

A Decisive Moment: Margret Wibmer's *Salon d'amour*

'Love', that most loaded word, is the subject of artist Margret Wibmer's unapologetically intimate work, *Salon d'amour*. Without screens or networks, recordings or photographs, love is expressed through language, in the present moment, from one person to another.

From the first ceremonious moments of this performance, visitors are invited to wear one of the unique masks Wibmer designed for *Salon d'amour*. No longer a traditional theater space, the stage area has been reinvented as a semi-private chamber where people can comfortably sit in pairs. Love letters in hand, participants read out loud to each other, choosing at will to be a reader, listener, or observer. Crossing generations and languages, these expressions (or confessions) of love by globally recognized artists, poets, composers, and others, reanimate the words on the page: breathing life into letters from the past. Intermittent live readings from two actors give focus to the act of reading and listening, while a soundscape composed by Robert Poss supports the warm and gently mysterious atmosphere of this unusual setting.

Unlike shares, likes, or views, the value of a love letter does not change in relation to the number of times it has been read. With every new reading, new readers enact singular and uniquely formed relations. By reading words written by another, they repeat that universal story again and again. Words that used to have a more secure place in our lives (and especially in art) have become suspect, and are more fragile now – unique, universal, love – and they trouble us. Unable or afraid to claim them fully, we have learned how to gratify ourselves, and live fluently among unlimited choices, where we trust matchmaking algorithms more than ourselves. We have a tendency to sustain compromised relationships where love is a myth, and where it is easier to be cynical about love than to admit to being in it. But love, if anything, is decisive. Being a part of the perpetuation of scenario where decisions are inconsequential precludes the possibility of decisive moments and any appreciation of their worth. A love letter belongs to such a moment, a notion that is most obvious when reading one that has been written for you.

Precisely how the reading of a love letter to a masked stranger in a dark theater space has affected or altered the people involved is unquantifiable. There was no exit survey following *Salon d'amour*, nor could there have been. Wibmer's work addresses that which has been pushed aside in a system of consumption-oriented response and production. As with her previous performative works where she reshaped the flow of time and put its abstract equivalency in monetary value into question, here too, she makes space for another welcome disruption in productivity: love.

Through the focused use of stage lighting and sound, Wibmer places moments of attention on various voices in the room, shifting perspectives from one speaker to another, and one listener to another. Combining these precisely formulated moments with copies of letters directed at specific people alters preconceived ideas about universal love. Any real love letter, as with any real love, is 'written' for the world. It is not that I love you, but "I love to you", as Luce Irigaray famously wrote. While the details in a letter may specify a person or time period, love is less fixed; love is not losing nor giving yourself, but being able to traverse your own permeable borders with grace and ease; inviting the 'here' and 'there' of yourself and the other. When we breathe with another, with trust, with abandon, with presence, we can love.

Wibmer's work turns this relationship into a conversation that happens through the participation of strangers in a room, all of whom breathe together, and neglect none of the above – trust, abandon, presence.

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