

Distant Thoughts – Reflective Interview with Mauro Snabaityte – Full Transcribed Interview

- Jolien Akkerman: So nice that you could be here. It is now 12 o'clock for you, right?
- Mauro Snabaityte: Exactly 12 yes.
- Jolien O yes, great. Time zones always make me really existential because it makes me think about how time is relative, haha. So my name is Jolien, of course. And I am an intern at Building Conversation. And I am doing this project together with Anastasia, who is from Greece and also living there. And we both are interns, we are from the same Master's Program at the University of Utrecht called Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy. So that is way I am here doing this interview with you. So yes, we are going to talk about Distant Thoughts. And I am really curious about how you came across this performance?
- Mauro Snabaityte: Okay, that is a good way to start. So I have this friend of mine that I met in Brazil, I think it was in 2011 or 2012, almost ten years ago. And right now she is somewhere in Europe, somewhere like Belgium or Germany, or somewhere at the intersection of these countries. And she is working – I don't know much about her job – but she is like an actress. So the place she works has something to do... One day, I think it was a year ago, she send me this proposal telling me about this chat that would happen. And if I was interested and then she told me about that it would be between two people who don't know each other and then talk about a meeting that you can choose and follow a script. And I found it interesting. And that was the first time. And then this year, the same thing happened, like a month ago or so. So I had two experiences of this conversation.
- Jolien Akkerman: So you did Distant Thoughts two times?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes. The first time I didn't send any message as feedback, because – I don't know – I was a bit... I didn't feel I had much to say. But the second time I felt that maybe the combination of both, or something.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, that is actually really interesting that you did it two times. Then you have also something to compare it with.

Mauro Snabaityte: Exactly, yes.

Jolien Akkerman: And you did it in April last time?

Mauro Snabaityte: It may have been.. I can check it, but I think it was, yes.

Jolien Akkerman: Because that was the same time I did it. I did it only once at the beginning of this internship so it was the same time.

Mauro Snabaityte: Ah, yes.

Jolien Akkerman: So how did you experience it the first time?

Mauro Snabaityte: Both of them were very similar to me. I was... I have this problem when I have to... I get a bit nervous, so it messes things up a bit. And it happened on both of them. I had difficulty picking up one experience to tell. My mind kept spinning around which do I pick, which do I pick. But once it started flowing, the conversation, I thought it went well. I found out I like hearing much more than speaking.

Jolien Akkerman: Haha, yes, I have the same. I was also beforehand... I was the one who was supposed to be calling and I get really nervous in these situations, because I don't know what is going to happen. And, I don't know, it is just really like... an overwhelming anxiety for doing this. But then the person picked up the phone and that kind of disappeared. And I also didn't know what experience to choose, but she immediately told me something personal so that made me think, okay now I can choose this experience to share with her also.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, that is interesting.

Jolien Akkerman: So in that way the other person also influenced the conversation maybe.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, as it is happening.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes.

Mauro Snabaityte: I had a lot... Let me have a look here. I was thinking about... I'm drawing on a blank here a bit.

Jolien Akkermna: That's okay. Do you want me to ask another question or are you looking for something?

Mauro Snabaityte: O no, yes go on.

Jolien Akkerman: I was wondering if you were expecting anything beforehand? Going into it, what it would be like to talk to a stranger on the phone this way?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes. Let's see. What were my feelings? Because it was the first time I ever did this. Yes, that's... I think I had high expectations because, well it could be anyone from anywhere literally, so...

Jolien Akkerman: And was that scary to you? Or really nice?

Mauro Snabaityte: The first one definitely more on the scary side. Yes. The second time it was more okay. It was also curious the first time I received the call and on the second one I had to make it.

Jolien Akkerman: Ah, you had a different role the second time?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, even though they are similar, there was this difference from the get go.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, because one of them starts with sharing a story and the other one is second.

Mauro Snabaityte: Exactly.

Jolien Akkerman: Did that change anything for you? That one time you had to start telling a story and the other time the other person had to start?

Mauro Snabaityte: It did make a huge difference. On the first... so I had it in mind, like I am going to tell this story. So I had it ready. But I wasn't sure I was... one problem for me – I am not having this problem right now for example, maybe because we are seeing each other – but I kept feeling I was in the dark. So as I was telling it, I was not sure. I kept having these self-conscious things, like – it was a guy so – is he hearing it? And then I think I got – I may have asked for bits of confirmation. Like a bit of sound or something and then I could keep going. But I kept being a little embarrassed. I wasn't sure, because I wasn't seeing him, if I was talking to much about something and the other person was expecting me to perhaps make it... is missed this...

Jolien Akkerman: The body language? That you could see that?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, so it was a bit confusing. But after half the story I felt comfortable and I understood, okay he is listening, that is good.

Jolien Akkerman: I like that you say... or "like"... the idea that you are in the dark. I think that is really a beautiful way of putting it. Because it is really... when you only hear sounds, its really a different reality. Because then it doesn't line up with what you see actually. So you have this experience of yourself in a room and then on the phone is a different world.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, I felt a lot this in the dark feeling.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes... yes. I think for me, this in the dark – being in the dark was actually really nice, because I felt like I was only a voice to her, so I am not really a person. And there is something you can hide about yourself or something. Which I experienced actually as really comfortable.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, that makes sense. That is like when you hear – I feel this way when I am listening to podcasts or radio. Like, I have no idea what that person is or zero idea about anything.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, it is also a comfortable feeling maybe. Especially with podcasts, when I'm going for a walk. Then I am physically in a park or something and then there is a conversation that happened a long time ago between two people in a different room, happening in my head. So that is really two worlds kind of clashing.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, and it also – I was thinking about that. Because it is a conversation of sorts between that person or sometimes it is two people talking to each other, but they are talking to you, in a way. Their talk is open for... intended to be heard by somebody like you, right? So... Why I was... okay, I will try something.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes.

Mauro Snabaityte: There is something I was reading about, this guy called Jean-Pierre Vernant, he is French. And he says that in old Greek the same word that originates for the... you know the stones that put over the graves for dead people? I think it's like tombstones. So he says that the same word – I think it is 'sema' – which means sort of engraving, so the same word for the tombstones is the same word for writing. Which is like grave and engrave, something like that. So because they were writing on the tombstones – and they did it in different ways, some old people did it in clay – so this was a way of transgressing the forgetfulness of ages or sanctuaries. And in this way they were carrying, sort of, the light from the doom of humanity – not being forgotten. And maybe why I thought about it was comparing the – have you ever heard of Sappho?

Jolien Akkerman: I don't think so, no.

Mauro Snabaityte: It is a lady, she lived in the island of Lesbos – it was like 600 year before the year zero. So they didn't have writing yet nor the alphabet. And she was singing. And so that was a way – nowadays we have two poems or something of her, because the great part of everything got lost. But I was thinking about it

because I was talking with this friend of mine and thinking about the thing of why we talk. And maybe it had something to do with... almost if it was something strange that happened long time ago. Like 3000 years ago or something, we started doing this strange thing. And it finds a way to allow us to do things that couldn't be done any other way expect for this communication with music and... but I had some conclusion, I will remember it.

Jolien Akkerman: Haha, that's okay. I really... talking is also the only... or words, or using your voice, is the only way to connect with others, in a way. It is a... or to pass on messages.

Mauro Snabaityte: And some people say that even plants do that. In their way. I hear it a lot nowadays but apparently its not that, it's been happening in studies since like the 1960 or something. But what I recently saw is that there is almost like a Wi-Fi network that they have with the fungi and that they can sort of transmit messages. Maybe not intentionally but it happens.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes. You also have these trees in a forest and it is something that is called... crowing? Something with crowing [*crown shyness*]... well it is these trees that are growing in a forest and the branches and leaves at the top don't touch each other.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, yes!

Jolien Akkerman: Have you seen this? There is also this communication where there is this spaces left between them at the top.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, that is so cute.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes... I am writing my Master's thesis about ecology and performance.

Mauro Snabaityte: O, yes?

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, so I am really into these plants talking and plant communication. And how we can encounter plants as living –

that how they move is slowly so they have this different temporality and their time structure is completely different than humans.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes, that is nice.

Jolien Akkerman:

I find that also really comforting. But maybe back to Distant Thoughts, but also related to this conversation. Could you maybe say what it meant in this case to talk to a stranger? Because it was also set up, this conversation. So in a way it is a different kind of conversation than, I don't know, talking to someone at the supermarket that you don't know. Because it is supposed to happen. Do you understand what I mean?

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes, it is not that spontaneous.

Jolien Akkerman:

Yes. So how do you relate to that in this case?

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes... I have a tendency to prefer the spontaneous one. Or maybe not prefer, but maybe to be better at it. And there is also the fact that it's between – that there is the cell phone in between. Or maybe the computer. It represents a downside for me. I'm not sure why, if it is just me deciding to have a difficulty with this medium or if it is just because I resent it a bit. I have like three or four people that are real friends of mine and they are all far away, so the only way we talk is this palliative thing with the way we are talking right now. So we're not exactly meeting and it is never the same. I really miss the thing we have which is just being in the same physical place or maybe walking together. So there is that too. But I had a meeting one time, I think it was – a personal meeting – some eight years ago. And it was a bit of a set-up, almost like this. Because we didn't know each other and it was this girl who always lived in the same town, but we never got to meet each other. So she send met this message via Facebook and we had a lot of friend in common but we didn't know each other. So we said, let's meet like three o'clock at this square by the church.

And I got reminded of it because it was one of those stories that I could have told about a first meeting on Building Conversation. Because it was somehow remarkable. But it was also awkward because of the circumstances. So we didn't have a script like at Building Conversation – and the first twenty minutes or so it was... we had no idea. Maybe overthinking things and that gets in the way.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, maybe also because of the expectations.

Mauro Snabaityte: Surely, yes.

Jolien Akkerman: But do you think it is different, for example this Building Conversation piece where it is also a performance in a way?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, it certainly... because in a way, in the best cases even when we try to get the performance out of the way, we are still playing ourselves or something. But we still have the script... so it gets...

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, it is maybe something you can hide behind. That it is a performance, so you can hide behind that.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, and it maybe brings back the question of are we not sometimes, in real life, doing that too?

Jolien Akkerman: Yes.

Mauro Snabaityte: Like, we meet somebody in a store where we are shopping. And are we not sometimes performing a bit without the other people knowing? And are they not performing for us too?

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, exactly. This is also a book by – what is his name – Irvin Goffman I think. And it is about the dramaturgy of everyday life [*the presentation of self in everyday life*].... And that is exactly about the roles you perform in your everyday life and then, if it is a performative conversation, than it is also really clear that you are performing. Because in everyday life, you may do also unconsciously or happens automatically. And then

if it is, for example in Distant Thoughts, really a performance, then that part of it becomes maybe amplified in a way... I am just thinking, haha.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes. I must confess that the second time I told a real story about this real... it's a boy that I met, he was four years of age. And then I met his parents too, and they were sort of people that come traveling around, selling art and stuff. So they were from Argentina. And I became real friends with their boy. And he was the one I remembered. So I told this story. 100% true. But the first time, I had such a hard time picking one, that I sort of mixed two different ones and made up some bits to make it... or at least make it sort of exciting. So I combined two real experiences and invented some details, but I think it went alright.

Jolien Akkerman:

Yes, that is of course something that you can do with this. And no one will know. Only you. And me now.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes.

Jolien Akkerman:

That is a possibility of course, to just make something up.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes. And then I think he believed it. I am not sure, but I think he did. And he was a bit awestruck. I didn't put in unbelievable things, but it was almost too good to be true, because... it was like I met this guy at a restaurant and he says that there is a play going on in the theatre nearby. And this is real place, because it is a place – not in this town but in the town I lived last year – so it is a place that I go by every day. So he invites me to the theatre... O, no! There was a good bit – the true bit. Because I sat at the table, after I picked up all the food at the buffet, and he was there at my table. And he says I can sit but that he occupied it while I was away. So I sit there and he says there is this play going on and he has an extra ticket. So, okay, I agree and we go together to the theatre and we get in and sit down, side by side seats. And he says he is going to the toilet. So he

spends like three minutes, five minutes there and is not coming back, the curtains are opening, there is the ringing of the three bells and the play starts. And he is not coming back. So the first actor starts taking the stage and suddenly I see him up there as one of the characters. So I am like, oh my what happened? So yes, at this point there were like two stories – one of a guy and one of a girl – all mixed up. And it goes on.

Jolien Akkerman:

It is a really good story, haha.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes, and most of it is true.

Jolien Akkerman:

But do you feel like you needed to make this up because you needed to perform maybe in a way? Or tell something exciting? That you had that urge?

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes, a bit of both. And there was some reason why I was telling you this... maybe this is in regard of making things... meaningful I guess.

Jolien Akkerman:

And did you feel this as a responsibility maybe to the other person?

Mauro Snabaityte:

I feel that. I feel like I cannot tell something that is sort of boring. So it has to be outstanding.

Jolien Akkerman:

So you had kind of an urge to entertain this person? You felt responsible to entertain them in a way with this story?

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes.

Jolien Akkerman:

I can really imagine that. I think that if I would do Distant Thoughts again and I would be the one telling my story first, I would maybe also feel the same way. That I would have the responsibility to set the mood for the whole conversation, or something like that. That responsibility to the other person.

Mauro Snabaityte:

Yes.

Jolien Akkerman:

O, I am just looking at the time so maybe we should close off.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes. Is there something else that you feel we left behind or something?

Jolien Akkerman: No, no definitely not. I think it was a really nice conversation. And we discussed really interesting things. Thank you so much for this.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes. Just one thing. Have you heard of a guy called Richard Linklater?

Jolien Akkerman: No, I don't think so.

Mauro Snabaityte: He makes movies. He is from Texas. Maybe you have heard about one of the movies, he has a lot of them. There is this one, it is really about talking and he has amazing dialogues all over. But there is this movie called Before Sunrise. Which has two following movies called Before Sunset and Before Midnight.

Jolien Akkerman: Is this about two people meeting and the story kind of continues?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, I know these, yes.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, I just made a note about it because I really love his movies. I look at the specifics of – because I write sometimes, so I am always checking how I can make it work in writing and this is one of the places I draw inspiration from. And there is a very nice scene on the first movie, Before Sunrise, where they make a mock phone call. So for example, they already know each other but they are two people in Vienna, one of them is from the United States and the girl is from Paris. So it is a really short scene but I really like it. So they say like, okay, now I am going to call my friend and tell why I am not there. And then they start pretending to call their friends, and sometimes they break the act. Not the actors but, the characters. Yes...

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, I see the similarity. This is about that they meet and decide if they get together again right, a love story?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes!

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, I do know it. I didn't know the name of the director though.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, he has a really strong thing about dialogues. I always admire that. It is not exactly like Building Conversation, but it is almost a parallel thing.

Jolien Akkerman: Also really meta.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, really!

Jolien Akkerman: Which this Building Conversation, Distant Thoughts, also really has. Because you meet a stranger and then you talk about meeting stranger. That also has that meta...

Mauro Snabaityte: Exactly. And then... there is a lot of things unfolding if we start going, because the movie is also a sort of – he is sending the message to somebody.

Jolien Akkerman: O really, yes.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, so there are a lot of layers.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes I love that sort of stuff. I really like all the connections you make to different works and books and things. Also in the reflection that you send. That is really nice.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, I do that sometime. I am better in writing I think than in talking. Expect if we are taking it easy or something.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, I understand what you mean. I have the same I think. Sometimes I need to think about – like gather my thoughts, write them down and then it is a coherent story. Otherwise it is just blebleblebeleb.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes... I think that was all that I – I just had some, yes, maybe a meaningless bit. But... where do I start. Ah, no, I think that was it.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes? Sure?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes. It was just about language barriers or something. It is funny because we are both talking in English right now and it is a foreign language to both of us, right?

Jolien Akkerman: Yes, it seems like a meaningless thing maybe but is really present in these kinds of conversation. Because I always feel that I can express myself better in Dutch. And with Distant Thoughts, I was actually talking to a Dutch girl but we still kept talking in English, because the script was in English.

Mauro Snabaityte: That is awkward, isn't it?

Jolien Akkerman: Yes it was a little awkward. At the end of the conversation, she asked me 'but you are Dutch right?' and I was like 'yes, you too right?' and then we still continued in English. But otherwise I would also have been weird, because then we spoke Dutch and then the script was in English. So then we would switch or translate it?

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, that doesn't work.

Jolien Akkerman: But still, these language things are always present. Especially when you don't see each other maybe, because you also don't know for example cultural behaviours maybe.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, sure.

Jolien Akkerman: Yes. Well maybe that is a good closing point.

Mauro Snabaityte: Yes, that's it.