

Lettera d'amore



— by Valerie Rath

I can always grow up again.

This thought solidified in my mind after visiting the group exhibition *Lettera d'amore*, curated by Alberta Romano at the Kunsthalle Lissabon, which featured works by the artists Alice dos Reis, Tamara MacArthur, La Chola Poblete, Laure Prouvost, Giulio Scalisi, and Inês Zenha, all of whom had previously been invited to the institution for a solo show. It's the first of a series of three group shows this year curated by three different curators—Alberta Romano, Yina Jiménez Suriel, and Filipa Ramos—as the Kunsthalle Lissabon pauses its regular programme of solo exhibitions to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the institution.

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How comforting this realization is, how exciting, how liberating and daring, reinforced by the observation that one does not have to go through this process alone. Alberta and the Kunsthalle Lissabon have grown up together, with and through each other, as *Lettera d'amore* reveals. It is a love letter between the curator and the institution, which marks not only KL's fifteenth birthday but also Alberta's farewell to the institution, manifested both in written form as well as through the exhibition.

As soon as you walk down the steps to the exhibition space, you can read it, printed on the wall with blue letters. "Dear Kunsthalle Lissabon ..." Alberta's love letter starts, letting me as the visitor know that this letter is not for me but rather dedicated to the very place in which I stand reading it. Yet, Alberta is not excluding me, but rather sharing with me, and everyone who takes the time to pause and read, the feelings and memories she holds for this place and the people it has welcomed through its continuous hospitality, including herself.

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Conversely, this means that I will always be back to some kind of beginning in my life; to a beginning of an almost unbelievable flood of possibilities that makes one waver back and forth between determination and doubt, between anxiousness and boldness. A beginning of a resurgence of *self*-determination, as first felt in adolescence, where the pursuit of independence is not yet tempered by the realisation of its inherent consequences of responsibility. While in this period of coming-of-age one dreams oneself into all kinds of places beyond the borders of the teenage bedroom, as someone who is supposed to *be* grown up one can find oneself longing for that very place that conveys a sense of security precisely because of this enclosed familiarity. Alberta has rediscovered this place of protection to a certain extent in the Kunsthalle Lissabon—or rather she rebuilt it there for herself. This exhibition is a testimony to this. In her love letter, she invites above all those artists who, sustained by the hospitality of the Kunsthalle Lissabon, made her feel a special sense of belonging through a shared sense of intimacy towards each other and within their artistic works.

As I turn away from the letter and towards the exhibition space, I follow the white semi-transparent curtain that winds its way through the entire room, giving it a new and softer shape that divides it without interrupting it. Through this exhibition design, created by Carlos Bártolo, I can relate to the intimacy between Alberta and the artists as expressed in her letter; but more so, I am given my own moment of closeness with each artist exhibited here within the walls of KL. Some of them are already familiar to me as I got to know them through their artistic work through their past solo exhibitions in this space. Some I even know personally, as I myself was part of the Kunsthalle Lissabon for an internship and got to work with them on their shows. Some I know only from hearing their names and shared stories. *Lettera d'amore* is a subtle interplay of return and discovery, in which each artwork becomes a document of both the present and the past of the Kunsthalle Lissabon.

I therefore immediately recognise the work of Portuguese artist Inês Zenha, whose solo exhibition *Ressurreição* at the beginning of last year transformed the Kunsthalle Lissabon into a semblance of a sacred bathroom, in which a fluidity of gender gently washed away the rigid norms of binarity. While their installation back then was kept in a cleansing white, in the works presented today the blue just flows towards me. *Reaching for a blue flame* is the title of the series which, in three paintings with oil on paper, depicts figures gently tangled up in themselves and in each other, with their bodies appearing more fluid than solid. Inês works always give me an incredible sense of vulnerability—one that disarms its clichéd implications of weakness, but one that I want to wrap myself in, as I can discover refuge and confidence within myself and others by its embrace.

I walk further along the curtain and reach Giulio Scalisi. A model building, *The Obelisk* stands on a round base, cut in half so that I can look inside. It reminds me of a doll's house from a futuristic parallel world, but it is empty. The only figure that appears can be spotted on the print on the wall behind the model house. This print, titled *A landscape of a gentleman*, shows a dystopian scenery with leafless trees and an almost natureless environment. Four of the obelisk houses can be recognised in the landscape; and in the lower left corner sits, or rather crouches, under one of the bare trees the main character in Giulio's work, Paul, who already appeared as the protagonist in his 2021 solo exhibition *A house for a gentleman*, in which the prototype of *The Obelisk* was presented for the first time. It is a kind of gloomy projection of a grown-up world in which the inhabitants have fled into the seclusion of their own homes to such an extent that they no longer know how to escape it—a world in which no one has ever really lived, but which I feel I've entered at one time or another.

The next moment I get is with Laure Provost, an artist whose past show I've heard many stories about. *Melting into each other, ho hot chaud it's heating dip* was presented at the Kunsthalle Lissabon in 2020. With this exhibition, Laure drenched the KL in a liquified reality melting itself into darkness. Through Alberta, I came to know that the exhibition not only stuck in the memory of those who visited it, but that its smell lingered in the walls of Kunsthalle Lissabon like an unsolicited souvenir long after it had ended—a fishy smell, as the entire floor of Laure's reality was covered in squid ink. I am now standing in front of a small puddle of it. "This one is love." The playful voice I heard whispering across the room earlier is coming from a video playing on an iPhone that's nestled in the squid ink, surrounded by rocks, twigs, leaves, two bricks, and a single tangerine. "Touch it. You can eat it." I don't know what to touch or what to eat, but I want to because the voice won't let me go.

I finally detach myself from the voice parting the curtain, and I am standing in front of a screen. I put on the headphones and immerse myself in Alice dos Reis' work *For a Life Long Disease of Copper*, which was originally shown in their solo exhibition of the same name in 2021. Through the use of digital aging effects, Alice transforms into their own grandmother in a fictional interview accounting of their grandmother's time working for a Lisbon-based company to develop its first copper IUD. It is an

ambiguous narrative in which factual events blur with sci-fi elements, representing a lived past rendered in an un-lived future capable of interacting with each other on a personal as well as a political dimension.

As I walked down the stairs to the exhibition space earlier, all visitors to the opening night were informed that there would be a performance with touch. This refers to the installation by Tamara MacArthur that I am now standing in front of. As I wait to be invited into the circular little room of blue curtains, all sorts of personal memories come flooding back to me—memories of blue glue, Britney Spears songs and stars upon stars, as I helped Tamara build their dreamy mountain landscape under a starry sky for her solo show *Wished On The Moon For More Than I Ever Knew* in 2022. The curtain opens and Tamara invites me in. They gesture for me to take a seat on the chair; everything is blue and covered in stars. As is so often the case, everything about Tamara is glittering. They begin their performance of *VIP*, a private dance of emotional intimacy that lasts just as long as the song that carries it. There are no words, and yet I feel like so much is being said through Tamara's facial expressions, through their gentle touch, and through the intuitive response they evoke in me. I don't know how the others experienced this performance, because it was just for me alone, like it was for everyone else who entered the small round room on the opening night of *Lettera d'amore*. For the remainder of the exhibition, a video of their performance on an iPad replaces Tamara's appearance alongside the transparent pleaser shoes that Tamara left behind, making their former presence tangible.

Just as I am about to leave the exhibition space, I realise that there is something else behind the wall on which Alberta's letter is printed. I turn the corner and find what looks like Kunsthalle Lissabon's teenage hideaway under the stairs. As I enter the room, I feel like I'm turning into a teenage version of my current self—a version in which I am fixated on a single figure, a pop star: La Chola Poblete. Her presence dominates the room, her face covering countless posters pasted on the walls, making her without a doubt my idol. I sit down on the floor, which is covered in fluffy purple carpet, on two cushions in a zebra pattern. In front of me is a CD player. I put on the headphones and press play, and O the nostalgia! La Chola's voice comes on and she reads out her manifesto, which she had previously performed at the opening of her solo show *PAP ART* in 2023. As I sit here in this teenage room listening to La Chola's words of unapologetic self-determination, I come to understand.

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Kunsthalle Lissabon (<https://www.kunsthalle-lissabon.org/exposicoes/alice-dos-reis-tamara-macarthur-la-chola-poblete-laure-prouvost-giulio-scalisi-and-ines-zenha-lettera-damore>)

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Since April 2024 she is working as an in-house Curator for DUPLEX_AIR. Her curatorial practice is driven by a deep curiosity about the influence of past narratives on our collective and individual abilities to imagine future worlds — and how artistic interventions can expand that imagination.

Note: Valerie worked as a curatorial assistant at the Kunsthalle Lissabon as part of an internship from June 2021 to February 2022.

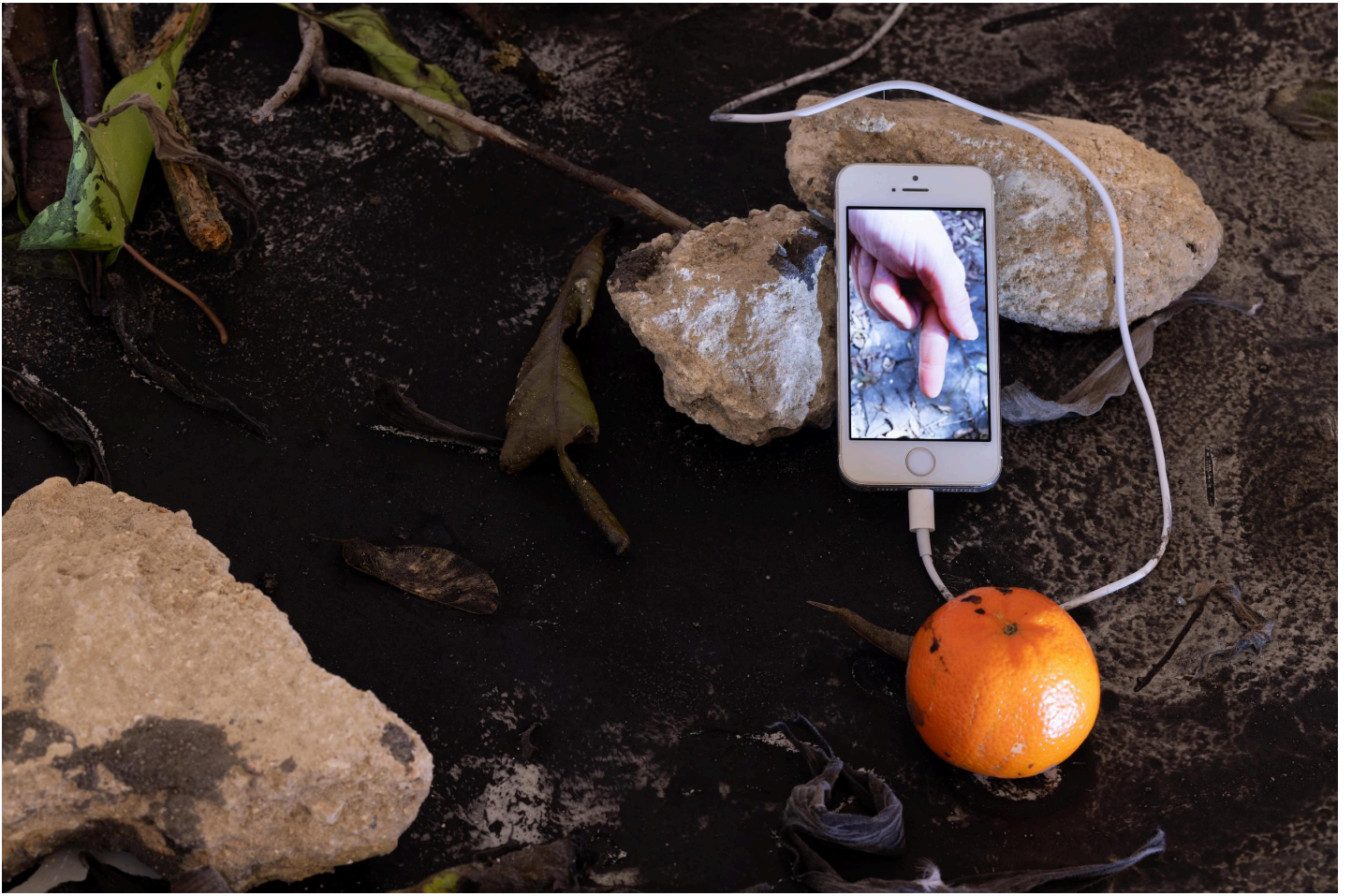
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Lettera d'amore. Exhibition views at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photos: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of the artists and Kunsthalle Lissabon.