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SUGAR RUSH

MATTEO LUCCHETTI

CONVERSATION PIECE

Exposing one's body to the risks of close proximity with others – together with the precarious state one's system of beliefs enters into – is often life-changing. At the very least, the experience is an entry point to a better understanding of oneself. In this *Sugar Rush* feature I reflect on desire and eroticism as ways to access alternative notions of precarity and the body as a 'site of common human vulnerability', as Judith Butler puts it in her book *Precarious*

Life: The Powers of Mourning and Volience (Verso, 2006). A possible counter-narrative to the 'fear of the other' mentality, ever present in political discourse. The following choir of voices has been arranged to explore the sense of anticipation, vulnerability, and erotic potential that comes when encountering someone whose position is diametrically opposed to one's own.

One work of art that evokes this 'dangerous exposure' in an incredibly profound and complex

way is the 1974 film *Conversation Piece* by Luchino Visconti. It explicitly centres around the desire to meet that 'other' as a way to expose oneself to the precarious state of danger that inevitably leads to self-knowledge and, possibly, the death of who we were before it. The main character is an American professor, played by Burt Lancaster, whose isolated life as an 18th-century painting collector and connoisseur was shaken by the arrival of a nouveau riche marquise (played by the glorious Silvana Mangano), her rebellious German lover (Helmut Berger), as well as her daughter and boyfriend, all who rent the professor's upper floor apartment in a palazzo in the centre of Rome. Their taste for modern art, unconventional sexual practices, and discombobulated liaisons clash at first, but later evolves into a questioning of the professor's certainties and desires. In this surrendering protagonist, many read a self-portrait of Visconti, who died only two years later and directed the whole movie from a wheelchair, orchestrating the acting as a stage director, with the very theatrical setting subsequently furthering in the film.

The role of the professor's beloved conversation piece paintings is an apparent reference to art historian and collector Mario Praz who significantly contributed to

the decoding of this genre of paintings in art history. Believed to be a simple still life with human figures, Praz's 1971 book *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* sheds light on how the depiction of different family groups during indoor or outdoor activities are key to understanding the social milieu that produced them.



That depiction reinforces the idea that artworks are privileged ways to access society and its ever-changing rules and constructions. Visconti's luxurious mise en scène portrays the incredible impact of *Conversation Pieces* on the imagination of many artists, and that led me to use this cinematic reference as an expedient for this feature.

Within this *Sugar Rush*, different contributors brought a fragment to a contemporary portrait of these kind of encounters, quests of identity, and unstable relationships, all efforts made in the attempt to understand ways of relating to each other. Together those voices form a present-day conversation piece, in which the precarity of the self meets the sensuous. By inviting the participants to reflect on the influences and concerns orbiting Visconti's film, I'd like to mimic the sort of remote stage orchestration that gave way to the film.



Laure Provost

**IDEALLY
THIS PRINT WILL
TAKE YOU FAR
AWAY**

Pedro Gómez-Egaña



I met an insomniac man in his early thirties who can only sleep when he's in a busy public place. Park benches, yes, but also underground stations, buses, museums, concert halls. The noisier and busier the deeper his sleep. At dinner parties he is known to wait until after dessert to slide under the table and fall asleep so deeply that no one dares to wake him. He fakes being drunk at dance clubs just so that he can pass out while people are bouncing around him.

When he isn't out in the world sleeping, he is inside his home being restless. He is a solitary guy, and a neat guy. He cooks and cleans up immediately after the food is ready and before he sits down to eat. He knows that exhaustion is useless for somnolence, but he goes to the gym anyways, and runs on the treadmill until the effort brings a promise of drowsiness, but not so much that it will render him useless. He hates inopérance. He learned French at home at night. It took him three months.

When he told me of his habits, he also told me that when he finds a place to sleep, and as he begins to make himself comfortable amongst a crowd, he immediately gets an erection. It's the same kind that he used to get as a teenager in the mornings, the classic 'morning wood', except now he gets it before and not after sleep. Now it turns out that this is the only way he can get an erection at all. Porn, random

encounters, lovers, fantasies, none of them trigger his body anymore. Only the imminence of public sleep.

Since for my work I've been researching different kinds of sleeping routines, I asked him if I could come to one of his public naps and observe. I'm fascinated by the fact that busy places could have this simultaneous effect of extreme relaxation and unique arousal. He agreed. I imagined he would suggest we go to a train station or something like that, but instead he invited me to a party that he is attending on New Year's Eve. He had been looking forward to it for months. He could try to get me a ticket. I have a soft spot for unusual ways of celebrating dates like Christmas and New Year's so I said yes.

Today is 30 December and I am writing this on the plane on my way to Berlin where me and this guy will meet. I confess that I'm not really sure exactly how to carry out this observation. I don't know how to deal with myself around him and how to be during the party. I wonder if he is an exhibitionist. I wonder what he is expecting. I wonder if he has a plan. I wonder if my presence will make the sensation even more pleasurable for him. I wonder if this has anything to do with pleasure at all.

A space engineer once described orbiting as 'the intricate administration of a perpetual fall'.

He said that if you have the right angle and the right propulsion, an object can fall and keep falling. The shape of this delicate balance is a long curve around the Earth: an orbit. I guess the sensation between arousal and sleep might be somewhat like that. The body lighting up with desire at the very moment it drifts out of consciousness. Any sense of physical direction getting lost, giving way instead to a thin tension, a round edge, a spiral.

The pilot just spoke. We've started our descent. The landscape will be much darker once we land so we should enjoy the views from up here. I love it when pilots are romantic about flying. The engines just slowed down and the nose of the plane is dipping slightly. We can all feel the drop in our gut. It feels good. It will be nice to finally land, but I also feel that deep inside we are all so sad that we can't just stay up here forever.

Ana Maria Millan



'July 3: I have cooked. The day before yesterday I slept with a guy, I'll call him Maarten. It was as if I were home again, sex, chitchat, laughing. No idea if anything will come of it. He is a bit of a womanizer and we didn't make any plans. Besides, he's popular with the women, he's very good-looking. So I'm not expecting too much, I'm staying cool. Never thought that I would find love here. I see myself alone forever so every hook-up is an added bonus. Besides, and I haven't written about this before, it's possible that they send me away, they already told me three times that a comrade was looking for me to send me on the road. He seems to have changed his mind, but he insinuated that he was only doing it for the moment and that it would

be my turn in a month. Somehow I believe him. I'm sure I'm ready. To restore myself, to absorb a bit of culture, to be in a different environment. At first I thought I wouldn't be able to, but now I believe I can. Finally do something useful. I can survive the loneliness, I survived Spain and that was really a hard experience. And who knows, maybe it's outside Colombia.'

Tanja Nijmeijer

Tanja Nijmeijer (born 13 February 1978), also known as Alexandra Nariño, is a Dutch former guerrilla fighter and English teacher who has been a member of the Colombian guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) since 2002. She has also been one of the group's leading public figures since the discovery of her diary in 2007. She was part of the negotiating team involved in successful peace talks with the Colombian government.