on a potential mutuality of intent and contract between performer and spectator that can generate a shared semantic and/or affective field of attention and absorption.

As well as watching what is to be seen and heard and how it might transform and change over the 45-minute duration of the performance, I am also watching, or better, *watching out for* a choreographic image to appear; something beyond a visible, moving body inside a scenographic space, a “something else” that is brought about by the intersections and correspondences between María Muñoz’s embodied presence and my own. I want to find the choreographic image *within* the practice, in the act of being *with* movement by hand and by foot, by limb and eye, thinking *from* the body and thinking *alongside* the intersection of bodies *in* motion, not “about” the work, but *with* the work; to shift the prepositional stance and open another perspective.

In his discussion of embodiment, Ingold notes that “of course, we have bodies—indeed we *are* our bodies. But we are not wrapped up in them. The body is not a package, nor—to invoke another common analogy—a sink into which movements settle like sediment in a ditch. It is rather a tumult of unfolding activity.” He cites dance philosopher Maxine

7. Steve Paxton continues to be a decisive influence on Mal Pelo’s approach to work.

8. Berger, John. *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible*. London: Penguin Classics, 2020 [2001], p. 84.

9. *Bach* also pays its respects to Steve Paxton’s *Goldberg Variations* (1992); see also Jurij Konjar’s reconstruction of Paxton’s *Goldberg Variations* (2010); and Mårten Spangberg’s *Powered by Emotion* (2003), coming from an entirely different aesthetic approach.

Sheets-Johnstone who argues that for us as living, animate beings, the term “embodiment” is not experientially apposite. “We do not,” she insists, “experience ourselves and one another as ‘packaged’ but as moving and moved, in ongoing response—that is in *correspondence*—with the things around us.”¹⁰

I am interested as a spectator, in how attention, receptivity and correspondence might operate at a point or moment where what I bring in terms of my own experience meets *with* the movement that I perceive to disclose a transforming, non-static, choreographic image. In his short essay “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible” (2001), Berger asserts that the artist is a receiver rather than a creator: “What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received.” He continues: “What is a likeness? When people die, they leave behind, for those that knew them, an emptiness, a space: the space has contours and is different for each person mourned. This space with its contours is the person’s likeness and is what the artist searches for when making a living portrait. A likeness is something left behind invisibly.”¹¹ Translating this in terms of dance, this immaterial, evanescent “something” is perhaps the “something else” of a choreographic image—a something else that crystallises from a “choreographic unconscious”, an idea which I will return to.

Discussing the tendency to view movement (both dance and political) “through the lens of arrest” and in so doing “fix what is looks at” and “strip out the very motion that would take the event beyond itself,” the choreographer and activist Randy Martin suggests that a corrective is needed: “To think, to see, to sense from within dance, is to take motion not stasis as our posture of evaluation.”¹²

10. Ingold, Tim. 2013: 94.

11. Berger, John. 2020 [2001]: 85.

12. Martin, Randy. “Between Intervention and Utopia: Dance Politics” in G. Klein & S. Noeth (eds.), *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of World Making in Dance and Choreography*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011, p. 30.

Following Martin then, it is in the very first moments of a performance that we experience a foreshadowing of what is yet to come, what is set in motion.

Bach is a work that starts by foot—the sound and movement of footfalls as María Muñoz dressed in black enters a semi-lit “empty” or better, neutral scenographic space, not simply to establish a position on stage from which the performance of dance begins in some instrumental sense, but to bring with her an embodied and palpable sense of an outside world, not simply a world to be represented or interpreted but to be lived, continued and explored “by other means”. As the light increases, we see only her face and hands lit against her black costume—hands that in silence slowly rise towards the light. Silence gives way to sound, stillness gives way to movement alternating between formal “sections” framed by the preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Memories, and the recollections of the movements and gestures that accompany them, are determined, or resisted by affective sensations and perceptions in correspondence with what surrounds us and continues out beyond the scenographic space. These initiating moments—by hand, by foot—foreshadow the precarity and vulnerability of everyday life that sits within the formal structures we raise against its uncertainties.

While there is no conventional textual content in *Bach*, anything that is “read” (such as dance) can be treated in itself as a text, the weaving of a semantic and affective field not limited to a written, spoken, or verbalised code. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has noted that “... gestural articulations of thought are *perceived* rather than, as they are in verbal languages, *apperceived*”. In other words, the movements of the dance are primarily sensed rather than only fitted into (or “arrested” within) a pre-existing lexicon of movement.¹³

13. Cited in Brian Rotman (2008), *Becoming Beside Ourselves*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 17.

At moments in *Bach* there is, in my “reading”, a brief palpable *sotto voce* text that almost surfaces and condenses into sound, but like movement itself evaporates and leaves no audible trail, leaving a charged empty space within the gestures and movements that almost gave it form.

To meddle with language, to meddle with movement is, as the writer Caroline Bergvall has insightfully written, “to be in the flux that abounds, the large surf of one’s clouded contemporaneity. It is a process of social and mental excavation explored to a point of extremity”, a process that “reaches for the irritated, excitable uncertainties, of our embodied spoken lives by working with, taking apart, seeing through the imposed complicities of linguistic networks and cultural scaffolds.”¹⁴

As I continue to watch *Bach* unfold a further question arises: What is it that moves through María Muñoz’s imagination or memory as she dances? I can see the gestures, expressions and emotional residues that flow through her face and body like undercurrents and eddies that move the surface of the sea. There is of course the physical/muscular memory of those aspects of the choreography which are already embodied and internalised, but to take a line of questioning from Marko Kostanić: “What receptive horizon [is] hidden behind [the performer’s] gaze” that we see in *Bach*? Of course, we can never precisely know—but as a “choreographic unconscious” it communicates itself and finds its form through movement and rhythm, and the presence and receptivity of the individual who is moved *with* it as it unfolds.¹⁵ The idea of a “choreographic unconscious”, which might give rise to, disclose, crystallise or take shape

as a choreographic image, and which I attach to the lived experience of place, finds one of its origins in Walter Benjamin’s *Little History of Photography* (1931), where he writes: “... to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may discover it. For it is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”¹⁶ A key phrase here is “*gives way* to a space informed ...”, which also resonates with William Forsythe’s idea of a choreographic object as a “model of potential *transition* [my emphasis] from one state to another in any space imaginable”, whilst here the space that is informed by the unconscious is immaterial—in Berger’s sense “invisible”—yet perceptible.¹⁷

The choreographic image that surfaces in *Bach* and elsewhere in Mal Pelo’s work between the performer and the individual spectator as a moment of correspondence or receptivity, is also part of a larger sense of “social kinaesthetic” as Randy Martin has described as follows: “Yet before there is movement, enunciation or inscription, there needs to be some shared sensibility, some array of physical pressures and agglutinations that orient and dispose what may get produced as bodily practice and what might get concatenated in dance practices. This predicate of movement, this disposition to assemble, adhere, pass through, align and locomote, the physical grounds and motional loam of a particular social and historical conjuncture, can be called a social kinaesthetic.”¹⁸

14. Bergvall, Caroline. *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts*. New York: Nightboat books, 2011, p. 18.

15. For a detailed discussion of the “unconscious” and its ideological and philosophical implications within art and performance see Rosalind E. Krauss (1993), *The Optical Unconscious*; Kostanić (2008), and Read (2020).

16. Benjamin, Walter. “Little History of Photography” in *Selected Writings Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1931], p. 507–530.

17. Forsythe, William. “The Choreographic Object”, 2008. <<https://www.williamforsythe.com/essay.html>>

18. Martin, Randy 2011: 34.

It is precisely such a “social kinaesthetic” that purposefully grows out of, informs and continues to shape the temporary zones and shelters for dance and performance that Mal Pelo has nurtured over the last thirty years in the buildings, fields, woods and valleys of Mas Espolla, a social and not simply individual kinaesthetic that is a condensation of place in the art work and which re-emerges out of the art-work in turn to reinvigorate the place and the many people that it has involved and supported. That artwork and artists can channel both consciously and unconsciously an image of one’s “secret life” as W.B. Yeats put it, is a measure of a social kinaesthetic—a disposition to work affectively with others towards shared futures and imaginations however individual and temporary they might be.

The poet Charles Olson wrote that: “what we do not know of ourselves / of who they are who lie / coiled or un-flown / in the marrow of the bone / one sd: of rhythm is image / of image is knowing / of knowing there is / a construct ...”¹⁹ The “knowing” that arises from this process is not a rationalisation, a “critical act of judgement that fixes what it looks at”, but a proprioceptive knowing that arises from an intimate and affective attention to the details of embodiment and social kinaesthetic that arise from the complexities and demands of place, from the “somewhere else” that is the “some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of [our] secret life”—an image which artwork, and the attentions and insights of those who make it, can provide a temporary shelter for.

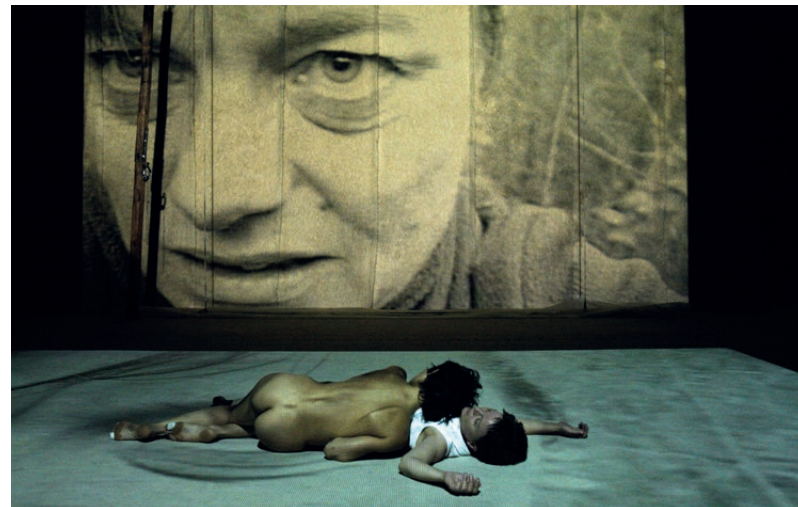
19. Olson, Charles (1970 [1949]), “ABCs (2)” in *The Archaeologist of Morning*. London: Cape Goliard, 1970



Pep Ramis, *Hiena*, 2006, drawing



María Muñoz and Jordi Casanovas in the show
Testimoni de llops, 2006



Nicole Balm and Leo Castro in the show
Testimoni de llops, 2006



Jordi Casanovas in the show *Testimoni de llops*, 2006



María Muñoz in the show *He visto caballos*, 2008



ABSENCE AND PRESENCE: A NEW FORAY INTO THE MAL PELO TERRITORY

Carlota Subirós Bosch

Y aurait-il des territoires dansés (puissance de la danse à *accorder*) ? Des territoires aimés (qui ne *tiennent* qu'à être aimés ? Puissance de l'amour), des territoires disputés (qui ne *tiennent* qu'à être disputés ?), partagés, conquis, marqués, connus, reconnus, appropriés, familiers ? Combien de verbes et quels verbes peuvent faire territoire ? Et quelles sont les pratiques qui vont permettre à ces verbes de proliférer ?

—Vinciane Despret, *Habiter en oiseau*¹

A few years ago, an image came to me: that Mal Pelo is, above all, a territory.²

A territory of life and creation, a territory of a deep exploration of the arts through the body. A territory of the imagination, populated by unforgettable figures, animal-people, humour and melancholy, philosophy and pain and beauty and movement. A territory at the foot of the Gavarres mountains, on the outskirts of Celrà, near Girona. A territory with rolling hills, and shady woods, and olive trees, and farmland, and donkeys grazing. A territory of

Photograph reproduced in the book *Swimming Horses. Mal Pelo*, published in 2013

1. Despret, Vinciane. *Habiter en oiseau*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2020, p. 41. *Living as a Bird*. Polity, Cambridge 2021. [Might there be danced territories (the power of dance to bring together)? Loved territories (territories bound by love? The power of love), disputed territories (bound by contention), shared, conquered, marked, known, recognized, appropriated, familiar territories? How many verbs might there be and which verbs constitute a territory? And what practices will enable these verbs to proliferate?]

2. Subirós Bosch, Carlota. *Territori Mal Pelo*. In: *Performances de la mirada*, published by Mercat de les Flors for the 2013—2014 season.

mutual understanding and collaboration that transcends borders and languages, that persists as the years go by. A territory where the everyday work is demanding and at the same time is part of a very long, very profound, very resolute journey. A territory of good meals around a wooden table that has turned dark with age, landscapes that are easy on the eyes, a territory of travel and raising children and domestic life and continuous research. A territory where complexity and subtlety are cultivated, along with the most striking essentiality. A territory where the results are not measured so much by finished performances as by the quality of every moment experienced and by the profound meaning that runs through every action. A territory where the stage intensifies life and life intensifies the stage.

In the transition from winter to spring of this year, 2022, two years into a relentless pandemic that has cast a shadow over our lives, Mal Pelo offers us a new foray into its fertile territory. A territory that always contains the powerful warmth of *home* and, at the same time, the un-tamed promise of *adventure*.

This time around, the invitation takes place at Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, where we will have inside access to some of Mal Pelo's impulses turned into volumes, textures, images, objects, voices, traces, sounds... Presences and absences that invite us to take a trip into our own inner territories.

the intensity of presence

Mal Pelo is a dance and performance group founded by María Muñoz and Pep Ramis in 1989. She was a young dancer from Valencia, who had been a competitive athlete and had trained at dance schools in Amsterdam and Barcelona. He was a young Mallorcan from Manacor who had enjoyed music and painting since he was a child, and had studied fine arts, puppetry and voice. Together, they discovered a territory of shared inquiry, focused on exploring the stage by way of the body. Over the more than

30 years of their career with Mal Pelo, they have premiered almost 40 shows, created various exhibitions and installations, published three exquisite books about their work, and collaborated with a wide range of artists from various disciplines. They have engaged in prolific teaching work and built the work space L'animal a l'esquena at Mas Espolla, which, since 2001, has hosted artistic residencies, research laboratories, specialized training programmes, project presentations, and many other activities focused on the body, thought and artistic creation.

One of the common threads that runs through all this tireless work is the *intensity of presence*. Being fully present in what they're doing at all times. Heightening that quality. Exploring in depth the uniqueness of each body, each performer, each gesture, each word, each texture of movement. Helping it grow in its exceptionality, endowing it with strength while also respecting its fragility. Giving it space.

Mal Pelo's performances are full of dance, of bodies dancing, talking, listening, breathing, watching, thinking, pulsing, curling in on themselves, laying themselves bare. In the Mal Pelo territory, choreography is rarely talked about. The conversations focus on materials, qualities, areas and specific body parts, poetic textures that run through the physicality. In the Mal Pelo territory, confidence is instilled in each performer so they can push the limits of their expressive and associative possibilities. In the Mal Pelo territory, the gaze that is cultivated focuses on the particularity of each body, its irreducible character, its wise openness on the stage.

Today, presence is a scandal. Today, presence is a treasure.

The Mal Pelo universe has always been populated by figures of a striking intensity, often combined with an extraordinary discretion. Now I close my eyes and a few of them appear at random; a few among many. The sound designer Fanny Thollot, who from her concentrated silence, transforms the stage into throbbing music. The dancer and

creator Leo Castro, who sharpens everything he touches and everything he sees. The video editor Xavier Pérez, who adds density and scope to all the recorded and projected images that inhabit this universe. The filmmaker and video artist Núria Font, who has engaged in an intimate dialogue with dance through the language of audio-visuals and a shared passion. The dancers Jordi Casanovas and Enric Fàbregas, each willing to offer up their unique, playful, animalistic, tender, wild energy. The fashion designer and costume designer Carme Puigdevall i Plantés, who with her taste for fabrics and colours and volumes works closely alongside the group of performers to find the right weights and cuts for each body. The lighting designer and chief technician August Viladomat, a craftsman with a sly smile and humble wisdom. The composer Steve Noble, who for many years boldly drove the sound of their shows. The dancer Federica Porello, who emanates and distils a boundless quality. The writer and poet and illustrator and art critic John Berger, who engaged in an intense relationship of mutual fascination with Mal Pelo, and who continues to nourish their thought, their love, their creativity.

Presences are not exhausted, they are not consumed. Loved presences are inexhaustible. They are a refuge and a constant stimulus. An infinite shelter from the inclemencies of life.

Over the years—following the inescapable cycles of proximity and distance, enthusiasm and illness, birth and death—the same committed presence is always there, enduring, transforming with the circumstances while also transcending them. In Mal Pelo's work, there is the echo of that long, profound, ongoing, constantly evolving path. Despite the inevitable ups and downs that exist in every relationship, their presences are committed, strong, unconditional. In their day-to-day, their collaborations are understood as a space for coming together, for discovery, for creative generosity. On stage, they are intense bodies, personalities that are offered up to us in all their fullness.

Dance is a space of expansion, of an enlarged presence. The Mal Pelo territory and its *performed poems* have always seemed to me like the experience of an *intensified present*.

we have grown old so many times...

Another intense presence in the Mal Pelo territory is the one demanded by certain words. Texts that may have the conciseness of an epigram or the breadth of an unbridled inner monologue, but which are always characterized by a categorical fragmented feeling. The texts make us feel that we have entered directly into someone's private diary, full of personal experiences. Phrases that echo with a specific cadence, in the speaker's own voice. Phrases that inevitably lay bare a thought, but also congeal like a clot, like an invitation, like a door that opens a crack and begins a new path.

For me, this is one of them, in Maria's voice: "We have grown old so many times..."

It's an idea that also comes to mind in one of John Berger's great novels, *King*: that water has seven skins, that each new layer of water offers a new quality as your hand passes through it. That what we perceive as water, as life, actually echoes continuously through many successive strata, many simultaneous layers. That all our past ages co-exist with the person we are today.

Each of us has grown old so many times...

Mal Pelo continually touches all those different layers, fearlessly, boldly, but with an endless delicacy. In the Mal Pelo territory, the passage of time is the focus of an ongoing meditation, since their work with the intensified present corresponds to a lucid awareness of transitoriness, of the body's ongoing transformation, of the ever-evolving dialogue between weight and agility, energy and tempo. Now that the group has completed more than three decades of uninterrupted research, the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next has emerged as another fundamental aspect of their work, as well as the preservation and constant evolution of accumulated knowledge.

Wood that has been worked by skilled hands ages well. One essential concern in the Mal Pelo territory is a job well done, caring for their materials, skin on skin, creation founded on attentive listening. In the Mal Pelo territory, experimentation and research and everyday life are all approached from an immediate commitment to the task at hand, whether it is in the kitchen, in the workshop, or in the studio. This approach also aligns with John Berger's essential poetics, as well as the viewpoints of other authors whom they have read in depth, such as the Italian writer Erri de Luca, the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa or the American sociologist Richard Sennett. These four authors all share an active and extraordinarily suggestive reflection on the body's knowledge, on the material qualities perceived through the senses, which are loaded with specific associations and experiential memory.

That said, as sophisticated and free as their intellectual journey may be, in the Mal Pelo territory thought is always *embodied*, situated in the body, located in time and space, transformed into movement and breath, circumscribed by life's circumstances. That is what always gives it its extraordinary personal resonance.

The word *craftmanship* may seem to belong to a by-gone era. That is not true. Today, as everything becomes more virtual, more ethereal, more intangible, touch is becoming more necessary than ever. A firm, determined, sensitive, exploratory, careful, delicate touch. Contact. Know-how. *Real know-how*, in our hands, in our bodies, rooted in commitment.

Mal Pelo cultivates daily experimentation, a physicalization of ideas. Paper, fabric, wood, linoleum, iron, straw, chalk, tape, book, notebook, computer, drawing, table, chair, shoes, earphones, sand, screen, paint, gauze, dirt, ink, mask, wings, hat, bone, key, artifact, junk, plant, dog, horse.

Hand, eye, finger, skin, back, spine, sacrum, vertebra, hip, foot, ankle, knee, thigh, ischium, scapula, neck, skull,

forehead, cheek, collarbone, armpit, elbow, wrist, twist, jump, fall, suspension, air, ground, support, weight, gravity.

Craftsmanship means listening. Dialogue. Research. Invention. Tradition. Inheritance. Memory. Innovation.

the intimacy of absence

Another phrase that resonates strongly with me in the Mal Pelo territory is this, in John's voice: "Someone remembers your absent body... Someone remembers your absent body with tenderness. I know it's a big challenge, but could you perform that memory?"

At this point, John's voice intertwines with Pep's voice: "There's a bit of your body that excites me to no end, and you'll never know which one it is."

From there, the memories unfold for me, memories full of images and words and emotions and experiences of some of the shows from the Mal Pelo territory I've enjoyed over the years, which come to life in the power of their titles. María baring her soul inward and outward in *Atrás los ojos*; Pep traveling and drawing with light in *The Mountain, The Truth & The Paradise*; the group turning the entire space in *Testimoni de llops*, with the working table as the centre of gravity; music turned body and pure human beauty in each new performance of *Bach*; Pep flying furiously in *Dol*; the universe of dreams that come to life in *La calle del imaginero*; Enric shrieking, curled at the very top of a tree trunk suspended in the air in *L'esperança de vida d'una llebre*; María's absolute nakedness in *He visto caballos*; Federica using her immense eyes to gather all the energy from the theatre in *On Goldberg Variations/Variations*; María wearing a moustache and a cap, navigating the labyrinths of words and love in *Tots els noms*; Pep carrying a tree in *L'animal a l'esquena*, looking for the perfect spot; María dancing uncontrollably against the image of a galloping horse at the centre of the white immensity of *An (el silenci)*, and Jordi tapping with his pointed boots; Pep and María's sparse silhouettes in *El cinquè hivern*, delving into the deeply moving

dialogue that their bodies have been weaving *avec le temps*, from solo to solo and from duo to duo; Leo challenging the audience amidst the sublime and crushing beauty of all the accumulated years of life in *Highlands*; the presence of each body and of each voice growing with each new piece and entering into a relation with new incorporations, like the infinite, ever-advancing counterpoint in music by Johann Sebastian Bach that rushes like a torrent through the group's latest creations.

We talk about the intensity of presences, but that intensity is inextricably linked to *the intimacy of absences*.

Longing is a powerful force in the Mal Pelo territory. Longing is the motor of life and desire. Longing is the sister of yearning.

(In Wim Wenders' documentary on Pina Bausch,³ the dancer who replaced the choreographer in the piece *Café Müller*, after her unexpected death, identifies that what gave so much strength to Pina's presence in that unforgettable piece was a kind of *hole* that opened inside her when she danced, a hole that could only be defined by the German word *Sehnsucht*, which refers to both longing and desire, the deepest yearning.)

The power of presence no doubt cannot be understood without the power of absences. Those who are absent nourish those who are here. Everything we have experienced before lives on in the present moment. Everything we have loved – the moments of joy, the moments of excess, everything we've danced, everything we've imagined in a blinding flash, the knowing glances, the warmth of trusting hands – all that fills the air, it all takes refuge in the memory of the body and the space.

Every room is a stage. Every stage is a life opportunity.

Today at Es Baluard Museu, Mal Pelo offers us a temporary refuge. There are no performers here now. The body inhabiting this space is ours. The air is heavy with absences.

3. Wenders, Wim. *Pina*. 2011.

The moment is open to our presence. A dance and performance group puts us right in the middle of the stage.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* begins with these lines:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.*⁴

In the Mal Pelo territory, we are always *halfway through the journey of our lives*. In the Mal Pelo territory, the *gloomy wood* is the infinite forest of everyone's dreams and stories. There are no *direct paths* in the Mal Pelo territory; each step is an adventure. In the Mal Pelo territory we can get *lost* without worry, because we know that getting lost is the necessary condition for *finding ourselves again*.

In the Mal Pelo territory, everything that happens in the present resonates with any number of past experiences. Movements leave traces; the traces are erased, but the air preserves their memory. All waters are connected. The past and the future are also connected. Presence and absence echo in the spaces we have worked with our hands, our skin, our hearts.

The dance we crave today is the one we dance in our own inner territory.

4. The English translation of these verses by Courtney Langdon reads as follows: *When half way through the journey of our life / I found that I was in a gloomy wood, / because the path which led aright was lost.*



María Muñoz with John Berger in La Llibreteria,
Girona, 2008

WHERE HORSES SWIM

A conversation between John Berger,
María Muñoz and Pep Ramis

It's the door, and beyond it is the paradise of the heart. Our things—and everything is ours—are interchangeable. And the door is a door, the door of metaphor, the door of legend. A door to keep September gentle. A door that invites fields to begin their wheat. The door has no door, yet I can go outside and love both what I see and what I do not see. All of these wonders and beauties are on earth—there—and yet the door has no door? My prison cell accepts no light except into myself. Peace be unto me. Peace be unto the sound barrier. I wrote ten poems in praise of my freedom, here and there. I love the particles of sky that slip through the skylight—a metre of light where horses swim, and my mother's little things...

—Mahmoud Darwish¹

^{MM} John, after following our creation process so closely, I'm curious to know what you made of *He visto caballos*.

^{JB} It has been a very profound experience. Theatre begins with a number of people who have come together to see something. They are both individuals and at the same time they form a kind of collective because they are watching the same thing, and that creates an energy which is both receptive and giving. If you compare it to that day we sat at a kitchen table talking about how horses swim or don't swim, they are completely different situations, and that's part of the excitement of making theatre. Last night I was aware

1. Darwish, Mahmoud. "Four Personal Addresses". In: *It's a Song, it's a Song*, adapted from a translation by Munir Akash and Caroline Forché. Lannan Foundation (2001/1984).

of seeing many things that were already quite deeply familiar because we had talked about them or we'd argued about them, and at the same time being continually surprised. And that is also to do with theatre in general. In theatre there is the recognition of the familiar and at the same time the surprise because it is for the first time. The dancing last night described all the incredible work, improvisations, corrections and changes you have made through the process. Yet to me it felt, and I think to other people there too, as though it was for the first time.

Writing is a strange activity but no more strange than many others. There is an aspect of it which is abstract and then there is another aspect of it which is the exact opposite and is extremely physical. People often ask after you have written a book or a story 'how did you find that story', 'how did you invent that', 'what inspired you?'. I understand those questions, but it's not really like that. We are surrounded by stories and voices all the time. The real struggle is how to deal with those experiences that you are seeing or sharing and how to turn that into something which belongs to the mother tongue. In fact, the whole activity of the relationship of making words fit together is to do with the inside of this mother tongue. In a way it is very physical. When you have that, and then you have dancers and artists like you who are able to transmit and express physically the subtlest qualities of experience, something very strange happens because it is not just to do with language but with the language of the body. It is not the body of the mother tongue; it's the body of something else more mysterious. You can tell me what it is.

^{MM} You have mentioned abstraction and physicality. When we work with the body, movement is synonymous with physicality whether the movement with which we embrace the space is big or very small. In our pieces, we try to make the experience of physicality not only be about how we move in the space but about how light, sound and

video generate movement. It's not a question of how to create images with light or how much light illuminates a body, but of perceiving how that light moves and changes the atmosphere.

In our creative process we frequently ask ourselves how we can think in that way in relation to words. Something that has impressed me from your last book *From A to X*—and I realized that I had felt the same before when reading your books—is the way you use words to refer to the body. It's full of suggestions of physicality: the physicality of the characters who appear, the physicality of the situations.

^{PR} We feel a very close relationship with your books. That's how we approach your work, trying to create with our bodies this space between places, between words, between names.

^{JB} There are two poles that are continually interacting in your piece *He visto caballos*. There is the pole of extreme confinement, the space of the small room at the beginning. The opposite pole is that of an enormous expanse, the empty stage, the horizon. You have a strange kind of paradox. It seems to me that all the time you are moving between that confinement and then that infinite movement. And yes, there is perhaps quite a strong correspondence between that and the experience of prisoners and particularly of political prisoners.

^{MM} You say in the book: 'You in your cell can't cover distances—except the repetitive minimal ones. Yet you think, and you think across the world'. That expresses so clearly these two poles.

^{JB} Apart from the images of the horses, which are really magnificent, there are also those of the forest. And the forest, not now the forest on the stage, but a real forest, simultaneously combines confinement and an enormous space.

The ways you use it on stage seem to me to work marvelously. I don't altogether understand why, but it's something to do maybe with that tension between confinement and open space.

^{MM} In the piece, the man in prison says: 'My father laid out this forest', and then the wall of the little room falls away and he moves as if he could break through the wall of his jail and run to meet this image, an image that belongs to his heart, to his freedom.

^{PR} I think it works because a forest is an essential place. It is easy to watch a forest; in the same way it is easy to watch a horse. The body relates very easily to those kinetic images in a very deep way, from the flesh. There is something very ancient in the horses and the forest that we somehow recognize.

^{JB} What is really amazing now is how you are able to find that energetic flow of a horse and express it with your human body and your human limbs. You fill the theatre with that energy, nervousness, strength, and also the fragility, of horses.

In a forest there is this simultaneity of living units that are of enormously different scale, and it seems to me that you are able to achieve something like that in what you do together and also in what you do alone. From the smallest movement you make with one small part of the body to the whole body being volatile, especially when you are depending on one another. That difference of scale is very striking and the spectator begins to learn to observe this, somewhat like a hunter in a forest watching movement to movement.

When animals are still learning and investigating so much to find their way around, they have a special capacity to play. They know the difference between play and reality. And that implies a kind of communication within the body

that completely bypasses the mind; there are messages that are not just going through the mind. I can feel messages like that in your performances.

^{PR} We want our performances to work as choral pieces, for the inner rhythm of things to be not only in us, the dancers, but also in the passing of energy between light, sound, video and movement. We try to offer this kind of open and peripheral space to the audience.

We have been very interested in working on and investigating the perception of space and the rhythm of things not only through the eye, but also by imagining what you don't see. It is in fact possible to move, relying on a space that you don't see. Normally we use our sense of sight until it reaches the limit of peripheral vision. But what about what I don't see? If I move from that perception, my movement changes. It's really hard to explain why, but the body just moves differently and communicates differently. That's what you see in animals, how confident they are in their relationship with space. Their senses are really there, they perceive vibrations before you can even hear anything. We could feel all these things; we could at least try to play with other senses.

^{MM} Something like that happens when a minimal distance separates two bodies in movement. It is something that you have to take into account when entering the space of the other body. We have peripheral vision and the area we don't see. But then how do we work? You can very clearly focus with the eyes, but you can also learn to work very precisely in this area where things are not completely focused. It is a very fragile and mysterious place.

^{JB} It's a different kind of touching.

^{MM} It's another kind of touching because you can really get very close to the other without the other feeling you are...

^{JB} Yes, yes, being aggressive.

^{MM} Of course, we make mistakes, we can bump into each other but if it works, we can really pass very close without actually touching each other, without invading the space of the other, we are...

^{JB} Yes, yes, so accurate!

^{MM} And that happens in the out-of-focus area. As soon as you move toward the other person frontally, the action relates to a concrete intention.

^{JB} This out of focus touching that you are talking about, it's very evident and very extraordinary. What do you think it's like for the spectator to see that? What does it do to the spectator?

^{MM} I think they recognize the quality of that touch strongly within them. They get something that relates to them. Or at least that is what happens to me when I see that in other people's movement and gestures. We often also wonder how to touch a part of the space through a movement of the body or the light, and so make it visible.

^{PR} I give a lot of value to that awareness of touch, not only touch between two people, but touching the space, writing in the space, the music of the body moving. The body is the architect of the space, a gesture makes a whole... it projects... it can project a lot of information, suggestions.

^{JB} How do you avoid, because you do, rhetorical gesture, which is to a great extent what theatre was or is based on?

^{MM} The movements, the gestures are the result of a long process of turning our desire into an image. We visualize the image in our imagination and then we associate it

with our body. We try to let the body enter into that image. To begin with you are not so aware of the exact gesture you are making, but by going back to that image again and again, the body recreates the association, and the movement is fixed. What you are asking somehow relates to the way we have worked with the manuscript of *From A to X*. When I read letters from the book, I try to relate every single word, every phrase, with the image I am going to transfer to my body, so as to turn it into gesture and movement and so come back to your words. I wonder if you do the same when you write?

^{JB} When I write? Well, I'm not sure if I can answer completely. I guess probably there is an equivalent for you. Ok, what is it? When you are telling a story, people tend to think there is the teller of the story and there is the story. But in fact, storytelling is not like that, because there is a third element, and that is the listener or the reader or the spectator, and it seems to me that story telling begins with establishing a complicity with reader, spectator, listener because in fact you are going to travel the story together, and you are not going to travel it together like soldiers marching in line. Story telling is related with what is *not* said, and with how you are able to jump together with complicity over what is *not* there. Narrative line is not a continuous line. A narrative line is like a line in the centre of a road when you can overtake and it's dash, dash, and dash. It seems to me that often when I'm trying to find the place to jump and the place to land, I'm thinking also of the listener. If I choose the place to jump badly, I know that the listener will stumble and feel confused. If I choose it well, we will go together.

^{PR} We could talk about embodying the words. It seems to me that you first inhabit the words and then you write. In that way you are guiding me as a reader because I perceive that, and I want to inhabit them too. If you say: 'I'm going to

tell you a story', followed by a moment of silence, you create a tension; that's body, that's rhythm, that's what is *not* said. That's what you do! When I first met you, I thought you were very physical. The way you touch, the way you talk, the way you listen is obviously related to the way you write. You and your writing are the same. There is a strong connection; it is a way of listening, a way of playing, a way of counting on the other and accompanying. In the process we go through in performance work, we seek a specific body to tell a specific story.

^{JB} What you are saying about the physicality of my writing makes me think of course of drawing. In a way, I have the impression that I draw before I write and drawing is, of course, extremely physical. When I draw plants or flowers, which I do quite often, I have a very deep feeling. If I am drawing the shape of a petal and the way it is folded over, I try to find that shape in my own body, and if I don't, it's dead. That must perhaps be quite like what happens to you.

^{MM} That answers my question!

^{PR} That is exactly what I meant. When I paint, if I don't feel this connection, I don't get anything. I am drawing because I want to feel this; I look for this quality, for this transmission.

^{MM} There is a process, if you are painting, writing or moving, that has nothing to do with the rhetorical. It is about how each one of us finds these little materials that constitute the narration. There are two moments in the book that are physically very strong. One is when you talk about flying. When I read that I thought it is impossible to have not experienced that and to be able to describe the physicality of that moment in such detail. Then there is another moment when a whole community of women are around

a factory, surrounded by tanks, and you explain how they press their bodies against the wall, against each other. As a reader you travel and the words enter your body.

^{JB} Have you ever flown in small planes and done acrobatics?

^{PR MM} No!

^{JB} You should do it. The lack of gravity, that sense of weightlessness that you have at a certain moment in the loop... You will recognize it because actually you know about it. And the opposite moment, when you really weigh hundreds and hundreds of pounds. I don't think disorientation would be difficult for you, I think you would be able to completely accept that.

^{MM} John, at the beginning of this conversation you mentioned the exchange between performers and audience. Things go in one direction and then come back. There is an attempt in both directions to help each other achieve something we cannot touch, see, sense...

^{JB} Or say, yes.

^{PR} You need the complicity of the audience for this communication to happen. If you think about what you are doing at the time you are doing it, you can't really do it. In the midst of the action, you don't think of what you are doing, you just do it, you are the gesture, and you disappear in it, you live the moment. The body knows perfectly how to do it. That's the connection. You are just transmitting, and that is where the huge potential for communication comes in, where everything expands, and a sphere is created.

^{MM} The sphere includes what you see and what you don't see.

^{JB} What is behind you, yes, yes. That's so true.

^{MM} It's hard to tell at what moment you succeed in transmitting that spherical quality that allows what you do to surround the spectator. When we plan a performance there are many things we don't know. We need the audience to be there to complete the exchange. The sphere starts to move, it's not static. We get a lot of clues from comments made by people from the audience, comments that come from their perception.

^{JB} I think this whole notion of a sphere is very important. It is a key word for all that we have been saying. When you say that the sphere includes what you can't see, because it's behind you, it is very much to do with the jumps, the disconnections that one makes in narrative. But there is another thing very related to this art of narration: the value of silence. The value of darkness. The value of stillness. They are very important in verbal narrative. And they are very important in stage narrative.

It's quite interesting here to compare narration, storytelling, which is as old as image making in human history, with what is a contemporary invention: information. Information is non-stop and it is the opposite of narrative. Even when that information is telling stories, because it often is concerned with stories, it has absolutely no narrative power because it has no stillness. Let's compare this to another thing that happens in daily life all the while. Somebody is saying perhaps something quite dramatic or painful to us and then, as this person stops, we don't reply immediately, out of a kind of respect for what has been said. It seems to me that quite often in narration those moments of stillness or those jumps are a kind of respect, a kind of recognition of the reverberations of what has just been said. When what is said goes in, we go on.

It's an obvious comparison but when you are on the ground still, or you suddenly fall, that is a moment of extraordinary drama. That puts a question to which one really doesn't know the answer, and that not knowing

will affect how we react to your staying there or to your getting up.

^{PR} Silence has a thousand qualities. Silence is the space for fragility to arise. If I'm talking to you and I stop, it's me who makes an appearance, it is a space for me, not for the story, and so you are reading me. And that is a very fragile moment but also a powerful one. To experience the power of punctuation through silence, through what is not being said. You can never see the complete sphere. You only see one part of it. It is very important that sense of fragility. It's something that as a human you can't escape from. That is what I like to see on stage, in writing and in paintings. It is a fragility that moves me in a very particular way. It is the space where things reverberate.

^{JB} Talking of vulnerability and fragility, *He visto caballos* begins with a short poem from Mahmoud Darwish, the great Palestinian poet. I think this is really important, because without any political manipulation, he really did embody or embodies still the Palestinian people. I can explain that in very practical terms: quite a lot of his poems became songs; therefore, there is hardly a Palestinian who doesn't know at least one line by him. Why did this happen? Darwish had, in his writing, an incredible combination of determination and vulnerability that everybody could identify with.

^{PR} We are under great pressure from the outside to avoid that vulnerability socially. There is hardly any silence out there. It's hard to find anywhere to give room to our own fragility and vulnerability. I completely agree about Darwish, when you read him it's like a knife and a caress at the same time. He loves horses... his work is full of horses. 'I love the particles of sky that slip through the skylight, a metre of light where horses swim, and my mother's little things', he says in that poem. When we first began the process of creation,

John, you spoke of the image of a horse swimming and pulling a small boat.

^{MM} And later we found that poem by Darwish and the image of swimming horses appeared again. It was a very beautiful and deep coincidence. In the last letter in your book *From A to X*, Aida says: 'to you I say YES; to the life we have to live I say NO'. If I had to sum up your book in two sentences, they would be those. Thank you very much, John, for your words, and, again, for the horses that gallop in your head.

This conversation between John Berger, María Muñoz and Pep Ramis, took place, with the help of the writer Ixiar Rozas, on the 15th December 2008, at the Teatre Lliure in Barcelona, the day after the opening night of *He visto caballos*.

Before the Words: Temporary Shelter

Mal Pelo

From 11 March to 28 August 2022

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Contemporani de Palma

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Mal Pelo, in dialogue with Imma Prieto

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