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Performing the self: the construction of Casa Malaparte as living images

The paper discusses architectural design as a transdisciplinary practice that interlinks architecture, performance, and the moving image through a building example: the Casa Malaparte, the house of Italian writer Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957) built in Capri, Italy, between 1938 and 1942. Malaparte stated many times that he considered his house the best portrait of himself and he called the Casa Malaparte ‘A House Like Me’. Through theoretical, archival, and fieldwork research, the paper argues that the house performs Malaparte’s autobiography. Unlike the conventional architectural design process, the Casa Malaparte was built by its owner Curzio Malaparte in collaboration with a master builder in an improvisational manner that incorporated methods of cinematic framing, material collage, and assemblage. The house is discussed as a self-portrait of its inhabitant questioning what could be architecture’s role in mirroring the self and theorises Casa Malaparte’s creation as a practice that works in between architecture, performance, and the visual arts. By drawing on Bertolt Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’, Antonin Artaud’s ‘theatre of cruelty’, and Denis Diderot discussion of the ‘tableau vivant’ which literally means ‘living pictures’, the paper provides theoretical frameworks that bring together spatial and performance theories. The Casa Malaparte as a tableau vivant is discussed as an alternative performative device that can potentially expand architectural design and render it as a living practice.

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Introduction

The paper discusses the house as an autobiographical performance through a building example: the Casa Malaparte, the house of Italian writer Curzio Malaparte built in Capri, Italy, between 1938 and 1942. Malaparte stated many times that he considered his house the best portrait of himself and he called the Casa Malaparte ‘A House Like Me’.

Unlike the conventional architectural design process, the Casa Malaparte was built by Malaparte in collaboration with a master builder in an improvisational manner that incorporated methods of cinematic framing, material

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collage and assemblage. Living in the house while working on it, Malaparte's life became the script of the house which he called 'A House Like Me'. Rather than becoming static, fixed, and stable, the house was physically as well as imaginatively in motion, informed, transformed, and reformed by Malaparte's actions and imagination.

A walk through the house, interweaved with theoretical, historical, archival, and fieldwork research, becomes the research method for exploring the house's role as a portrait of its author and contributes to the theorisation of its making by means of the performative practice of the *tableau vivant* that renders architectural design as a living practice.

Curzio Malaparte

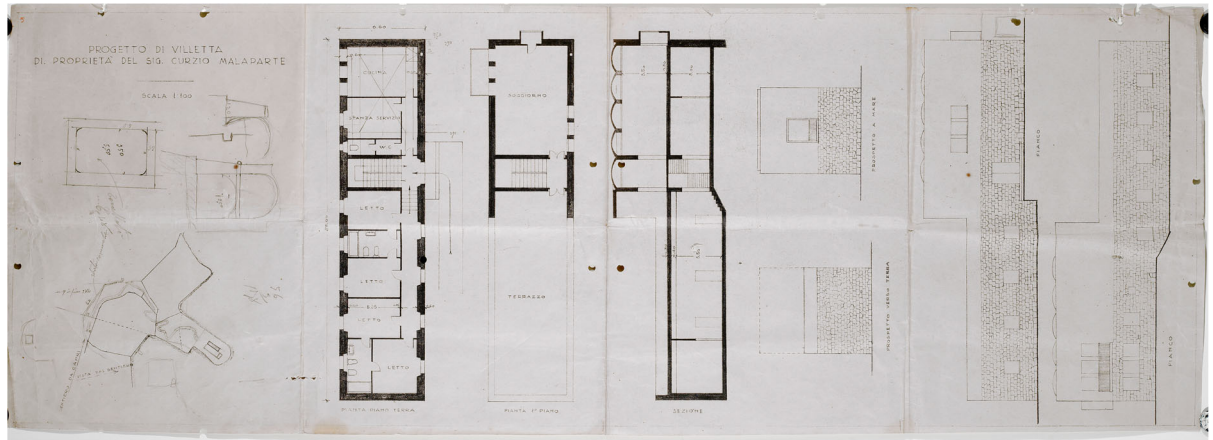
Curzio Malaparte, the renowned writer and journalist, was born in Prato, Tuscany, in 1898, to an Italian mother and a German father. He was an early supporter of the Italian fascist movement and he served in the First World War. In 1931, he was exiled to the island of Lipari for two and a half years, sentenced by the fascist government after his publication of the book *Technique du Coup d'Etat* (1931) in which he attacked both Hitler and Mussolini. In the Second World War, Malaparte worked as a correspondent at the Eastern Front. His best-selling books *Kaputt* (1944) and *The Skin* (1949) are testimonies of his experience of the war. Malaparte changed his political position to the left after the war.

During the time of his imprisonment, Malaparte wrote the book *Escapes in Prison*, as opposed to *Escapes from Prison*, 'as forms of mental escape, suggesting that one can imprison the body but the mind of a writer cannot be restrained'.¹ His romanticised idea of imprisonment in the small Mediterranean island and the sense of freedom manifested through art and poetry triggered the desire to search for a remote plot exposed to nature and the sea, where he would isolate himself and embark on his mental journeys. In 1938, Malaparte bought the land at Punta Massulo, a nature reserve site and, despite that building was illegal, initiated the procedures for applying for building permission.

Authorship

For many years, the Casa Malaparte was attributed to the Italian architect Adalberto Libera, but his actual involvement in the project is still in dispute. Malaparte stated that Libera's contribution was limited to legal procedures and that he designed the house himself 'helped not by architects and engineers (save for legal issues, legal formalities), but by a simple master builder'.² Marida Talamona in her book, *Casa Malaparte* (1992), provides historical evidence that questions Libera's authorship over Casa Malaparte and instead renders its owner the author of his own house.

According to Talamona, Libera's proposal for the house was submitted for permission to the Building Commission of the City of Capri in March 1938. Building permission was given with an exception to the rule, on the basis that the house would be invisible from its surroundings.³ Talamona published



the drawings (two plans, a section, and an elevation), which she argues were Libera's proposal of Casa Malaparte (Fig. 1), in her essay 'Lo Scrittore e l'Architetto' included in *Adalberto Libera: Opera Completa* (1989).⁴ This book accompanied a major exhibition that celebrated Libera's work — as one of the most important modernist architects in Italy — twenty-six years after he died. A year later, in 1990, Talamona first published *Casa Malaparte* in Italian, where she extensively discusses the house's authorship.

Talamona revealed that Libera was absent from the construction site and did not supervise any of the building works. At the time, Libera was busy working on the EUR project Palazzo dei Ricevimenti and dei Congressi in Rome, a big and important project for Mussolini's government. In addition, she explained how Malaparte's in-situ decisions along with his master builder and close collaborator, Adolfo Amirano, radically transformed Libera's proposal. The decisions that concerned practical solutions, like the position of the water tank, the adjustment of the plan's footprint to fit the restrictions of the rocky site, the addition of the external staircase (a prominent feature of the house), the pompeian red colour, and the white curvy wall on the roof terrace, substantially transformed the design of the house and the way it relates to the landscape.

Opposed to Talamona's position, in a more recent publication entitled, *Adalberto Libera: Casa Malaparte a Capri 1938–1942*, Mario Ferrari argues that Libera is the author of Casa Malaparte. Ferrari's study is based on a comparative analysis between Libera's proposal against the house as it is finally built. In his analysis, Ferrari argues that the house as it stands today (Fig. 2), bears similarities with a 'second version' (Fig. 3) where Malaparte tried to translate into drawings Libera's ideas.⁵ He quotes Malaparte: 'Dear Amirano, I phone the Architect Libera more and more, hoping to find someone: no answer. I don't know if you see him or received his letter [...] I tried to translate his ideas into drawings that I mail to you hoping you appreciate them [...]' (Fig. 4).⁶ However, Ferrari, like Talamona, acknowledges that Libera was absent from the construction site. Additionally, he acknowledges that those sketches by Malaparte are 'the principal changes

Figure 1.
'Progetto Di Viletta', initial design
for Casa Malaparte, by Adalberto
Libera, March 1938, courtesy of
MART — Archivio del 900

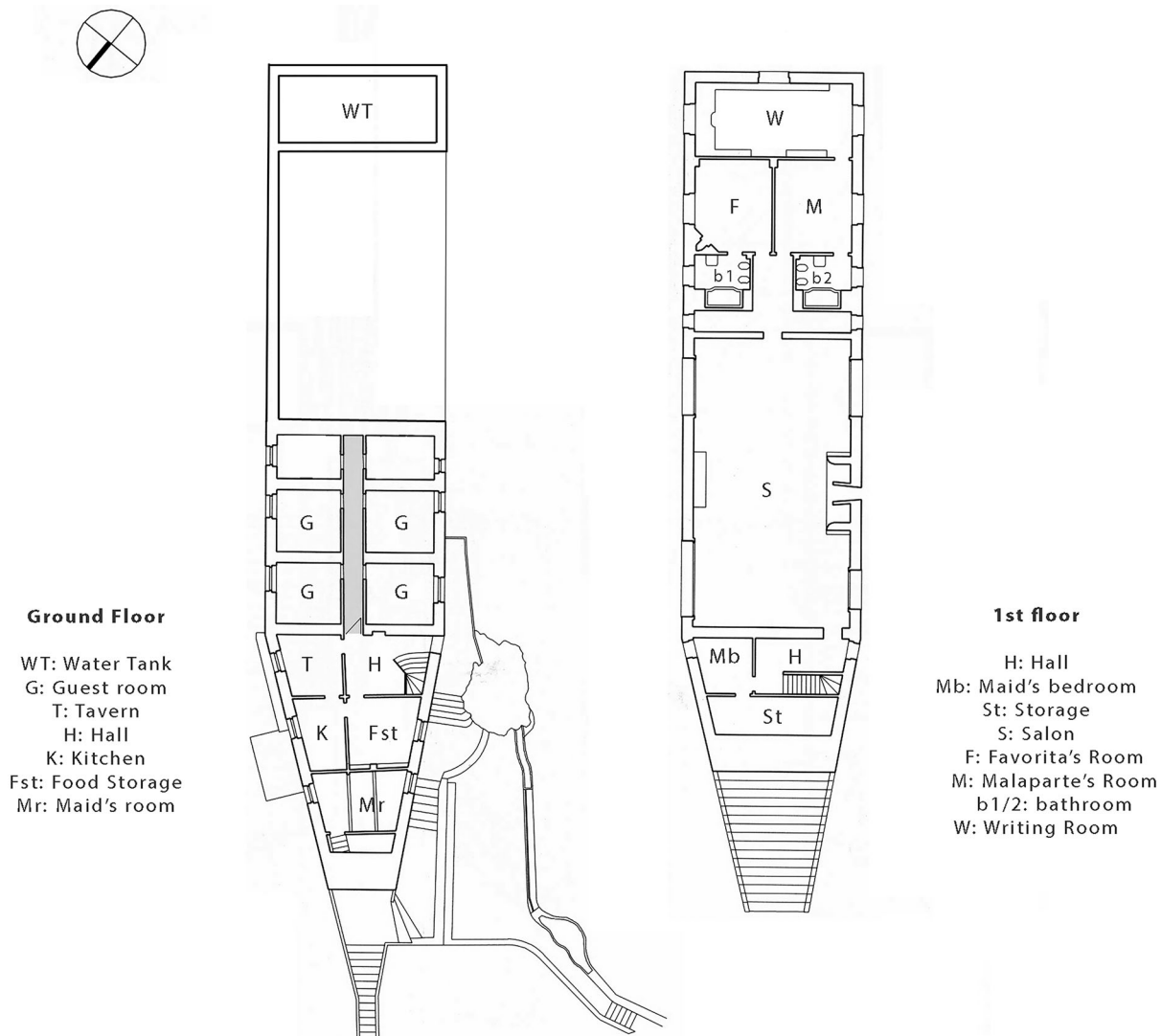
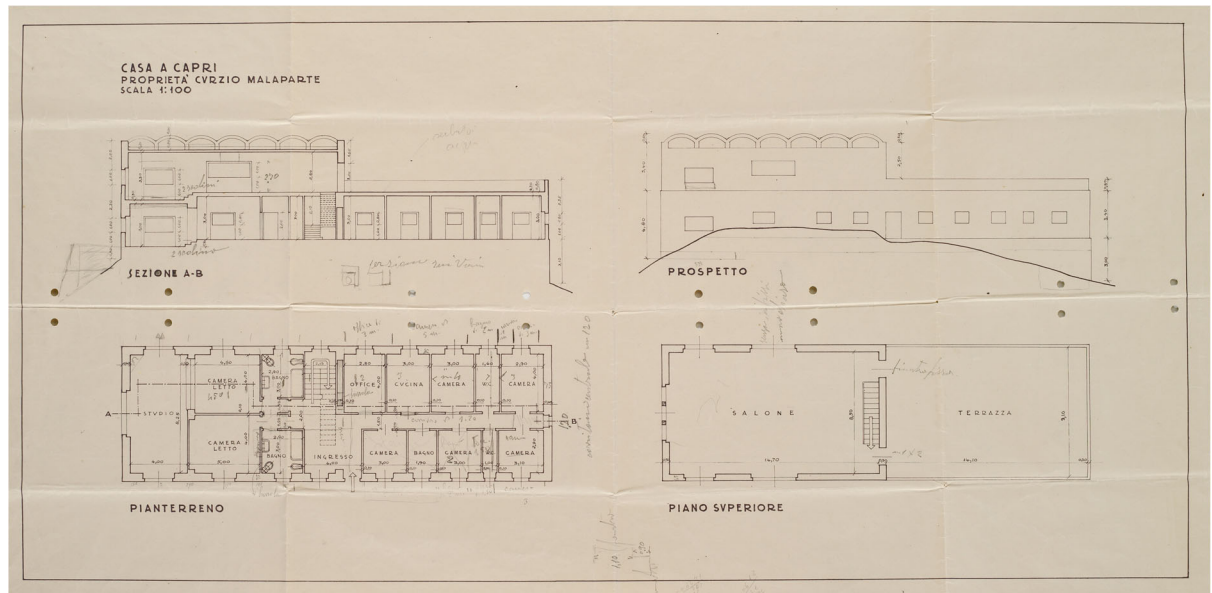


Figure 2.
Drawings of Casa Malaparte in its
built form by the author, 2010

that transform the image of the villa'.⁷ In this sense, Ferrari seems to argue that Malaparte did not start from tabula rasa, in which case the question is what authorship is and how it is defined.

As both Talamona and Ferrari argue, Libera did not include Casa Malaparte in any publication of his collected projects during his lifetime. The first time an article on Casa Malaparte was published in an Italian design magazine was in 1980 in *Domus* by John Hedjuk entitled 'Casa Come Me: Cable from Milan'. A year later, in 1981, Manfredo Tafuri, Italian historian and critic, published in *Gran Bazaar* 15 an article entitled 'L'Ascesi e il Gioco'.⁸ Later, in 1989, in *Lotus* 60, further articles were published.



Libera died in 1963, when the *Domus* magazine dedicated articles to his work, with no mention to Casa Malaparte. The same year, Jean Luc Godard's film *Le Mepris* (1963) was released where Casa Malaparte is portrayed as an impressive Italian 'modern' house. The film was a huge success that brought worldwide attention to this architecture 'masterpiece'. Three years later, in 1966, Casa Malaparte was for the first time attributed to Libera and ever since it has become an object of dispute.

The first publication that made this association between Casa Malaparte and Libera is the 1966 article 'Adalberto Libera (1903–1963)' by Alberto Alieri, Murizio Clerici, Francesco Palpacelli, and Giuseppe Vaccaro.⁹ The drawings that illustrate the article are the same ones held in Libera's archive in the Pompidou Centre in Paris.¹⁰ Casa Malaparte's file in the Architecture Centre, Pompidou, consists of three basic technical drawings, at a scale of 1:200, that outline, with inconsistencies and without much information, the house in its built form: with a roof plan, a first floor plan, and an outline facade view of the house on the cliff without any windows (Fig. 5). After close study of Pompidou Centre's archival material by the author, these basic drawings seem too immature to be Libera's, and it is suggested that they were possibly made after his death, by his students for publication purposes.

The battle for Casa Malaparte's authorship began after Libera's death, at a time when the house gained international attention through Godard's film. During Libera's lifetime, Casa Malaparte was never published as his project, possibly because of the failed collaboration with his client and the radical transformations his design proposal underwent.

Figure 3.
Adalberto Libera's revised design of Casa Malaparte, April 1938, courtesy of MART — Archivio del 900

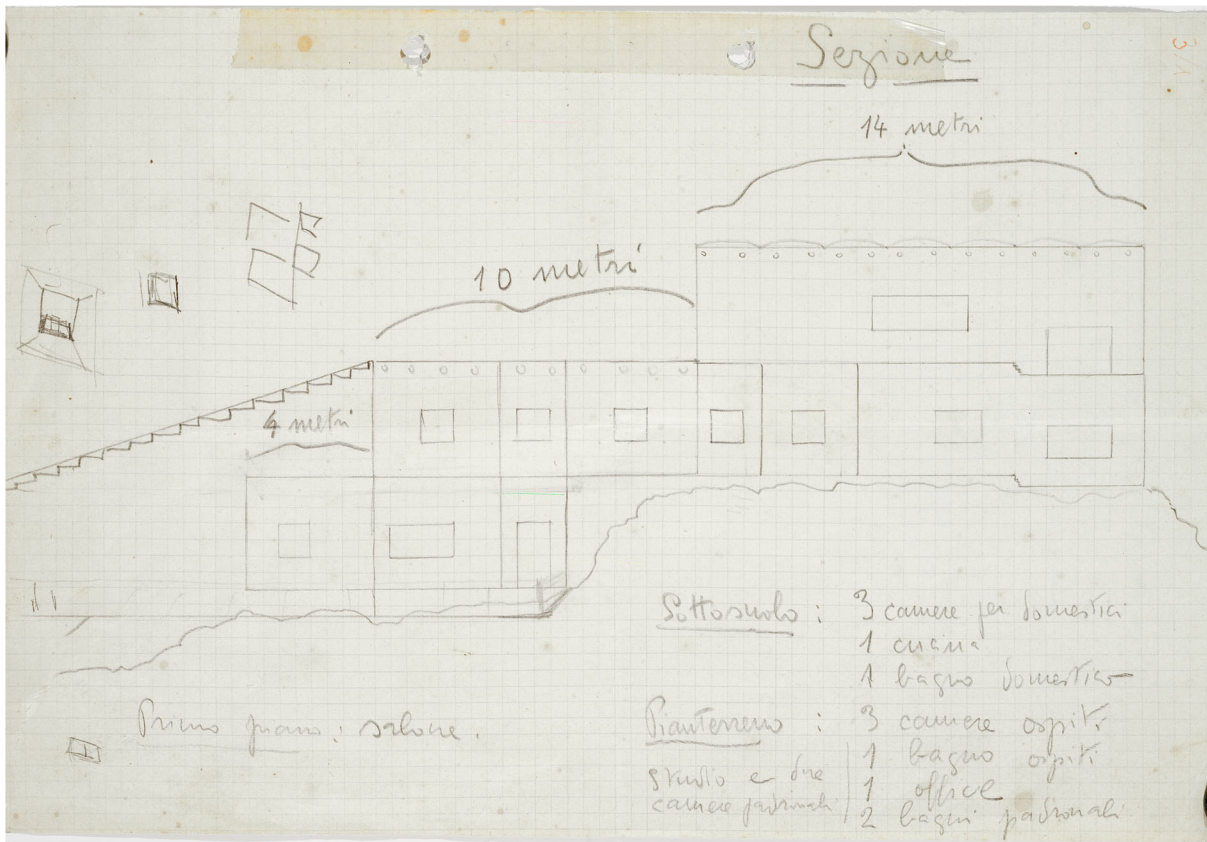


Figure 4.
Curzio Malaparte and Adolfo
Amitrano sketches on Libera's
revised design, June 1938, courtesy
of MART — Archivio del 900

In his 1981 article, Tafuri offered a critical response about the link already made between Libera and Casa Malaparte. He writes:

The way in which Malaparte would weave his self-images with the history of the house, suggests a close collaboration with Libera from early on [...] We are in possession of sufficient evidence to believe that the interplay between Libera and Malaparte was less smooth than it might appear at first sight: at any rate, the weight of the client and his commission is too great for us not to detect, in interpreting the work, the subjective practices that guide its use.¹¹

Tafuri points out to the 'subjective practices' through which Malaparte interweaves 'his self-images' with the house, alluding to its autobiographical character that cannot be ignored 'in interpreting the work'.

'A house like me'

The day I started building a house, I did not know I would draw a picture of myself; the best of all I have drawn so far in literature.¹²

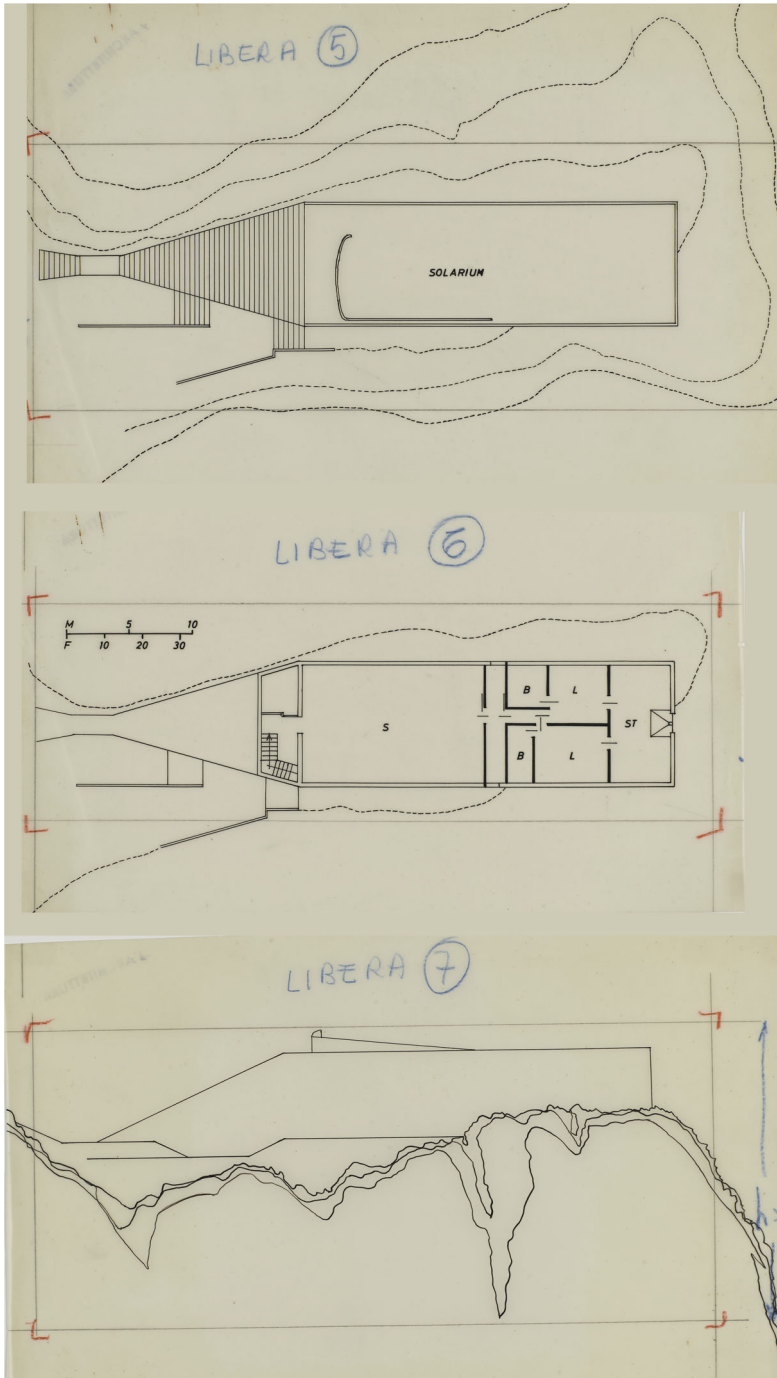


Figure 5.
Drawings of Casa Malaparte in
Libera's file, undated, courtesy of
Architecture Centre, Pompidou
Centre, Paris

Despite his many textual autobiographies, Malaparte stated multiple times that he considered his house the best portrait of himself. Building a house as a self-portrait, like in the case of Casa Malaparte, involves a multiplicity of actions: Malaparte's acting behaviour in public and how he performed his multiple selves as a writer and public persona, the act of staging his built portrait as a creative action, as well as the act of inhabitation. Living and building interweave into a series of staged self-portraits, each a partial self-portrait of Malaparte.

Self-portraits and autobiographies are preoccupied with the reconstruction and projection of the self into the public. Initially, in the Renaissance, portraiture became an independent art form following the changes in the social status of the artist, and self-portraits were used for commercial purposes. Artists constructed their self-image for advertising themselves to the public and to potential patrons. Later, during the late twentieth century, artists



Figure 6.
Curzio Malaparte, Paris, 1949,
photographed by Robert Doisneau,
Getty Images / Ideal Image

deconstructed the idea of the portrait as an idealised whole image and began approaching it as a self-explorative tool. This came along with the rise of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century and new theories of subjectivity, which changed the self's perception from fixed and whole, to pliable and fragmented.

In a collection of photographs published in *Malaparte. Una Proposta* (1982), Malaparte's photographic portraits rarely give the impression of being spontaneous snapshots; they seem staged, like his house, evoking a strong sense of self-consciousness with regard to the projection of his public image (Fig. 6). Even his last days in hospital battling with lung cancer were photographically documented, when he virtually became the centre of public attention. As Talamona describes it:

In the spring of 1957, as Curzio Malaparte lay dying of cancer in a Roman hospital, not a day passed without at least one major Italian newspaper devoting an article to him. Tempo published daily what amounted on an hourly bulletin on his condition. It was as though all of Italy had stood by his deathbed, praising him, disparaging him, mourning him. Nothing could have pleased Malaparte more. By 1957, Curzio Malaparte's status in Italy reached that of a national celebrity.¹³

Under the spotlight and by being extremely self-conscious, Malaparte knew how to use the media, which he handled provocatively to construct his public image and to maintain the public's attention. His photographic and literary portraits play a significant role in the projection of his public image as a writer, journalist, artist, and political persona that render him ambiguous and enigmatic.

In regard to the performative element inherent in portrait making, in 'Self-Portraits as Presentations of Self', Ray Crozier and Paul Greenhalg explain that 'self-presentation may be defined in terms of those aspects of a person's behaviours that are designed to influence the impressions that other people will form of that person'.¹⁴ The self-image is not the self but a projected image to be seen by others. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman illustrates through social studies that in their everyday life people are involved in role-playing for staging their multiple selves in social interactions.

Richard Schechner calls this behaviour of acting out another (from the self) 'restored behaviour' and he refers to actions that are played out consciously. It is noted that people become self-conscious when in front of a mirror, a camera, or an audience. Marvin Carlson explains that 'restored behaviour [...] points to a quality of performance *not* involved with the display of skills but rather with a certain distance between "self" and behaviour, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage'.¹⁵ Self-presentation involves actions of 'restored behaviour' for an audience. Pointing at the audience-performer relationship of live-theatre, Schechner argues that 'a per-

formance is an activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group'.¹⁶

Understanding the idea of the self-portrait as an image, which is different yet related to the author, Casa Malaparte is interpreted as another self-consciously constructed image of its author. The indicative sense of theatricality embedded in the way Malaparte performed himself in public is also reflected in the deliberate theatrical staging of his house. In this intentionally staged self-portrait, what could be architecture's role in mirroring the self?

Walking Casa Malaparte

A walk through the house becomes the research method for retelling Casa Malaparte's story while exploring the house's role as a portrait of its author. This method takes into consideration the lived experience as a source of knowledge in architectural criticism. Through the walk, the researcher as an embodied subject becomes an 'architect-performer', an agent for interpreting and re-performing the house's story.¹⁷ The architect-performer is a subject attuned to movement: physical (moving through space) and mental (moving in time through memory, emotion, and imagination). This active engagement with the temporality of places aims at drawing findings inaccessible through other means of research. The walk and the on-site observations interweave with theoretical, historical, and archival research to create a piece of writing by assembling relational fragments (textual and photographic) that punctuate the linear journey of the house with other times and places. These punctuations interrupt the spatial continuity of the walk, with multiple temporalities and research positionalities that aim to add more voices (from the objective to the subjective, from the distant to the intimate) for the interpretation of the house. This method draws insights from Jane Rendell's 'site-writing' as a form of critical spatial practice that discusses the relation between the critic and the object/place of study by exploring the construction of different subject positions in architecture criticism.¹⁸ It also draw on Michel de Certeau's 'space as a practiced place', where the walker escapes the imaginary totalisation of vision of the voyeur and the imposed ordering system.¹⁹

Through the walk, Casa Malaparte is discussed below as a series of autonomous staged scenes, each a partial self-portrait of its inhabitant, creating connections between the house and the self. The construction of the house is discussed as an assemblage of material and immaterial images that reflect and reconstruct its inhabitant.

The cliff of Punta Massulo

To reach the house, you need to walk a two-kilometre path on the cliff before arriving at the private part that lies within Malaparte's property (Fig. 7). During the walk, images from Malaparte's literary descriptions of his hometown Prato, with its windy, green landscape and surrounding mountains Spazzavento,



Figure 7.
View of Casa Malaparte,
photographed by the author, 2010

Retaia, and Monteferrato interweave with the experience of the passage of Punta Massulo. In the short story 'City Like Me' in his book *Woman Like Me*, he writes:

I would like to build it on the ledge of a plain, in the mouth of a windy valley, at the foot of the hills green with vines, olive trees, woods, cypresses, oaks and holm oaks: behind it mountains, with naked peaks and forests on the sides, where one can see the rock emerge between the broom. Soft yet pointed mountains which would encourage you to climb them and at the very end, just under the peak, would break your legs with fatigue. (And I would call them Spazzavento, Retaia, Monteferrato.)²⁰

Malaparte intervened at the public passage of the cliff by planting olive trees (Fig. 8), which form part of Tuscany's landscape, where he spent his childhood years. The olive trees punctuate the passage of Punta Massulo that becomes an extended entrance of the house, reminiscing of another place and time.

Staircase

As soon as you reach the house, you encounter the iconic external staircase (Fig. 9). Its geometry, with the gradually widening steps, creates a warped perspective that resonates with Giorgio De Chirico's paintings, where multiple vanishing points deconstruct the truthful perspective of 'real life'. From a reversed point of view, as John Hedjuk writes, 'the stair acts as the seating for a theater', against the dramatic planted rocks that stand as a spectacle of nature; a staged scenery.²¹

Figure 8.
View of olive trees planted at Punta
Massulo, collage by the author,
2010



Figure 9.
View of external staircase, Casa
Malaparte, photographed by the
author, 2010



The idea of the staircase came later on site. Talamona references two testimonies, one by *Ciro Amitrano*, who was the son's master builder with whom Malaparte had close collaboration, and another by his friend, ambassador *Guglielmo Rulli*, arguing that Malaparte's idea of the staircase was taken from the *Annunziata Church* in *Lipari* (Fig. 10), where he was exiled.

A photograph dated March 1940 shows a cut in the volume of the staircase, where Malaparte considered placing the entrance of the house so that it would



Figure 10.
View of Annunziata Church, Lipari,
photographed by the author, 2017

directly lead to the Salon.²² The decision to close the opening and leave the staircase unobstructed removed any functional purpose from the staircase. Surplus and poetic, the external staircase of Casa Malaparte contradicts the early modernist theory of functionalism and creates a ritualistic ascent that turns the roof terrace into a symbolic type of 'altar'.

Roof terrace

The absence of any boundaries on the roof terrace positions the body against the empty space that expands infinitely towards the sea horizon. For Malaparte, creating an unsettling feeling was intentional. He even bet with his friend Rulli, who was also building a house on Capri, that he would build the most dangerous house on Punta Massulo. He writes:

No other place in Italy has such broad horizons, or such a depth of feeling. It is without doubt a place that is only suitable for the strong and for the free-spirited. How easy it is to allow oneself to be dominated by Nature and become its slave, to

allow oneself to be engulfed by its delicate yet savage jaws, to allow oneself to be swallowed up by Nature as Jonah was by the whale.²³

Using Jonah's biblical story, Malaparte describes the feeling of danger evoked by the experience of Capri's expansive landscape and its wilderness; this primitive engagement of humans with nature is terrifying and heroic.

Historical photographs depict Malaparte cycling on the roof terrace.²⁴ On the one hand, these render the space in its everyday use, animating and enriching the outdoor space with multiple meanings and uses. On the other hand, the photographs portray Malaparte as an 'athlete', like Le Corbusier, a 'typical "man" working out freely like an athlete in open space'.²⁵ Malaparte heroically 'conquers' nature by daring to build his house at the edge of the cliff on top of one of the wildest sites of the island, revealing a megalomaniac side akin to Le Corbusier's, who shapes the new world, as well as Emperor Tiberius's, whose palace just at the other side of the cliff, overlooks the gulf of Naples.

The entrance

The entrance door of the house, which is at the side of the building, is made of frameless glass and a second layer, an iron white bar door, seals the glass plane from the outside (Fig. 11). This unusual juxtaposition of materials of the entrance door is enigmatic. The iron bars suggest that you enter a prison, and the transparency of the door that you enter a modern house, which is Malaparte's voluntary prison and 'the secret image of the jail', perhaps?²⁶

Tavern

The dining room of the house, or Tavern, is a small dark room just opposite the entrance door. One would expect the house of a socialite to have a big dining room, where eating becomes a social event. But the Tavern stages eating as a modest everyday sacred ritual in a setting that has a monk-like austerity. The room has a relatively small window and is dressed in chestnut wood (floor, walls, and ceiling). The thematic framing of the view, which deliberately frames the sea out, the dark atmosphere of the room, the wooden furniture, and the coating on the walls and the stove make you forget that you are on an island. While there, you feel you are elsewhere.

There are many stories of dinner parties as well as references to hunger and starvation in Malaparte's *The Skin*²⁷ and *Kaputt*,²⁸ testimonies of the atrocities of the war, where dead bodies (of soldiers, animals, women, and children) compose the war's landscape. The human body is reduced to a piece of meat — eaten by war, fascism, and soldiers in extreme conditions of starvation. Many of the references to food and to eating in both *Kaputt* and *The Skin*, for instance, are in fact references to cannibalism — literal and metaphorical.²⁹

Typical in Malaparte's descriptions are irony and anecdotes that fuse fiction with reality, as if the author tries to give a truthful account of the cruelty of the war through anecdotes. The seemingly civilised set-up of dinners is only the surface, a theatrical setting that masks the cruel reality of those social events. In addition, many descriptions in the books are about hunger and starvation



Figure 11.
Entrance door, Casa Malaparte,
photographed by and courtesy of
Andrea Jemolo, 1988

during and after the war. Like many of Malaparte's contradictory positions, eating seems to be another one. The pleasure of eating has also another side, which is dark and cruel.

Salon

On the first floor you enter the Salon, which is significantly bigger than any other room of the house (Fig. 12). The floor is paved with a medium-grained sandstone, known as *pietra serena*, which is commonly used for public spaces in Tuscany. The use of the floor material turns the room inside-out as it appears as an outdoor public space inside a house. The organic and sensual form of furniture designed by Malaparte contradicts the austere simplicity of the house. A low bench with a wooden seat sits on what looks like classical stone columns, but which are a factory-made toilet and bidet. Another glass table by the wall sits on two fragments of natural stone material. The assemblage of found objects juxtaposes technology and nature, the manufactured and the natural, the classical past with the modern world.

The room's floor material used in outdoor spaces in Tuscany suggests the displacement of the furniture to an outdoor square, or street, resonating with Giorgio De Chirico's series of paintings *Furniture in the Valley* (1927). Describing these paintings, where domestic furniture is displaced from interior to outdoor spaces, De Chirico writes:

Figure 12.
Interior view of the Salon, Casa
Malaparte, photographed by and
courtesy of Andrea Jemolo, 1988



Figure 13.
'Picture Window', Salon, Casa
Malaparte, photographed by and
courtesy of Andrea Jemolo, 1988



Furniture removed from the atmosphere of our rooms and placed outside, reveals feelings in us that also show us the streets in a different light. Also very profound is the impression one would have of furniture placed in deserted lands, in the midst of infinite nature. Imagine an armchair, a divan, chairs grouped together on a plain in Greece, deserted and covered by ruins [...] The nature that surrounds this furniture reveals, by contrast, an aspect of it I did not know. Pieces of furniture abandoned in the wild are innocence, tenderness, sweetness amidst blind and destructive forces; they are children, pure virgins in the circus amidst raw-boned lions; armoured with innocence they stand there, distant and solitary [...] For some time I have been obsessed by this aspect furniture has when placed outside of buildings; in some of my recent pictures, I have sought to express the emotion it inspires in me.³⁰

For De Chirico, domestic furniture displaced to alien outdoor spaces, outside their 'home' environment, has the power to disclose new meanings until then undiscovered. Within a landscape, with an ancient Greek temple in the far distance, referencing De Chirico's love of the classical past and his childhood memories, the furniture in the painting is grouped together like people in a family. The furniture in this alienated world seems to stand for humans, evoking deeper feelings and memories. In the spirit of De Chirico's metaphysical art movement, connected to Surrealism and Dada, Malaparte's furniture evoke new meanings produced by everyday objects taken out of their context. Similarly to De Chirico's painting, the Salon's furniture, designed by Malaparte, replace and perform their owner and maker to the potential visitor. The precise staging of the furniture in the space, in relation to the landscape views and to each other, create symbolic associations and dialectical images that choreograph the gaze of the visitor who re-enacts multiple narratives with open-ended interpretations and meanings.

The room has four enormous framed glass windows, each with different dimensions and opening mechanisms (Fig. 13). Their positions are chosen to highlight specific views rather than being symmetrically arranged according to an imposed order of a facade. Malaparte names the four framed windows in the salon 'picture windows', which direct the gaze to the exterior. In an anecdotal way, he writes that 'I bought the house as it stood here' and at the same time declares 'I designed the scenery', giving the landscape a fictional dimension that interrupts the spatial and temporal continuity of the house.³¹ The landscape views are *his* constructed imaginary world, his *internal view* projected out. Metaphorically, they are screens of an interior projection; at the same time, the landscape 'looks' inside the space through the window apertures, as a spectator of an interior stage.

Danza

Centrally in the room, there is a big fireplace. Just opposite the fireplace, there is a masonry base, on which a wooden relief sculpture entitled *Danza* (1935) by Italian artist Pericle Fazzini used to sit. *Danza* is a study of the archaic forms of Greek art that depicts a complex composition of bodies in expressive and dra-

matic gestures. When looking at the fireplace from a frontal view, a curious detail surprises you — a window placed in the fireplace that frames Faraglioni rocks, a view that recalls a Greek Homeric landscape (Fig. 14). The position of *Danza* in the central axis of the fireplace's window links two images: the Homeric mythical view and the archaic dance. In Casa Malaparte everyday objects and spaces become 'dramatised' to frame another world. Malaparte's understanding of surrealism goes back to Greek mythology, where 'Greece provides examples of surrealism in Aristophanes, Sophocles, Homer himself: some Homeric similes [...] and the speaking horses of Achilles are very beautiful examples of surrealist poetry'.³² The built objects within the house, deliberately staged to frame the landscape as a mythical view, resonate with 'archaic times' where 'the dance was the architecture. The space of architecture was the space of ritual and not an objective geometrical entity'.³³

Walking through Casa Malaparte, the most noticeable principle is the deliberate autonomy and explicit theatricality through which the external staircase, the roof-terrace, and the interior rooms are constructed. The change of floor material from room to room, the precise and thematic framing of views, and the staging of objects, furniture and architectural elements give each room or cluster of rooms an episodic nature. Instead of a continuous promenade,

Figure 14.
View of the fireplace's window,
Salon, Casa Malaparte,
photographed by and courtesy of
Andrea Jemolo, 1988



the house is composed as a series of staged exterior and interior spaces, each an autonomous episode — a *tableau vivant*.

Tableau vivant

The walk, as a method, towards and in the house evoked stories, images, atmospheres, and sensations from Malaparte's writings, an experience inaccessible through other means of research. This method allowed for the filtering of evidence that interlinked onsite observations with archival, historical, and theoretical material contributing to the notion of the house as a self-portrait and to the theorisation of its making by means of the performative practice of the *tableau vivant*.

Tableau vivant literally means 'living pictures' and began as a genre between art and entertainment, blurring the boundaries between art and life, by recreating a scene from history, literature, sculpture, or most commonly painting into staged live performances with bodies in expressive poses in between stillness and movement. The origins of *tableaux vivants* go back to medieval rituals and pageants, but in the mid-eighteenth century, they became a popular form of performance in Italy.

For example, in Naples, Emma Hamilton's 'attitudes', which mimetically enacted poses of classical statues, attracted the attention of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, during his stay in the city as part of his 1787 journey to Italy. Goethe, to whom Malaparte devotes a short story in *Woman Like Me*, describes Hamilton's 'attitudes' in his book, *Italian Journey* (1816–1817), that gave popularity to her performances and promoted this new art form in between visual art and performance.

Initially, *tableaux vivants* were mimetic reconstructions that, through embodiment, referenced historical scenes as truthfully as possible, raising questions between the 'authentic' and the 'original'. Later, the art of *tableau vivant* deviated from its mimetic character and the aim was no longer to mime a scene from history, but to recreate a new vision of it.

French philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot was a key figure, whose interest and writings on the *tableau vivant* brought attention to the genre. Diderot drew a link between the *pictorial tableau* of eighteenth-century painting and the theatrical scene. As a materialist philosopher who rejected dualism and the separation between body and mind, Diderot aspired to make theatre more 'natural' by shifting from the literary to the visual.³⁴ In the *pictorial tableau*, the painter has to communicate and depict a plot in just one instant, which inspired Diderot's theory on the theatrical scene. Diderot understood each *tableau* as autonomous, whole, and independent from the audience. As a whole, the *tableau* composes a dramatic moment where the past, present, and future overlap, condensing what has happened or what is about to happen in just one instant. In this sense the *tableau* is a constructed image, a fictitious moment, rather than a literal representation of an event. Roland Barthes, in his essay 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', writes that 'the epic scene in Brecht, the shot in Eisenstein are so many *tableaux*; [...] which answer perfectly to that dramatic unity theorised by Diderot'.³⁵

The way the tableau works as a device for articulating a plot, whether in painting, film, theatre or architecture, deviates from linear ways of conceiving space in relation to the experience of space and time. If the architectural promenade expresses the linear path, the 'paradoxical movement' of tableau vivant punctuates space to create intensified moments of spatial and temporal discontinuity that are subject to experience, provoking the body in motion to think through the senses.

Time in tableau vivant

Casa Malaparte, like Diderot's perfect play, comprises a series of staged tableaux. These tableaux are constructed as a series of assemblages of overlaying images: found, invented, three-dimensionalised, and incorporated within built objects — like, for example, the window-view in the fireplace, the vertical iron bars overlaying the front door and window-views, and the thematic framing of views in the Tavern and the Salon. The staircase and the rooms of the house are not generic spaces, but they are deliberately staged and dramatised. Everyday actions acquire a ritualistic quality: ascending the external staircase to reach the roof terrace becomes a symbolic act towards 'infinity', eating in the Tavern is rendered as a sacred everyday ritual that has a double side, which is dark and savage, and lighting the fire in the Salon's fireplace 'animates' the archaic bodies of *Danza* sculpture against the framed view of Faraglioni rocks that resonate a Greek Homeric landscape. Everyday rituals become symbolic acts that bring together multiple times and places that interweave with the everyday.

In this sense, the time of the tableau is fictitious. The Casa Malaparte is like a theatre, where the time of a play is fictive and thus different from the actual time of the audience. Constructed themes and events of multiple past times interweave with the everyday and 'the here and now' of the experience of the visitor. The tableau vivant, through its live presence, relates to history (personal or collective) by means of appropriation and sensorial engagement.

Like Brecht's epic theatre, Casa Malaparte 'is a typical but incomplete fragment without the spectator's critical and reconstructive perspective'.³⁶ Unlike Diderot's understanding of the tableau as a whole fragment independent from the audience, the body in Casa Malaparte interrupts and reconstructs the staged drama and its fictitious time through sensorial engagement that is activated by the optical and tactile stimulus.

The house as self-portrait

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman discusses the notion of performed identity by exploring how individuals actively construct their identities through social interaction and the way these are influenced by cultural norms, social roles, and other personal intentions. A different perspective is offered by Elizabeth Grosz's who, in reference of Judith Butler,

says that 'identity is performed or produced through action and not simply, as psychoanalysis suggests, through identification'.³⁷ Action is also for Diderot the most fundamental aspect for a successful composition in a portrait. He writes:

As long as the painter portraitist will produce only resemblances without composition, I will not say much, however, when they feel that to interest others one requires action, then they will have tapped into all the talent of historical painters and they will interest me independently of the value of their created resemblance.³⁸

Diderot suggests that action and composition are the fundamental principles of portrait making rather than resemblance and imitation. He suggests that the depiction of the character in action is indicative of 'what could possibly have altered his state', indicating that action generates an affective response that animates an emotional state to the character.³⁹ As Grosz and Diderot argue, actions have an affective impact that transforms the identity of a person in time.

The self in this sense is dynamic and pliable rather than fixed and stable, discovered along the life journey by the actions that move one through emotions, spaces and times. This idea delineates the self in an endless series of 'movement-images', like in Malaparte's multiple published photographic portraits, each depicting a moment from his life journey.

Casa Malaparte, unlike a photographic portrait that depicts an instant in time, is composed of a series of tableaux vivants where multiple times overlap, creating for the visitor the experience of displacement and poetic associations between objects, views and materials, as in Gilles Deleuze's 'time-image' model.⁴⁰ Deleuze's 'time-image' model breaks the 'sensory-motor' scheme and becomes a 'pure optical and sound' image, a 'direct image of time'. Between the past and present, the time-image creates 'paradoxical movements' that are subject to perception, affection, and memory, not as isolated functions, but as a holistic experience of all three. Here, time does not describe physical movement, but is 'movement in time', generating displacements, associations, analogies, and mental journeys. Space is created in prolonged time, layering and assembling multiple images that transform in time.

The composition of the house as a series of staged tableaux vivants reflect Malaparte's multiple selves: as a writer who blurred reality with fiction in his novels, as a journalist and Second World War correspondent that used anecdotes and irony to speak of the cruelty of the war, as a political prisoner who romanticised his isolation, as an artist affiliated with surrealism, and as a megalomaniac, narcissistic and enigmatic public figure. The staged tableaux vivants in the house project these multiple selves as composed fragments lost in time and in the cruelty of the war. Each room as an autonomous episode disrupts the continuity of movement, adding intensity in the experience of it. This is also the role of the tableau, which 'has no explicit story, it is thematic; "a spatial unit of atmosphere"'.⁴¹ The variety of materials and textures, colours,

landscape views, the weather, and the objects compose material and immaterial images that alert the senses of the visitor.

In theatre, Brecht's 'alienation effect' and Artaud's 'theatre of cruelty' aspire to move theatre away from its illusionary character by exposing its artificiality and creating a shock effect to the audience to approach life at a deeper level. For Brecht, the audience should not be submersed in the drama of play by identifying with the actors, but instead be at a distance and critically intervene in the plot of a drama. He explains how 'the alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions, which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed'.⁴²

In his house, Malaparte constructs his *I/Eye*, provoking the visitor to identify with his view, the way a spectator would identify with an actor in a traditional theatre play. Yet the experience of space is subject to critical affective re-action that provokes the visitor to think through the senses, like in Brecht's theatre. Casa Malaparte is not perceived as a place of comfort but rather as a place of discomfort that alerts the senses and shakes the body.

For Artaud, as John Calder writes 'the role of the theatre must be to shake us out of complacency and our delusion of security'.⁴³ Artaud argues that 'we ought to return through theatre to the idea of a physical knowledge of images'.⁴⁴ Artaud aspires to a total theatre, where there is no separation between stage, audience, and the spectacle. The spectacle extends beyond the stage to occupy all the surrounding space that is not only visual but auditory and multisensory.

If in theatre the aesthetic device of 'alienation effect' and the 'theatre of cruelty' facilitate the interruption of drama to question life, in Casa Malaparte we have the reverse condition. Defamiliarising the familiar means resisting the reproduction of habitual and automatic behaviour that comes along with the establishment of routines in the experience of space in everyday life. In Casa Malaparte the dramatisation of use, space, and the landscape create an effect of 'theatrical artificiality', which defamiliarises the familiar and provokes mental journeys, suggesting that the imaginary lies in the experience of life as its other side.

The strongest element that awakens the body and forces its affective response in Casa Malaparte is the unpredictability of the harsh landscape whose presence — visual and auditory — is constantly felt. For Malaparte, 'the Italian landscape is typically surrealist: [it lives] of its own life, [it has] its own character, a value and meaning that go beyond the concept of nature and reality. [It has] its own reality, totally free of so-called realistic elements. A magic reality'.⁴⁵ In Malaparte's description, the landscape is anthropomorphised, portrayed as a character that performs in its own way. In Casa Malaparte, the landscape and the weather are another performer that participates in the construction of the house's staged drama, at times violently transforming the house into a 'theatre of cruelty' that shakes the body of its comfort and provokes it to venture out for new journeys of self-discovery.

Conclusion

Breaking disciplinary boundaries, the creation of Casa Malaparte blurs theatre and life, the imaginary and the everyday, building and living. The performative walk, used as a method, re-writes Casa Malaparte's history by filtering the evidence of archival, historical, and theoretical research with on-site observations and contributes to the theorisation of its making through the performative device of the *tableau-vivant*. The house is interpreted as an assemblage of staged *tableaux vivants*, each a partial self-portrait of Malaparte that explores the deeper connections between the self and the society. Through a transdisciplinary form of practice that interlinks architecture with performance and the visual arts, the house becomes a creative place for self-discovery: an ongoing assemblage of material and immaterial living images that reflect and reconstruct its inhabitant in time.

The act of home-making as a living practice shifts from linear ways of organising a narrative to a more complex type of cyclical performance — the gradual creation of living images of the self. The employment of the performative device of the *tableau vivant* in architecture expands the notion of the event-space by introducing a multilayered sense of time, rendering architectural design as a living practice. The past (as personal or collective history) interweaves with the everyday and the cyclical time of the landscape. The house is composed as a series of event-spaces that replace and perform its inhabitant. The study of Casa Malaparte raises issues that question the architect's authorship, suggesting that architectural design is an expanded transdisciplinary activity that incorporates the life of its inhabitants and the environment over time.

Disclosure statement

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